**Decision 5.3**

**Lady of Nyx**

**Ordo Malleus Restricted Archive**

Transmitted: Conclave of Nyx

Received: Astropath Benito

Destination: Conclave of Samarkand

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Reference: Ordo Malleus/09FJ4536B1/AS

Author: Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor

Priority: Yellow

*Per your last request, I sent one of our colleagues to obtain the order of battle for the new Honour Guard of Space Marines which has been created to protect the Saint. Let me emphasize your fears have no reason to be given the current strength of this formation. The Dawnbreaker Guard, as its members have proclaimed themselves, are thirty-five strong as I am writing this message. With the departure of the majority of Space Marine contingents from this Sector, the possibility of increasing their numbers significantly is extremely low. And the command structure is based on the sole decision of protecting their charge, thus making any attempt of one Space Marine to overstep himself and gain ideas above his station inferior to the odds of an average Astartes doing the name in a Codex-compliant Chapter. Seraph Gamaliel of course has the unconditional respect of many of his fellow Astartes, but he’s not by far the only important figure in this Honour Guard.*

*The symbol of the triangular red tear, blue beetle and golden flame on a white field has not suffered any changes since its first presentation, as thus you can record it in the archives as the official banner of the Dawnbreaker Guard.*

*Below is the order of battle as far as my agents have been able to discern from highest rank to lowest:*

*Seraph Gamaliel, Exalted Herald of Sanguinius, Sanguinary Guard of the Blood Angels Chapter*

*Sanguinary Guard Puriel, Sanguinary Guard of the Angels Encarmine Chapter*

*Sanguinary Guard Simiel, Sanguinary Guard of the Angels Vermillion Chapter*

*Champion Kratos of Flesh Tearers Chapter [ref Olympus Incident, yes that Kratos]*

*Captain Quintus of the Angels Sanguine Chapter*

*Captain Rhodes of the Knights Hospitallers Chapter*

*Standard-Bearer Riel of the Brothers of the Red Chapter*

*Chaplain Zuriel of the Crimson Scions Chapter*

*Chaplain Sidonius of the Crimson Swords Chapter*

*Sanguinary Priest Claudius of the Exsanguinators Chapter*

*Sanguinary Priest Philip of the Charnel Guard Chapter*

*Sanguinary Priest Galen of the Red Seraphs Chapter*

*Sanguinary Priest Sterzing of the Angels Resplendent Chapter*

*Epistolary Aslan of the Templars of Blood Chapter [ref Librarian]*

*Epistolary Hendrik of the Blood Legion Chapter [ref Librarian]*

*Techmarine Dyson of the Knights of Blood Chapter*

*Techmarine White of the Blood Exemplars Chapter*

*Techmarine Renaldo of the Blood Drinkers Chapter*

*Techmarine Ben-Ur of the Sons of Scelus Chapter*

*Veteran Sergeant Gavreel of the Dark Wardens Chapter [ref martyr 35178 imperator]*

*Veteran Sergeant Jonas of the Angels of Defiance Chapter*

*Veteran Sergeant Alfonso of the Disciples of Blood Chapter*

*Sergeant Bohemond of the Angels Redeemed Chapter*

*Terminator Veteran Karael of the Blood Swords Chapter*

*Terminator Veteran Morael of the Angel Guard Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Herman of the Flesh Eaters Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Rahab of the Red Wings Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Maxime of the Heralds of Vengeance Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Sari of the Angels Numinous Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Richard of the Knights Sanguine Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Bertrand of the Crimson Paladins Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Midas of the Golden Sons Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Wald of the Crimson Legion Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Thermoses of the Red Legion Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Vesuvius of the Scions of Sanguinius Chapter*

*I will contact you again in five standard days for the preliminary report on the cleansing of the Neptunia System from Ruinous influence. May the God-Emperor guide us to victory.*

Thought for the day: Fear runs as deep as the mind allows.

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*And thus on 744.289M35 the Living Saint began her unforgettable rule of the Nyx Sector. The Menelaus dynasty, which had ruled for one thousand and six hundred years faded into oblivion, and few regretted their disappearance. The ork threat, which had loomed everywhere, was now routed on dozens of fronts and was annihilated by the counter-attacks of the Navy and the Guard.*

*Naturally, hundreds of thousands were prompt to label it as the beginning of an ‘Age of Weaver’, but given how many times the same thing was proclaimed in the 35th millennium and those which followed it, a new denomination was required. It was in 010M37 that the official name we still use today was published by retired Lady General Elena Dalten, my ancestor.*

*Thus the period between 744.289M35 and 110.403M35 is known as the Age of Silk and Hope, one of the ten Ages of the Living Saint.*

*It was an age of prosperity and victories for billions of men and women.*

*It was also an age of political and social upheavals.*

*The Nyx nobility, which had abused its powers and privileges for centuries, was the first to receive the wrath of Lady Weaver.*

*The purges were, by all written accounts, a brutal affair in every aspect.*

*When the Living Saint became the Basileia of Nyx and renamed the capital Hive Athena, the nobility living in the Menelaus seat of power was estimated close to five million. This was five million men, women and children divided into seventy-one nobility titles and in their great majority they had never worked a single day in their lives. Yet they played their dynastic games while below them, more than ten billion souls toiled and died in the manufactorums, forging the weapons the Imperium military forces desperately needed to hold the lines.*

*While the Nyx archives are rarely unsealed to the public, certain facts remain. Post 290M35, the Nyx Nobility had a grand total of one hundred and three million people. After the Inquisition had finished their executions and Lady Weaver her creation of penal legions, the nobility was a shadow of itself.*

*The nobility rolls published on 001.292M35 affirm thirty-one million nobles remained for Nyx Tertius as a whole, one million and five hundred thousand living in the Upper Hive districts of Hive Athena.*

*The punishments were incredibly varied, but the sentence which focused a lot of attention, both internally and externally, were the induction in the penal legions. It would be a mistake however to assume every aristocrat arrested by the Adeptus Arbites or the Nyx Justicars received this harsh punishment. Many nobles were not deported off-world, but lost one third to one half of their personal fortune along with their peerage, their privileges, and their shares in the various corporate cartels established in the Sector Capital. Some Dukes escaped with nothing but a slap on the wrist and an exceptional tax levied on their yearly income. But many did not. From Prince-Magister to Esquire, the Nyx peerage was brought on judgement for their excesses and their willingness to abandon their duties to the God-Emperor. Executions, decades of forced labour in promethium extraction facilities and exile were a few of the judgements rendered at the time.*

*By comparison, the loss of the hereditary nobility rights for almost a quarter of the high nobility could seem almost an after-note. And at the time, for the millions of nobles dragged in chains in front of the judges, it certainly was.*

*But the fate of Nostradamus ‘the Grox’ Vandire and the fall of the nobles who had supported him were not forgotten by other blue-blooded tyrants. The Reign of Terror was still far away, and yet it was becoming slowly ineluctable...*

Extract from *The Fires of Hope*, by Taylor Dalten, 990M41.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.754.289M35**

Thought for the day: Ruthlessness is the kindness of the wise

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

There were many things the Astartes of the Dawnbreaker Guard didn’t agree upon. It was regrettable, but simply unavoidable. Thirty-five Space Marines of different backgrounds, born from thirty-five different planets, had not the same battle-experiences, psycho-conditioning, traditions and martial philosophy. And except from him, they were all descended from the Ninth Legion. The divergences between Chapters not sharing the same Primarch gene-seed had certainly to be greater. Maybe it was something Lord Roboute Guilliman had overlooked during his Second Founding, or maybe the Primarch of the Thirteenth Legion had judged the risk of cultural divide acceptable compared to the risk of a Second Heresy. Or maybe he simply had been critically wounded before he had time to correct the mistakes of his Codex Astartes. Like everything done over four thousand years ago, it was difficult to know and the aura of myth and the parsed information didn’t help figuring out the truth.

So yes, the new Dawnbreaker Guard was certainly not speaking at all times in a unanimous voice. It was maybe for the best, for that way each member could voice its opinion freely. That didn’t mean they weren’t subjects where they found themselves in total agreement.

The enormous garish construction pretending to be a palace in front of them was one of these.

“This,” Chaplain Sidonius spoke in a voice where disgust and astonishment fought each other for dominance, “is an artistic abomination.”

“Apt words, brother,” Puriel of the Angels Encarmine declared, resplendent in his pure white power armour. “I don’t think I have seen someone violates so many laws about artistic decency in a single location and remain uncorrupted by the Ruinous Powers.”

“The only thing I find remarkable,” Champion Kratos growled, his face hidden by his helmet, “is how vain this stupid aristocrat must be to sculpt statues of his relatives everywhere on the balconies.”

“These are gargoyles, brother,” Captain Rhodes intervened.

“Ah, my mistake,” the Flesh Tearers did not sound sorry at all to have made his remark.

And to be honest, the more Gavreel watched it, the more he felt the urge to borrow a flamethrower and begin to joyously torch the entire structure until nothing but ashes and burned debris remained. The marble columns, he could understand. The gold, he could understand, though there was something like overabundance and there was...that. The colours...no, no he couldn’t understand. One to three or four colours could be considered acceptable. A dozen was too much. Two dozen? The effect was repulsive. And if it was not enough, the owner of this building had tried to mix the style of a religious place of worship – the aforementioned gargoyles and the surcharged Gothic style – with other elements of palatial decorations that simply didn’t fit.

Frankly, if they had not come to arrest nobles for an assassination attempt upon their Lady, the Dawnbreaker Guard would have probably come anyway as a matter of principle.

There were things that couldn’t be allowed to stand, and this ‘palace’ was one of them.

It was too bad, because the level was so far a very nice sight. The Izmir Imperial Palace – notice the lack of pretension in the name – had been built on floor 50 of the renamed Hive Athena and it was a pleasant – and extremely expensive – area to inhabit. There were parks covered in true grass for the nobility’s children to live in without fearing the meeting with a gang member or a rebel. There were markets, numerous shops showing products that only the wealthiest population of Nyx could afford.

It was an Upper-Upper district of the Upper Hive. For reasons that were almost as traditional as they were logical, the ‘Floor 1’ of a Hive was in general the top of the Imperial starscraper, and this Hive respected the rule. As the Menelaus family had more or less confiscated everything from the Governor’s Own Belvedere to Floor 46, this level was tantalising close to the apex of the social aristocratic ladder.

Today House Izmir was on the verge of understanding trying to assassinate someone who had fought and won against a Bloodthirster was not a smart thing to do.

The chatter stopped abruptly stopped as the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard escorted their charge in full view, flanked by two hundred Fay guardsmen in black-grey carapace armour they had requisitioned from the Nyx Pureblood equipment stores.

“Gavreel, tell me what you found on the traitor.” There were times Taylor Hebert could radiate happiness. There was no sign of it as she advanced in her heavy golden armour.

“The name of the noble who paid for the assassins of this morning is one Vizier-Duke Ahmed-Ibrahim-Mustafa the Third of House Izmir. We are right now in front of his main residence, the Izmir Imperial Palace.”

The snort which escaped the lips of the insect mistress proved she was as unimpressed as her Honour Guard by the decoration and the name of this artistic horror.

“His family was a third-rate House until they attracted three or four decades ago the eye of the Governor because they were giving above average production quotas in the mega-manufactorum of the Manzikert Sub-Sprawl south-east of the capital.”

“I suppose they were willing to kill faster their workers to accomplish these quotas?” Lasers were not firing from the new Basileia of Nyx’s eyes, but her expression was even more ruthless than it was seconds ago.

“I think it’s a safe assumption,” he answered before adding the last of the information. “They were granted some position in the Governor’s Aegean Cartel and the important industrial contracts for the warships and the orbital development programs. House Izmir was as a result just below the Consul-Prefects last year in the official rolls of nobility. They had a private guard of five thousand PDF soldiers to defend their properties. The Adeptus Arbites is also convinced they have between sixty and seventy high-profile assassinations they can accuse them of with solid evidence.”

And that didn’t count the assassination attempt of this morning, when they had detonated a bomb in front of her convoy, killing three guardsmen and wounding twenty more, plus all the civilians caught in the crossfire. If they had been intelligent, the attempt would have stopped there, but no they had to launch a suicidal attempt of fifty-plus madmen charging the convoy while a dozen snipers took position. Seconds later, the assassins who had not been decapitated, torn apart or eaten had begged for their deaths.

“I think I have heard enough,” his Lady and commander said with evident distaste. “Try to take some of them alive if it’s feasible. The Pureblood Penal Legions are always happy to accept more volunteers and it’s always faster to know where their accounts and resources are with unharmed prisoners.”

“And if they resist?” asked Kratos with evident glee. Gavreel threw him a concerned look. The majority of the Blood Angels in the Honour Guard were totally in control of their transhuman minds and bodies. After centuries holding against the dread curse of the Black Rage, few were really prone to violence before battle was joined. The Flesh Tearer Astartes was alas not someone born to be a pacifist and calm warrior.

The gladiators of the Menelaus Arena would have been able to support this, assuming any of them had survived their short and final duel with Kratos.

“If they resist, you can kill as many of them as necessary to convince them to surrender. Their titles and possessions are already going to be confiscated, and I certainly won’t have any use for them in my new administration. Knock these doors down and...”

BOOM!

Gavreel had seen a lot of things since his mysterious landing on Wuhan a few months ago. Watching a Dreadnought using a large and hideous gargoyle as an improved ram against the garish golden gates was a novelty he would have rather not witnessed.

“Gavreel...Gamaliel...Puriel...Quintus...I thought I told you not to invite any of the ‘Heracles Wardens’ in the Dawnbreaker Guard. I wish to stay in the Inquisition’s good graces for the moment, and inviting Space Marines who were Renegades before the Battle of the Death Star is not going to paint this Honour Guard in a positive light...”

BOOM!

“KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. YOUR DOOM IS AT HAND, TRAITORS!”

“We certainly did not invite him, my Lady,” Puriel replied, his angelic visage ill-at-ease. “But I’m afraid he’s been following us since our arrival. And he’s only listening to the orders he like. What can we do, my Lady? Short of demanding the Tech-Priests put asleep the machine-spirits of his armour or we throw him into a stasis-vault, it is not like we have a lot of options to force him to obey.”

“I see, I see.” The sigh which came out was not feigned in the least. “I will speak with Harrow-, no it’s Chapter Master Isley as soon as we finish dealing with House Izmir. Please kindly inform Techmarine White I will need a priority encrypted line with the Heracles Wardens in a few minutes.”

BOOM! CRAAAAASSSH!

The screams of terror of the Izmir soldiers when they saw what was coming from the ruin of the main gates were loud and Gavreel almost pitied them. Fighting a hostile Dreadnought with nothing heavier but a few grenade launchers, shotguns and lasguns was not an experience most inexperienced soldiers survived to tell the tale. But then if they had not been idiots, they would have thrown down their weapons the moment they saw the Astartes were coming.

“Let’s go punish my traitorous nobles,” Lady Weaver said as a wave of centipedes and a massive swarm of insects charged into the breach to follow the Ancient Dreadnought Pierre. “If the other nobles have something between their ears, they will understand after that it’s a bad idea to try to assassinate me.”

The Nebula’s Shard was drawn and golden flames danced on the edge of the blade.

“FOR THE EMPEROR AND SANGUINIUS!”

“FOR THE EMPEROR! FOR THE BLOOD OF THE GREAT ANGEL!

Compared to the endless wave of orks and the demons days ago, this was a walk-over. But it had to be done.

**Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica**

There had been many things to say about Naxos XXVIII’s parties and his inclinations, most of them bad, but there had been an advantage to them. By the time the ‘mighty King of Kings’ had made up his mind, half of the planet was aware of his intentions. As a consequence, preparations to ensure nothing regrettable happened while close to Lord Nyx were known to last weeks, sometimes months.

And even after the exquisite message of summoning was delivered by arrogant young men and women of the Menelaus line, it was not like things were unpredictable.

First they were brought to the forty-sixth floor of Hive Menelaus, the lowest hive-section the Sector Lord condescended to descend among his aristocrat peers if there was no gladiatorial games organised.

Ninety percent of this hive-floor consisted in the Palatine Menelaus Palace, a gigantic assemblage of marble columns, stairs and reception halls they had to cross before prostrating themselves in front of the Governor after a ceremonial most highborn had to memorise by heart before they were fourteen.

What the Princes, the Princesses, the Prefects, the Dukes and all the nobles important enough to be invited at these gatherings had to do was written to them in the message they were sent, and eternal disgrace awaited those who dared breaking the protocol. It was one of these parties which had led to the fall of fortune of her House several centuries ago when her grandfather had gotten so inebriated he had forgotten everything not pertaining to drink and pleasure in a night of fatal consequences. House Attica had never recovered from it, losing two-thirds of its connections, assets and resources in less than ten standard days.

At a time, it had seemed a terrible disaster and assuredly it had been one. But as House Attica was unable to maintain the lifestyle demanded by the Governor and his close friends, their participation in the orgies, decadent parties and unscrupulous affairs had also decreased accordingly. It was in part why they were still alive now that the Inquisition and their allies had annihilated House Menelaus, House Romulus and House Doris. The most powerful Houses of Moira were now gone, but not Attica.

Of course, the situation was now very much in flux. Usually, when a new Menelaus ascended to the throne of Lord Nyx, the election was rigged in advance. A Prince-Magister ‘volunteered’ to be the challenger, most of the time chosen by the Menelaus in charge, and the future King of Kings organised something like a standard month of festivities to prove he was the natural successor to the vacant title of Sector Lord. There had rarely been deviations to this predictable process. But since eight out of the ten Prince and Princess-Magisters voted for House Menelaus, the election could only go one way.

Not this year, though.

It had been six days since the election had taken place...sort of...and from what Zoe understood it had been memorable. The candidate who had supposedly been the lead contender – also known as Nostradamus Vandire – had disappeared in Inquisitorial custody after his bid to become Governor of Nyx had monumentally failed.

Then the assassinations had begun. It was not difficult to guess who had decided to contest the electoral result this way. Houses Ionian and Argos had everything to lose about a Governor inimical to their interests, and dozens of smaller and less powerful nobles had to be not far behind.

It had rapidly devolved into a massacre by the end of the second day. A massacre of assassins and hired killers, that was. The Prince-Magisters could afford the best of the best killers available on Nyx, but the new Basileia had the support of the Guard, the Inquisition, the Ecclesiarchy...and they had hundreds of Space Marines with armoured feet trampling the corpses in mere minutes.

And every time an assassination failed, prisoners were taken, talked and less than two hours later, the House which had hired the saboteurs or the bomb experts saw its palace invaded, its leaders arrested or killed, and its senior figures dragged in chains before the palace was razed, sometimes giving PDF and Guard troops the opportunity to loot and pillage beforehand.

Many, many Houses had already shared the fate of the Menelaus line, Dukes, Counts, Viziers and relatives were missing, the Adeptus Arbites was now at last falling upon the aristocracy with a vengeance and everything they held for granted was now overturned.

If the new Governor was truly a Saint...if she was sent by the God-Emperor in person, Zoe knew the Master of Mankind was clearly not pleased with Nyx as a whole.

Zoe’s lips winced involuntarily before she returned to an emotionless stare as the Aquila-Claire Lander arrived to its destination. A glance at the platform informed her she was not the only one to have been summoned. The personal transports of Michael XXXXI Argos, Sophia XVI Seleucid, Ephesus V Corinth were already there. But after that glance all her attention was on the massive armoured giants in red armour patrolling the small spaceport which had once been the private star-fiefdom of House Menelaus.

Judging from the colours, these were the Space Marines calling themselves the Brothers of the Red...if the rumours from the Battle of the Death Star were telling a tenth of the truth, these genetically-enhanced warriors would take great pleasure eviscerating anyone opposing the new Lady Nyx.

When she descended the ramp of her personal Lander, Zoe tried not to show fear, a feat easier to say than do, indeed. These were the Angels of Death, and the size of their weapons was something to give nightmares. Fortunately, her accreditation and her name was sufficient, but Zoe could not stop thinking she and the rest of the nobles escorted in the Spire’s corridors would have been killed in less than a minute if the order had been given.

There was more than one protestation on the lips of the other aristocrats as they were escorted by troops in heavy armour. Because judging by the succession of lifters and stairs they were taking, the audience was clearly not going to happen on the forty-sixth floor. And the rumour the Nyx Purebloods had been arrested and removed from their previous duties was obviously no rumour at all. There were many insignia and emblems on the carapace armour of the men and the women escorting them, but none belonged to units House Menelaus, Doris and Romulus considered their private elite forces.

It took them close to ten minutes to arrive to the audience hall, although Zoe was sure they could have arrived far earlier if certain fat Menelaus favourites had exercised a bit more in the last decades. Sometimes, Zoe was almost ready to believe the zealous companions of the former Lord Nyx had no access to rejuvenation treatments...but no, there were large and grotesquely obese after the treatments, and all their deep pockets would not prolong their lives for a couple more centuries if they did not reduce their excesses soon. Assuming they survived this audience with all their limbs.

Zoe Attica had never set a foot in this hive-section of House Menelaus, pardon Hive Athena, but she had spies in the Menelaus staff like everyone else and thanks to them she knew where she was. This was Floor 40, the Hall of War and Oaths. If the new Governor wanted to make a statement, it was well-done.

Aside from the hololith, an elevated golden throne currently empty and many, many banners of past campaigns fought by Nyx renowned regiments, her eyes were immediately fixed like every newcomer on the kneeling nobles in front of the throne guarded by four gigantic Space Marines, and one wore a golden armour similar to those painted during the days of the Sanguinala for Sanguinius the Beloved.

But the Space Marines were not the reason were gasps and whispered echoed in the hall as more nobles arrived. Their fellow nobles were...it was not like it was one saw a Prince-Magister kneeling and in chains every day.

But there was not one Prince-Magister in this unpleasant position. There were four. Sophia XVI Seleucid, with her light green hair and red eyes, her visage and her body altered by the God-Emperor only knew how many dozen of youth-giving drugs. Michael XXXXI Argos, rose hairs, rose eyes, but a black heart who had eliminated father, brothers, sisters and cousins before claiming the title of Prince-Magister. Samuel XIX Ionian was here, with his eminently recognisable blue wig and golden robes. And Ephesus V Corinth came last, managing to remain somewhat dignified in his custom-modified Navy uniform.

Since the Inquisition had removed four Prince-Magisters’ lines before the election, this was four out of six of the remaining Houses which were there, in chains and accused by the new Lady Nyx. At any point Zoe thought she was going to be dragged by the Angels of Death to share their fate, but when her name was called with the one of the young – and newly elevated too – Prince-Magister Justinian XXI Euboea they had to stand ten feet behind the other Prince-Magisters and the guards and the Astartes did not move a finger to arrest them.

She was going to take it as a good sign. Maybe.

The trumpets sounded and the flow of incoming nobles stopped. It was not a perfect count, but the Princess-Magister would be astonished if there were more than six hundred nobles here. It was by far one of the smallest gatherings ever organised by a Nyx Governor...and Zoe had a bad feeling the audience was going to get smaller, not larger in the next minutes.

The trumpets sounded a second time and for the first time the Princess of House Attica met the eyes of the woman they had supported in her bid for the title of Lady Nyx. It was not voluntary; Naxos XXVIII Menelaus never came inside a reception hall without at least one hour of ceremonies, music and messengers to announce the imminence of his arrival. Evidently, his successor didn’t share his sense of timing.

The next second they were all bowing and kneeling, trying to guess which was the correct protocol as the heroine the common people had taken to call Lady Weaver sat on the only seat of the Hall of War.

“You can all rise.” By the time, Zoe was able to once against are at the throne, the Governor of Nyx was flanked by several armoured beetles, a couple of gigantic spiders and ten more Astartes. And while it was difficult to analyse the visage of someone you didn’t know, the Lady Nyx looked to be radiating in anger. “My schedule has been completely upturned by all these assassination attempts and I have other places to be before the end of this day. The first order of this gathering is the judgement of several traitorous Prince-Magisters.”

This time there was no doubt that it was a glare which was sent to the chained Prince-Magisters.

“Your Holiness,” Michael XXXXI Argos began. “We are your faithful servants, sworn to the light of the Golden Throne...”

“I have a mountain of evidence from Arbitrator-Judge Joseph Anderson which says the exact opposite. I have also the seals of House Menelaus stamped on the data-slates which avoided your arrest the last dozen times, Prince Argos.” The black-haired, golden-armoured woman cut him. “I don’t know why my predecessor thought letting you kill babies because they could challenge your claim one day was a good idea, and I don’t really care. What I know is that it stops today. Since every Argos noble today is either dead or one of your descendants, your line will end with you.”

“But...but...I want a trial!”

“You will get one,” there was no smirk but something burned in the Lady Nyx’s eyes, and Zoe was not arrogant to say it didn’t scare her, “on the battlefield. The orks are not completely vanquished, and as you have by all evidence no reluctance to kill your relatives, I have decided to appoint you as the first recruit of the 7th Nyx Pureblood Penal Legion. You sons, grandsons and relatives will be the next conscripts. If you have a shadow of loyalty in your body, you will charge the greenskins and do something useful.”

The sentence didn’t end with ‘for once in your life’ but everybody heard it. Michael XXXXI Argos tried to stand on his two legs and run away, but he had not managed to make two feet a couple of guards grabbed him and dragged him away while the fallen Prince-Magister kicked and screamed.

“Prince-Magister Ephesus V Corinth.”

“Your Holiness.” The golden-armoured insect commander breathed out before correcting him.

“Your Ladyship will be enough.”

“Yes, your Ladyship.”

“You have been a terrible administrator these last decades. In fact, the representatives of the Administratum are quite puzzled how you managed to avoid bankruptcy no less than seventeen times by sheer dumb luck.”

A Space Marine moved out from the shadows with fluidity and gave her a voluminous ledger that Lady Taylor Hebert examined for five minutes, letting a heavy silence descend on the hall.

“But while you’re an incompetent administrator, you care about your family and you appear to have enough principles to refuse the blackmail of someone like Nostradamus Vandire.” The name was uttered like a curse. “I will not demand the Arbites to press for charges. Unchain him.”

That was...it was a surprise. By the euphoric face of Ephesus Corinth, it was a surprise for him too.

“On the other hand, I can’t let you in good conscience continue your tenure as Prince-Magister. You still hold your rank of Lieutenant in the Imperial Navy. It is my suggestion you re-enlist within a standard year and let one of your children take your title.”

“Your Ladyship is aware...of my daughter’s activities...”

For the first time, something like a smile arrived on the young visage of the Lady Nyx.

“I will not throw her to the Arbites...this time. I once played the vigilante, and your daughter avoided a lot of crimes a lot of lesser nobles were involved into. If she decides to toe the line starting today, I’m willing to write an amnesty...exceptionally.”

“Thank you, your Ladyship. I will join back the Navy.”

“Excellent choice,” and the former Prince-Magister of House Corinth left the audience room, without chains and his freedom regained.

Seleucid and Ionian had hopeful expressions on their visages...especially Samuel Ionian. When he saw the wrathful expression directed at him by the recently promoted Major-General of the Imperial Guard, he tried to take a step back and fell on his backside in a ridiculous manner.

No one laughed, and the Space Marines tightened their grip on their bolters.

“I don’t like rapists.” The voice had become frigid and angry. “I really don’t like those who use their power, be it politically or of another nature, to gain sexual favours over someone. But if I hate someone more than a rapist, it’s those who decide to abuse sexually children. Even Vandire didn’t fall that far, and he was as irredeemably corrupt and evil as it was possible to be. Samuel XIX Ionian. I can say without taking any risk the judgement in the afterlife is going to be particularly unpleasant for you. You are a defiler of innocence, you destroyed the lives of children and left broken shells of them...and for this I call you to judgment, in the name of the Emperor.”

“Mercy...mercy,” the Ionian Prince-Magister prostrated himself further. “I will go to the penal legions...”

“No.” The word was uttered like it was solid adamantium. “A Penal Legion is for someone who has a tiniest chance to be redeemed. Judging by the images and vids we seized from Vandire’s private stash, you did this for decades and never felt remorse, otherwise you would have stopped on your own. I don’t have a proper count of how many lives you ruined, but it ends today. You will go to the gallows leaving this room, and an executioner will make sure the hanging is slow and dolorous. Then your body will be burned anonymously in the incinerators. This is the fate you deserve. Guards, take him away.”

Samuel XIX Ionian continued to cry and plea, but the black-armoured guards who seized him ignored him and for the third time an important noble lost his titles, privileges...as well as his life.

“Princess-Magister Sophia XVI Seleucid.”

“Your Ladyship?” Her counterpart of House Seleucid was terrified and rightfully so, as two Space Marines stopped less than half a meter on her flanks.

“Your attempts at tax evasion may have amused Governor Menelaus. I can assure you they don’t amuse me. And the Administratum is not amused by the ridiculous justifications you found to decrease your tithes in the last fifty years. I want before the end of this year the confirmation you have repaid every Throne Gelt, armour, cannon, truck and lasgun you were required to give or produce for the Imperial Guard and the Imperium of His Most Holy Majesty. You will not increase the duration of the working week endured by your workers. You will pay all of this with your private funds and the materials you stashed away. If you succeed and do not commit more crimes in this lapse of time, I will allow you to retire without going in front of a tribunal and abdicate in favour of a candidate of your line. Fail and you will be the first recruit of a new Nyx Pureblood Penal Legion.”

The chains were removed, but Sophia Seleucid ran out of the room like she had an army at her heels and not the two guards of a normal escort.

Then the giant spiders unveiled a large banner they had apparently weaved in the last minutes. It had a single work written on it.

LOYALTY

“I think with all the assassination attempts I have been unable to present myself. I am Lady Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, Lady Basileia of Nyx, Duchess of Brockton, and Major-General of the Imperial Guard. And I think we need to properly discuss what I expect in terms of loyalty, competence and governance from the nobility of Nyx.”

The Angels of Death were in a neat line on each side of the throne-seat, but Zoe never doubted at this moment they were the minor danger.

“Let’s begin with the military obligations...”

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

“She is waiting for you.” The words, delivered by one of the big red-armoured Space Marines, were a pleasant change compared to what had been PRT policy months ago. When Director Piggot was in power at Brockton, the woman often let the Wards wait out several minutes before they were invited in. It didn’t matter if the Director had previous appointments or not. By contrast, with her new ‘boss’, you were introduced the moment you arrived and the Astartes checked you had no weapon of mass destruction under your clothes.

Taylor Hebert was very, very removed from perfection, but at least she was effective. When she had asked to be the ‘leader of the anti-gang Nyx brigade’, it had taken less than ten minutes for Weaver to take a decision and send the appropriate paperwork to the Adeptus Arbites.

It was a lot of fun. Nyx was what Brockton could have been after a few centuries of corruption and neglect, and the Arbites had mountains of evidence they burned to use. The common PDF regiments and enforcers were eager to clean the cesspit of darkness and illegality too. It was probably going to take decades to return to something approaching an honest society, but the heroine in her knew this was a good start. As the High Justicar – supreme commander of the enforcer and investigation forces across the three Hive-Continents - and the Minister of Justice for Nyx, Vista was going to do what the nobles should have done long ago. Make this world a place its inhabitants would love living on.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted as she marched in the vast room of Floor Five where Weaver had decided to install her office. Wow, there had been a lot of changes since yesterday. There were green-gold mosaic on the walls, with a few large fruit paintings and drapes of silks supplementing the decoration. On the ground an expensive green carpet had been added, and it covered half of the room. The hololith/tactical display had not changed its place in the centre, but it was now on a large wooden table which was a polished brown. There were also gold-blue and silver chairs, couches and pillows, not to mention a massive white-golden desk where pile of data-slates were divided by a swarm of insects. It gave a certain sense of...oriental flair to what had been a very Roman-type ambiance, what with the marble columns, the marble statues and the High Gothic carvings.

“I like what you did with the room.” Missy said as she advanced and took care not to walk on the column of spiders hurrying away.

“Thank you, but it’s not me you have to compliment,” the other parahuman replied as she raised her eyes from what looked like a massive book of regulations. “It’s the butlers, housemaids and other personnel I inherited who are to be complimented.”

“They love you.” The dark eyes looked away and Vista did not need to be a genius to know Weaver was embarrassed.

“After Vandire and Menelaus, I think they would have cheered for anyone who treated them like human beings. I am not that special...”

Vista shook her head and almost let escape a noise of amazement. Well, at least the insect-controlling parahuman was not going to go mad with power anytime soon.

“The justice reforms have begun. We will open three recruitment centres for the formation of judges, investigators and law experts in the next two standard months. Of course, we will ‘lose’ many to the Adeptus Arbites once their formation ends, but coupled with the increased budget to the police forces we may be able to curb down the criminality and the corruption to more reasonable levels in a few years.”

“Good,” several big butterflies flew to her and delivered new data-slates in her hands. “Hopefully the working week being decreased to 80 hours and the slight increase in income we deliver are going to be a new departure for the people of Nyx.”

It was more than that, and they both knew it. Both girls had walked in the streets and the hab-blocks of the Lower Hive. The poverty, the neglect and the dirtiness...it had made her sick to look at it. According to Dragon, even the most cruel and amoral industrialists of Earth Bet had never treated their employees like this. Save perhaps the Nazis, but when the comparison came to them...

The Nyxian day was twenty-five hours-long. A week was thus one hundred and seventy-five hours. Eighty-four hours represented forty-eight percent of the existing hours, and the majority of the lower classes were not doing office work but trimming and selling the force of their muscles and bones in gigantic manufactorum. When they came back to their tiny quarters, they were more often utterly exhausted and collapsed on vermin-infested mattresses. Because the next day would be just as exhausting and there were millions more of unemployed to take their place if they dared protesting.

Honestly, eighty hours remained far too high to her taste, and she knew Weaver agreed, but they had to start somewhere and at least the new weekly schedule would give each worker a free day. Some industrialists had tried to protest and were now directly bound for Nyx Secundus where promethium and iron ore exploitation awaited. Some men and women obviously didn’t realise that past a certain point, forcing someone to work was counter-productive.

“Are there more reforms you want to push for the next days?”

The new Lady Nyx grimaced.

“No, unfortunately not. Dragon advised against it, and a lot of the administrators and councillors I have been able to delegate the lesser duties agree. In their own words, going too fast will cripple some of the reforms before they have the time to be properly implemented.”

“They might not be wrong,” Missy answered in a neutral tone.

“They are certainly right, you mean,” the black-haired girl sighed loudly. “You might be interested to know we have already voted and ordered more reforms in the last week than House Menelaus did in three hundred years.”

“That bad?” This was a definition of new definition of stagnation...

“That bad. Of course, the merchant and artisan guilds, the Tech-Priests and the officers changed their doctrines, selling policies and their organisations in the mean time, but at the top the nobility stayed unconcerned and ignorant. But as long as they pay their tithes properly, the Imperium does not care a lot what the leaders of a world are doing every day.”

Weaver fell on one of the biggest couches with a groan and Missy took a chair nearby.

“The monetary reforms for the Sector as a whole will be a bit delayed, but I intend to give the go-ahead next year or so. This situation where there are more than ten currencies with the name ‘Throne Gelts’ but different values must cease.”

Yes, that in hindsight had been one of these nasty little surprises all the parahumans could have done without. Want to buy something at Wuhan? You need Throne Gelts. Want to buy something at Nyx? You need Throne Gelts. Are these Throne Gelts issued by the same Banking Clans and worth the same value coin for coin? Of course not, it would be too simple...

“It’s your decision.”

“Yes, thank you for the vote of confidence,” the newly-elected Basileia declared sarcastically before softening her tone. “The reconstruction of Hive Arcadia in the deep north into a proper Forge-Temple under Dragon can wait a few days, it’s in the island north of this continent and the Tech-Priests have to dismantle the former Hive-structure first, plus we are still negotiating on the STC templates. The same applies for the former House Macedon and the new Basilica which will be built there.”

“I saw the budget estimates for this one. You don’t think the Ecclesiarchy is a bit...too demanding?”

Taylor Hebert shrugged.

“I am trying to release them a Cardinal World to my authority and convince them to use the Basilica as a sort of...Vatican of Nyx, if the analogy makes any sense. I intend it to be the first and certainly the last religious monument I will ever finance. For the glory of the God-Emperor and all of that.”

Missy could not help but smile.

“For shame, the priests would be so disappointed listening to their Living Saint...”

The smile was not returned.

“I could live with their disappointment. I don’t know if I can sleep soundly when the nominal ruler of the Imperium is strapped on an arcane throne-device half a galaxy away and is obviously able to give me and others Trump-like abilities of golden flames that I absolutely have no idea how to use.”

Ah yes, that point...the heroine was trying not to think too much about it. Wondering how exactly the corpse of the most successful tyrant humanity had ever produced was preventing a horde of demons from invading reality was...was not something good for your sanity. The red monster had been a nightmare, but it was certainly one of a million horrors waiting in the hells beyond reality.

“Any other reforms in the planning stage?”

“Yes, and this one was brought me by Lankovar.”

“Oh?” The new Archmagos had stayed on the rear-lines for the moment, since his promotion, while entirely deserved, had upset more than a few venerable Magi.

“Yes, he was able to get one of the many anti-pollution measures the Mechanicus sometimes authorises for valuable worlds. You know, in order for us poor flesh and blood mortals to breathe without a rebreather mask outside the Hives.”

Yes, that was definitely something Vista could see would be useful. Nyx was less polluted than Wuhan, mainly because the planet had still a large ocean and ice caps, but the ecological disasters had steadily gotten worse in the last centuries. If someone wanted to swim in the main ocean today, it was best to have a suit resistant to various chemical substances and prepare a will beforehand.

“And what is the first measure you will order, oh leader of the Green Party?”

The next second she received some spider silk in the face for her question.

“Don’t laugh. In the name of ecology, we are going to plant millions of giant cactuses.”

Vista giggled.

**First Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

If the new Lady of Nyx herself had not named him First Naval Secretary and Wolfgang Second Naval Secretary, it was a certainty they would never have been invited in the room, never mind granted the right to sit at the table.

Aside from Weaver herself, there was Lord Admiral Danvers Alexandros, the commander of the Imperial Navy for the Nyx Sector as a whole, Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer of Cypra Mundi, who by default was now his second-in-command, and Admiral Genseric Florentine, the new commanding officer of the Nyx System Defence Fleet now that the five high-ranking officers had been condemned to join the penal battalions in recompense of a life spent embezzling funds destined to their monitors and crew supplies. And around them were several dozen Captains, Lieutenants and practically every military rank which could be considered important.

All of those great gentlemen were quickly learning their new...well, mistress was a bit exaggerating. Weaver was not technically the supreme commander of the Navy. A Sector Lady had in theory no right to order around Battlefleets and squadrons; the Imperial Navy was independent and proud of it. On the other hand, if a Navy wanted, say to recoup its losses after a massive space battle, the Governor of the Sector was the logical interlocutor to go. It was she who owned the shiny orbital shipyard – that she had just renamed Vulkan Arsenal, in honour of the Primarch. It was also she who decided where the naval tithe had to go. Warp-faring vessels had to be delivered to the Imperial Navy, but it never said which Sector’s Battlefleet was to be reinforced with brand-new constructions.

The previous Governor – may his soul rot in a pit of garbage somewhere – had been too fond of buying favours to Sectors more important than his to be concerned about consolidating his Battlefleet. Yes, even while orks were busy invading Fay, Governor Naxos hadn’t abandoned the idea to sell to the highest bidder the military hulls constructed in his dry docks. Clockblocker was not mournful at the idea the Inquisition had removed this incompetent idiot from power forever.

“So we have one Mars-class dry dock for small battlecruisers and the like,” Weaver summed-up once Admiral Florentine had finished giving a long recapitulative session – nice moustache, by the way. “There are also five Luna-class dry docks for cruisers and units of these tonnages, eleven Mercury-class docks for the light cruisers and thirty-five Centauri-class docks for the construction of escorts, and one hundred and forty-three Auxiliary docks for the freighters and the essential supply train.”

“Yes, this is about it,” the officer wearing the midnight blue uniform admitted. “We can build escorts in reasonable quantities, but for centuries we never tried to build anything bigger than a small battlecruiser.”

“This looks really imprudent,” the black-haired insect-mistress commented. “Orks love their big guns and as the Battle of the Death Star proved, we can lose plenty of destroyers and frigates if they are not rapidly reinforced by capital ships.”

The majority of the officers wisely chose to stay silent. Some may or may not have supported the former Governor for more power and influence, and now the short-sighted policy had come back straight in their faces – for those who were still alive, that is.

Weaver played with the display for several seconds before addressing the Admirals again.

“All right. Tell me what the Navy needs.”

“To begin with,” Admiral Alexandros cautious started, “we need the hulls in construction in this very shipyard. There are two Lunar-class Cruisers, nine Dauntless-class Light Cruisers and thirty-two Cobra-class Destroyers which will be completed by 030.290M35. I suppose representatives from the Samarkand Sector will probably pester you for acquiring these warships, but the losses suffered in the last year makes us vulnerable. We may be able to count on your Space Marine allies for the moment, but the Angels of Death will have in the future other crises to deal with. And when they leave, it will be Battlefleet Nyx to hold the line.”

The warlord turned Planetary Governor nodded once.

“Given the circumstances, that seems reasonable. I will expect the Navy to record properly this generous contribution. I am willing to cut a bit down on the benefits and the advantages Menelaus demanded, but there are hundreds of thousands Nyxians working night and day for the defence of the Imperium in these shipyards.”

“Of course, your Holiness,” Dennis didn’t chuckle, but the temptation was there. For the last days, Taylor Hebert had fought tooth and nail with her personnel for them to call her ‘your Ladyship’, ‘Governor’ or ‘General’...and each time she faced a new interlocutor, it was back to stage one. The mistress of insects was not slamming her head against the table, but by the glance she had given, Weaver had thought about it.

“I suppose a new wave of construction will be necessary once the dry docks are liberated from the current wave of constructions.”

“Yes, your Holiness,” Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer politely intervened. “Between all the warriors sworn to the God-Emperor who fought in the Brockton System, five Cruisers, eight Light Cruisers and forty-two Destroyers were destroyed or are heavily damaged and will be non-operational for the next year. Even disregarding the other losses like the frigates and the heavy capital ships, we will still be short on operational Cruisers and Destroyers next year.”

“And how much time does it take you to build a Destroyer?” asked Taylor Hebert, in a voice which was filled with suspicion.

“In the Vulkan Arsenal,” Admiral Genseric Florentine revealed, “it takes approximately two years to build a Cobra-class Destroyer, and counting all the essentials the warship cost roughly three hundred and thirty billion Throne Gelts. Battle-line Cruisers like the Luna class take a bit more than nine years and cost around one thousand and three hundred billion.”

Dennis hissed in stupefaction, and he was not the only one. The ‘election’ which had played itself over a week ago had seen the price of a Destroyer thrown around...but he had thought it would represent far, far more in terms of warships.

“I see,” the voice of the parahuman was far more subdued when she opened her mouth again. “I see. Admiral Alexandros.”

“Yes, your Holiness?”

“I want you to concert with Admiral Florentine and prepare me a few rebuilding plans for the naval forces in the Nyx Sector. I don’t want to let the Sector vulnerable to pirates and other predatory xenos, but I suppose that since we need nine years to build a Lunar-class Cruiser to the proper standards, it is not something we can rush mindlessly. I will give you a month or two, but before the end of this year I want to have a military space program to propose to the Archmagi and Magi present in this system.”

“It will be done, your Holiness.”

“I am pleased to hear it. Now I want to hear about the deployment priorities in the Moros Sub-Sector...”

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*When one speaks about Nyx, the subject of the Weaverian Marvels is unavoidably mentioned. And when you begin speaking about the Weaverian Marvels, you are forced to speak about the Hagia Sanguinala. It is a rule which tolerates no exception. The Basilica was the first great architectural triumph ordered by Lady Weaver after her ascension to the Nyx Sector Ladyship, and the fact it remains unblemished and undaunted more than five thousand years later is proof of the genius of its builders and the steadfastness the Nyx military forces defend their homeworld.*

*Smaller than one of the main Hives on Nyx Tertius, the Hagia Sanguinala was built on the location where the former Hive Macedon had stood before M32 and the top of its monumental dome stands five thousand metres above the ground. It is a jewel of the Renaissance style, indeed one might say the Basilica created the style. It took nearly a century to build this masterwork, and as such the rise of the Sanguinala is often associated with the Age of Silk and Hope in the Nyx Sector. It is the Ecclesiarchy seat of the Nyx Sector, for the incumbent Cardinal of the times transferred the diocese headquarters from Nyx Sextus to Nyx Tertius ten years before the end of the construction. It is also one of the rare locations in the galaxy to be held as sacred by every branch of His Most Holy Majesty’s Imperium. Many famous individuals of the Dawnbreaker Guard worked on the decoration of the holy edifice, and their names and their tombs can be read by those judged worthy in the Great Catacomb. Priceless archeotech relics and the Athena STC database are stored in the Hall of Technology. Tens of thousands banners of Crusades and Liberations are displayed before the altars. And there are just three of countless reasons the Hagia Sanguinala is the beating religious heart of the Nyx Sector...*

Extract from the *One Hundred and Forty-Four Marvels of the Saint* by Patriarch Prescott XXX, 310M41.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.814.289M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Thirty-fifth millennium after Jesus Christ or no, the morning always began with the strident noise made by an alarm clock. It was an expensive thing in gold and platinum, but an alarm clock nonetheless.

Taylor groaned, threw a pillow at the other end of the five metres-long huge bed that had become hers some twenty mornings ago and rose.

“Light, windows,” she vocally commanded and the systems put in place centuries ago answered. In less than five seconds, the penumbra of the vast bedroom ceased to be and as she marched towards the edge of the room on a large red and gold carpet, she was able to see the clouds and the Hive below. It was one of the many advantages which came her private quarters on Floor three, at the top of Hive Athena.

It was better not to suffer from vertigo. Floor three was at some fourteen and a half kilometres above the ground of the Moira Hive-Continent. It was one of the most elevated points of Nyx in fact, if one didn’t count the space elevators and other Mechanicus ground-orbital facilities and transport methods or asteroid extractions.

It was not beautiful. The Hive was a nightmare of industry, overpopulation, black smoke and unbridled emotion. The lands which surrounded it were brown, grey or black, and betrayed the existence of millions of manufactorums and sprawls from over-industrialisation and human exploitation.

By all rights, no life should be able to exist on a planet like this...and yet somehow billions of humans were born, lived and died on these hive-continents since times immemorial. From her observation post, Taylor could see the dozens of high-speed trains leaving and arriving in the terminals of the Nyx capital every minute. Hundreds of thousands lights were guiding people to a new day of work. A new day was beginning and like a hive of insects, the workers and the millions of inhabitants prepared or rushed towards a new work day. It made her feel...unworthy of these people’s admiration. Life in the streets of Brockton Bay wasn’t that dangerous compared to the one a Nyxian born in the Under-Hive endured every day. And in the end, who did the most important work? The hero who killed the monster in a blazing moment of glory? Or the exhausted man who had produced two thousand lasguns for the regiments of the Imperial Guard? Without the latter, it would be difficult to win wars with nothing but rocks and sticks...

For a second or two, the parahuman watched the Hive her ‘election’ had given her before turning around. As much as she wanted to sightsee, there were duties a Lady of Nyx had to fulfil – assuming you had principles and morals, obviously.

The moment she set a foot outside the bedroom, it was time to regret it. In a matter of seconds she was assailed by an army of servants whose only goal seemed to bask in disapproval of her hairs and her appearance in general. Worse, today apparently her schedule didn’t involve going outside highly-secure areas. And this meant a robe was in the cards, not the golden massive tank-thing the tech-Priests insisted to call her power armour.

These were, as usual, ten long minutes, and when Vladisluvius Arav, her chief of staff and newly promoted Captain arrived, she gave him a silent thanks.

“What is the planning for today?” she asked once she had laced blue boots to go with a long gold-coloured dress with symbols of blue crowns.

“Breakfast with Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius, several officers of the Frateris Templars and the men of the PDF Nyx 160th Regiment,” the blonde-haired Fay guardsman replied. “After that you have one hour and a half of audience, General. Then two hours of exercise with the Dawnbreaker Guard and the 1st Company of the regiment. I think sword lessons are on the menu today.”

She groaned. She hated these lessons...she always served as the Space Marines’ punching bag.

“If you hurry, you will be able to go to the baths on Floor 10. If not, shower on Floor 18. The lunch will be with Major Sevrev and Ministry of Industry Dragon Richter. I understand our recruitment priorities and the creation of the division will be discussed. Also present will be officers and guardsmen of the PDF Nyx 39th Regiment. Once the meal is over, there is a long meeting-audience with several Archmagi and Magi of the Mechanicus. It will probably be to conclude some STC-template negotiations.”

“One can only hope. Dragon will have more information on the subject, hopefully.”

Her chief of staff nodded.

“Once this is over, there is one hour of audience scheduled with merchant guild representatives and some captains of important civilian freighters operating in the Sector. I have reserved then one more hour in the new Biodome with your insects on Floor 24. And once you are ready there will be dinner with Princess-Magister Zoe Attica and several local dignitaries plus the PDF Nyx 2003rd Regiment.”

The two of them went to the electromagnetic lifters, preceded by two Astartes and over fifty guardsmen, some of them from Fay, many others from the rest of the Sector. There were also assistants and palace personnel everywhere.

Officially, she was the owner of everything between the top of the Spire and Floor 46. In practise, this was a gigantic amount of ground to cover, and it was better to admit there were rooms and locations she would never have the time to visit. That wasn’t to say these sections and floors were empty. Menelaus, his wives and his friends may have vacated this reality for a far worse place, but the army of men and women maintaining, cleaning and repairing were still there and apart from a few corrupt and murderous cases, Taylor had kept them.

Even if she had thought about reasons to dismiss, the smiles and expressions of adorations they gave her would have melted a colder heart than hers.

“Are there any major news which came after I was asleep?”

“One; the Gladiator Arena on Floor 48 has been razed by the demolition engines of several Magi. Valeriya and one company oversaw the destruction. The crowd approval was particularly loud, I’m told.”

“You will show me the vid-casts before lunch.” This entire place had reeked of blood, death and misery, and for all the truth it was here she had become officially the new Governor of the Nyx System and Sector, there was no way she could look herself in a mirror if she let these blood games continue. “I think we will be able to replace it by something calmer and more educational. Maybe several insect domes, a zoo or a museum including some real information.”

“As you say, General. Your friend Leet proposed to make it a ‘video-game centre’.”

Taylor raised her eyes to the golden-painted ceiling in consternation. Of course the not-so-funny Tinker thought this was a good idea.

“I thought I told Dragon to find him a space-lab with nothing too important nearby.”

“She tried,” her subordinate revealed with the visage of someone about to present bad news, “he made the space-lab explode in record time. It was a miracle there weren’t more deaths...and the Tech-Priests refuse to give him another until they figure out how he blew up the first.”

“This man is a menace,” Taylor cursed under her breath before ordering one guardsmen to go to the Tech-Priests to see if there was a possible compromise to be made.

Half a minute later, they entered the breakfast hall at the sound of violins and harps. A small regiment worth of invitees, butlers and officers saluted, and after one minute of ceremony everyone went to his or her seat.

She was well-aware the protocol she was entitled for a Major-General, a Sector Lady and a recognised Saint was at the very minimum ten times longer, but if she authorised too much, she wouldn’t do anything with her days. Already with Missy she had modified a lot of useless protocols: before her arrival, the Governor and his close family were the only ones authorised to seat at the main table and it was completely unconscionable for everyone to talk without his permission.

She had decided from the start this was not going to happen under her watch. She was Taylor Hebert. She was not going to eat alone as tens of thousands people starved in silence and tried to curry her support with flatteries and good words. Everyone was searched before being invited and assassins which were courageous or suicidal to try their chance nonetheless were shot on sight, but this way there was a good ambiance when she talked with the men and women of Nyx. And the presence of simple soldiers, civilians, and common artisans helped her enormously. For all the power she had been granted now...she was still human. Her blood was red, and she was mortal like them.

The Spire decorations and the archives had made very clear that House Menelaus had been given power for centuries over billions of people and this power had corrupted them absolutely. Taylor didn’t want to end like them.

The decoration had been of course a bit altered since last week. New white and gold mosaics, a painting representing a victory of the Imperial Guard returning home victorious and several smaller tables and chairs were the main modifications. The original carpet and long table were still there, although the previous owner had likely never imagined so many non-aristocrats would be invited to breathe in this august room.

Since she was the Governor, her seat was by default the one looking like a throne and it was in the dominant position at the head of the table. She was the first seated, and the first to leave. And yes, people made her pleading eyes every time to respect that tradition.

“The doctrinal problems are not getting out of hand?” she demanded to the Abbess to her right once she had eaten two delicious pastries, drank two glasses of fruit juice and emptied one bowl of something tasting like cereals but that she had never managed to utter the name.

“No, no, your Holiness, they are still debating if the correct name of Nyx Sextus is Saint Clare’s Stand or Saint Claire’s Stand...”

Colonel Guerin to her left chuckled while she rolled her eyes. Sadly, some disputes of the Imperium higher hierarchy were absolutely ridiculous. More than thirty millennia after inventing the atomic bomb, humanity had not learned to not debate about petty issues. Evidently.

“I’m sure they will be able to figure it out in time,” the whole thing was a bit amusing, for them to debate who was the greatest between the Founder of the Nyx Sector – Lady Admiral Claire Theresa – or the leader of the Expansion Crusade in M33 – Lord General Militant Lucian Clare. But since the debate was over a millennium old and largely academic by that point, she was not going to intervene in this religious affair.

“I certainly pray they will do so,” the old warrior woman affirmed. “I have the dates Cardinal Prescott Lumen wanted to propose at the last audience before we were cut off by this unfortunate bombing event.”

The dates were the dates of Nyx holy days. Normally, the Cardinal of the local diocese would not have cared much about her advice, but as she was technically blessed by the Emperor, Master of Mankind, taking unilaterally this decision would set a dangerous precedent for Cardinal Prescott...and he couldn’t know she was perfectly content to let him rule alone his planets as long as he organised his subordinates into a semi-rational organisation which wasn’t going to incite a war of Faith the moment she had her back turned.

“I’m ready to hear them.”

“As per your wishes, ten important holy days will be celebrated every year. The Day of Renewal to celebrate the first day of the new Terran year, day-fraction 001. The Day of the Emperor’s Ascension, where the Master of Mankind ascended on the Golden Throne, the holy day of holy days, day-fraction 101. The Day of Soldiers, to remember the sacrifices made by the souls willing to depart their home and fight under the flags of the Aquila, day-fraction 220. The Day of Saint Claire, to commemorate the Founding of Nyx and the victory over the terrors of the Old Night, day-fraction 312. Other Saints and Heroes of the Imperium are celebrated during the three days of the Festival of Saints and Heroes, day-fraction 517. Machine Day is...officially a holy day, due to the ancestral accords signed with the Mechanicus, day-fraction 562. The Burning of Sins follows, with its traditional ceremonies of confessions, day-fraction 590. Children’s Day, which is always popular for its sweets and its numerous attractions to please the young generations, day-fraction 630. Governor’s Day will celebrate your arrival and the triumph won at the Battle of the Death Star, day-fraction 744.”

It would also serve as her birthday, since with all the calendar modifications, no tech-Priest had been good enough to calculate where her birth date fell in the Imperium calendar.

“And of course, the holy week of the Sanguinala traditionally ends the year religiously, day-fraction 933.”

“The list sounds acceptable,” she said as she read the data-slate and the short description of what resources and festivities were organised by the administration of Nyx and the Ecclesiarchy every year. Without surprise, the Day of the Emperor’s Ascension was the biggest event, but the Sanguinala was not far behind, and for the children, it was the most popular, for the event celebrating the sacrifice of the Primarch Sanguinius had absorbed Christmas a few centuries after the Great Heresy.

“A few Pontifex were disappointed you didn’t try to increase...or should I say replace, the considerable number of holy days Governor Menelaus ordered every year.”

For this one, fortunately, she had the answer ready the moment she had discussed her preferences with the Cardinal.

“Holy days are, at the risk of repeating the evidence, holy days. There are days when loyal men and women can find some relaxation, be it in their faith, in feasts, in prayer or in marvelling the possibilities offered by the Imperium. I think it’s better to have ten real holy days which are widely celebrated than a hundred half-empty events where the foreign visitors will be able to see empty stands and deserted streets. It would not be pleasant to watch...and I don’t think the Emperor would look kindly on it either.”

“I am happy this is your motivation, your Holiness,” Theodora Gaius replied as Taylor handed her back the data-slate. “I also have good news on the Basilica front; we have been able to contact an itinerant architect at Atlantis willing to work on the plans of the new Basilica.”

“Really?” Taylor was forced to raise her eyebrows. “The last astropathic transmission was, forgive me, a bit disappointing.”

A few Fay and Nyx officers present, who had watched the famous Nyx architects tear each other apart on their preliminary draws, smiled or chuckled.

Building a Basilica, a super-cathedral or whatever religious edifice was no problem in the M35 Imperium. As long as the Governor or whoever ordered the construction respected the basic tenets – double-headed eagles, statues of the Emperor, Saints and Primarchs, no Chaos symbols, proper respect to the Imperial authority – the approval was given in the seconds after. No, the problem came from the architects. The moment she had voiced her opposition to the Gothic style for this new construction, the potential architects-in-chief had started a mini civil war and yesterday’s reports made clear the situation was apparently unravelling badly. Hypothetically, one of the pro-Gothic architects might have voiced this was a crime against the Emperor to build a cathedral not Gothic, and had been found dead in the bed of an ‘exotic dancer’ the next morning. His death had apparently begun a cycle of vendettas and bloody reprisals.

The psyker who had come to deliver the message had told her this was already nicknamed the ‘War of the Gargoyles’ in certain circles of the Atlantis Sector.

“What sort of information do you have on this new promising architect?”

The answer was a lot, which was unsurprising, since Cardinals and other high-ranking figures of a galactic Empire weren’t in the habit to hire complete unknown for their mausoleums or sites of worship. Yet even with medicines to lengthen considerably her life, this female architect seemed to have lived a charming life. Over twenty Sectors visited, and each time the recommendations had been extremely positive by all parties. Dozens of cathedrals, palaces and cities had been built under her supervision, and each time it had been reported the religious attendance to religious events had skyrocketed. The lone picture and a few lines completing the report made this even more extraordinary.

“She’s blind?” It was not impossible in this age; the augmetics the Mechanicus produced were not able to heal or compensate all the afflictions. The fact however that this woman had learned to adapt...she had to be very old or come from a rich family willing to pay for her education. Outside the Nyx aristocracy, people with lasting injuries or disabilities were lucky to last a year. Even after the Battle of the Death Star, she had to personally take care of several broken veterans, who were cared in an unoccupied floor of the Spire with the medical support she had been able to negotiate.

“Yes, she is,” confirmed the Abbess. “Her faith in the God-Emperor must be powerful to overwhelm the obstacles she faces in daily life.”

“Assuredly,” Taylor said and finished her breakfast before her servants began to prepare reports to Dragon or another of her mother hens that she didn’t eat enough. “Well, I’m willing to pay for her travel to Nyx and meet her face to face. The conversation should be interesting. Make the arrangements, please. Oh, and you forgot to include her name on your report?”

“I did?” the Abbess-Crusader checked and frowned. “Indeed, I did. My mistake, your Holiness. The name of this woman is Cyrene Versailles.”

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

There were many reasons why Space Marine Chapter Masters rarely met together. One was the fact that when it was a time for war, there were fortunately not many enemies in the galaxy requiring thousands of Astartes to go to war together. The kind of threats which were a threat to all life were not a common occurrence, praise the Emperor and Sanguinius.

Another, and far less acknowledgeable reason, was the issue Space Marines of different lines could live on the same planet in harmony like they could squabble like a group of new recruits trying to impress their comrades with the usual boasts and tales.

Chapters of the Blood had a tendency to avoid the Space Wolves because of this very point.

Obviously, Agiel had no reluctance to listen to the suggestions of Seraph Gamaliel. The Sanguinary Guard was old, wise, respectful and even if he had not been of the Blood Angels, his tactical acumen and his position as one of the semi-official leaders of the new Dawnbreaker Guard were enough for a Brother of the Red to listen to carefully every time the Exalted Herald of Sanguinius spoke.

He had no problem, to his pleasant surprise, working with Jeremiah Isley. Yes, the veteran was a former Alpha Legionnaire, but he was a professional and conscious that his remaining Astartes had best to toe the line and present themselves as dutiful Space Marines. Yes, they were not fond of the Codex Astartes, but then the descendants of the Ninth Legion had discarded it time and time again when it was obvious the words of a Primarch had no solution to the problem at hand. Not that he was going to go to Ultramar and confess it to the sons of Guilliman.

No, he had no problems working with these two Astartes. The same couldn’t be said about Chapter Master Pontiac Dupleix, supreme commander of the Iron Drakes.

“Your Dreadnaught is a menace, Chapter Master!”

“I think you dramatise too much,” retorted Isley. “So far, the only things he destroyed when not obeying orders are a few gargoyles...”

Gamaliel intervened before the exchange unravelled in an unpleasant way.

“Please, cousins,” the Blood Angel said in his angelic voice. “This council is done between loyal servants of the Emperor and this debate must stay courteous and in the spirit of cooperation humanity expects of us.”

The blue-red Astartes and his light green counterpart mumbled apologies which were maybe one-third sincere.

“But I fear, Chapter Master Isley,” the Seraph continued serenely, “that Chapter Master Dupleix, while prone to exaggeration, has raised a good point. The Ancient Dreadnought known as Pierre is disobeying orders and creating undue agitation in the streets. I know you have a deep respect for the brother who once fought by your side, but it is time to put him into a stasis vault until the next war. What our Lady and the administration of a Sector will accept during victory celebrations, a tumultuous period of political transition and purges are not the same actions they will accept when peace is back.”

“I will support this motion,” Agiel Izaz added, trying to stay as conciliatory as possible. “Dreadnoughts, I’m afraid, are best kept aboard secure vaults until it is time to march for war again. Battle-brothers can and will walk the avenues of Nyx this year, but our Ancients will rest and sleep. They are not given the duty to fight this kind of moral and political battlefield.”

“I will put him into stasis myself,” declared reluctantly the Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens after a moment of hesitation. “Pierre will not like it, but I can’t deny he is not made to pursue gangers and rebel nobles in the tunnels.”

“Excellent, now-“

The door ten metres away opened and the man who had organised this reunion entered at last. He was late, but neither Agiel nor the other Space Marines were going to voice their displeasure. Angering an Inquisitor Lord was never a good idea, whether you were in the right or wrong.

“I’m afraid urgent affairs delayed my arrival,” Odysseus Tor announced as he took his seat. The Master of the Brothers of the Red knew he wasn’t going to receive something more this apology. “Reports arrived from the Neptunia System, and it seems there is nothing left alive or useful. The Warp Storm is gone, but the Traitors and the Enemy have only left us utter ruination and corrupt planets in their wake. The Inquisition and Priests renowned for their piety will quarantine the planets and do their utmost to destroy this corruption, but it will be years before any colonisation attempt will be officially envisaged.”

The Inquisitor watched them one by one like a hawk. The Astartes simply nodded in return. While they would have loved to go to the Neptunia System and restore it to the rule of the Imperium, this was not a fight Astartes had been built for. From M31 to M35 the *Certamen Ferale* had been trapped there, and the World Eaters had never been known to be particularly sane or empire-builders. They were killers, and psychotic ones at that. Four thousand years was unfortunately ten times longer than necessary to kill the humans and the fauna before tainting the earth and erecting their piles of skulls to the Ruinous Power they worshipped.

“The orks are accumulating the defeats and with penal legions and army corps being diverted from victorious battlefields, it seems this war is entering its last phase. Given this excellent situation, the Inquisition is concerned about the intentions of the Space Marines present in this Sector.”

In other words, some members of the Holy Ordo wanted the Emperor’s blades to go elsewhere while they could go to rewrite history and rebuild their circle of informants and agents in the shadows.

“Wherever Lady Weaver stands,” Gamaliel was the first to answer, “the Dawnbreaker Guard will be her to protect her and help her in her battles. Should she stay on Nyx, the Dawnbreaker Guard will stay. Should she leave, we will follow her.”

The Lord Inquisitor’s visage did not twitch or show any emotion. There was a curt nod, and the eyes of Odysseus Tor turned towards him.

“I have spoken with Lady Weaver and, after a long series of consultations and proposals, we have agreed to use this system as our base of operation for the time being. We will be authorised to organise recruitment selections twice per year should our effectives require it,” and his Chapter certainly did need the reinforcements. The Penance Crusade had bled them white, and the Battle of the Death Star had nearly been their grave. Today, the Brothers of the Red were down to one hundred and fourteen Astartes plus five Dreadnoughts.

“I suppose you have the official document to prove it?”

Agiel handed the Inquisitor a copy of the treaty, having anticipated he might need it. The original was in the most secure vault of the *Opera Exitium*, of course. Better not to take any risk.

“It is a fairly standard contract, Lord Inquisitor,” the Brothers of the Red explained as the man began to read the lengthy document. “In exchange of manning the defences of this system with no less than fifty battle-brothers, we are granted the authorisation to use several Mechanicus gene-labs in construction and the testing of one hundred thousand potential aspirants per year. In exchange of repair and maintenance for our starships, ammunition production and refuelling, fifty of our battle-brothers will accompany Lady Weaver to war should she make the demand.”

Honour would have demanded no less, for the salvation she had given them.

Of course, by the time the Inquisitor Lord had arrived to the last paragraphs, his frown and the narrowing of his eyes proved he had noticed some of the other clauses.

“It says that Lady Nyx will provide your Chapter a brand-new Ramilies-class Star-fort to ensure the rearmament and reconstitution of your ranks proceed at a satisfying pace.”

There still was no surprise or change of tone in the Inquisitor’s voice. The reputation of this man was not usurped...Pontiac Dupleix, on the other hand, was gaping like a huge fish.

The Iron Drake did not that way more than three seconds of course, but still Agiel Izaz would treasure the look on his cousin’s face until his death.

“Where in the name of Terra has your Lady found a Forge World willing to give her such a priceless fortress?”

“According to *our* Lady’s words,” maybe it was a bit childish, but he was going to insist the difference between the Iron Drakes and the Brothers of the Red this time, “this was the price Triplex Phall put on the table to acquire a copy of the Hebe rejuvenation template.”

That and two hundred thousand Tech-Priests protected by over forty thousand Skitarii, but he was not going to say more of the secrets he had been confided in than absolute necessary. Besides, a third of these numbers would be required to garrison the Ramilies for several years. His Chapter’s ranks were too depleted to play that role for the moment.

“The agreement is acceptable for the Inquisition,” Odysseus Tor affirmed before giving him the copy of the treaty. “Have you any idea how long it will take your Chapter to be rebuilt?”

“I’m afraid not, Lord Inquisitor.” It was sadly the truth, there. “We hope to organise a recruitment session for the Sanguinala, but after one century without recruitment, all the estimations we have are somewhat...rusty.”

“I see. Do your utmost.” And the inflexible eyes turned towards Jeremiah Isley. “Reassure me, Chapter Master, that you haven’t agreed to one of the greatest Imperial fortresses while I was interrogating Vandire and his accomplices.”

“No, Lord Inquisitor, we haven’t.” Isley was almost chuckling at first before returning to a more serious tone. “We have detached per your instructions three Heracles Wardens to the Deathwatch and two other battle-brothers have been placed under orders of your Inquisitor colleagues. Since this will reduce the number of my battle-brothers available to forty-nine, I must politely request an increase of my Chapter’s numbers.”

“Chapter Master Dupleix?” The Inquisitor continued to watch Isley and the symbol they had chosen to decorate their pauldrons: a red scales on a golden field.

“The Heracles Wardens as they stand can’t be engaged in any conventional war without receiving crippling casualties,” grudgingly admitted the Chapter Master. “Recommendation is to return their numbers to one hundred for first tactical strikes. I will not support them recruiting on the same world as another Space Marine Chapter.”

“In this case, I think it is best I speak with Lady Weaver,” the Lord Inquisitor spoke like if it had not been his plan all along. “As for your own plans, Chapter Master?”

“I would prefer to wait the return of my companies assigned to the elimination of the orks before making more adamantium-class plans, Lord Inquisitor.”

“As you wish,” the Inquisitor rose from his seat and all of the Astartes imitated him. “I wish to speak to your Lady before the day is out, Seraph Gamaliel. Preferably a few minutes during her audiences of the afternoon will do. I bid you a good day. For the Emperor.”

“For the Emperor,” and the Inquisition agents disappeared after their master. Less than a minute later, it was like none of them had been in the Upper Spire.

**Magos-Draco Dragon Richter**

“General, you look like someone has used you as their punching ball,” the comment of Major Tanya Sevrev was extremely accurate, Dragon admitted internally.

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” her superior, also known as Major-General Taylor Hebert, fell on her seat with a face betraying her exhaustion. “I didn’t see you in our training session, Major. Maybe I should summon a Space Marine or two to make sure you aren’t slacking off on your physical regime.”

“Some of us have no need to spar with the Emperor’s Finest, General,” the tone employed managed to sound at the same time pious and evasive, a worthy exploit it had to be noted. “We are simply that good.”

“The first time we will organise war games, you will be the first into the fray,” somehow in the other parahuman’s mouth, it sounded very much like an iron-clad promise. “I understand you have something for me?”

“The new order of battle for the regiment,” the Major announced while handing a series of data-chips to Weaver. “Your instructions have been respected. Dragon could not see from her seat the information the commanding officer of the 20th read, but then she had no need to: she had watched it while ‘appeasing the machine-spirits’ of the Fay headquarters a few hours ago. To sum-up it was:

*Fay guardsmen operational strength: approximately 6100 women and men.*

*Commanding officer: Major General Taylor Hebert*

*Discipline/Political Officer: Lord Commissar Zuhev*

*Second in Command: Major Tanya Sevrev*

*1st Company: Captain Anton Rykov*

*2nd Company: Captain Ekaterina Plaksine*

*3rd Company: Captain Feodor Khabarov*

*4th Company: Captain Olga Sian*

*5th Company: Captain Roman Aksionov*

*6th Company: Captain Sachaev Eldyev*

*7th Company: Captain Clara Firsov*

*8th Company: Captain Victor Tovar*

*9th Company: Captain Andrei Cheremetiev*

*10th Company: Captain Pavel Masev*

*Mechanicus support: Enginseer Prime Arcturus Morkys*

*Vehicles: 300 Chimeras, 59 Sentinels, 40 Taurox, 40 Salamanders, 60 Atlas, 35 Trojan, 10 Hellhounds*

“I have given the priority to reconstitute the officer ranks with experienced veterans of our latest campaigns and some brilliant candidates Governor Dalten sent us from Fay. But the rank and file of our new troops remain untested.”

“It can’t be helped,” Taylor Hebert shrugged. “Until they fight the orks or some horrible xenos with blood and murder in their eyes, they will be untested. There are a few things that we can order to prepare them to the hell of the battlefield.”

“Such as?”

“Such as exercises against a few Astartes in a war game,” the smile was thin, but it existed.

“I would suggest giving them far more training before they are ready to be...pulverised by the Space Marines, General.”

“Agreed,” Weaver said as the Spire cooks and kitchen personnel stormed in, bringing hundreds of hot meals and succulent food and drinks Dragon very much regretted not being of flesh and blood to appreciate more than the smell. “The Fay 20th Regiment has just been rebuilt, we aren’t going to crush their spirits and their moral immediately...but it will have to be done. I don’t want them to go overconfident into the fires of battle. That attitude can lead to disaster more quickly than one thinks.”

That was a good point, admittedly. The Fay Mechanised Infantry 20th had created a small legend by its exploits, and while the survivors of the Death Star had faced hell literally, there were less than a thousand of them left. The new recruits coming from Fay – where by all accounts the Guard recruiting offices had literally been assaulted, such was the popularity of the regiment leading figures – were well-motivated, but the most dangerous things they had seen were ork runts in various cleaning-up operations.

“The Andes 10th has also been rebuilt under Colonel Perez. So we have two regiments ready for your future division command.”

For good ten minutes, the military topics were temporarily put aside as everyone around the table debated, exchanged some of the latest nonsensical rumours and laughed. It was a pleasant atmosphere, and Dragon found herself exchanging with a scarred Nyx PDF Captain the non-classified information on the new solar farms the Mechanicus built in space right now.

At the heart of this scene was Taylor Hebert. And while she spoke rarely, the Tinker could see how so many of the participants drank her words and listened, really listened to her. She was their hope and their pride, and should she order them to go find the biggest army of orks and slay the Warboss, they would likely storm out of the room sword and lasgun in hand. Some of this had probably been unavoidable, with how the nobles were aloof and distant...but then Dragon remembered that as a warlord of Brockton Bay, Skitter had never experienced the popularity problems of the PRT, and this for a simple reason: she acted. Not always in the good direction or according to a philosophy a hero would want to espouse, but she acted. And the people loved her for it.

“I suppose there have been many propositions for the new division,” the insect-controlling parahuman filled in as the lunch was nine-tenths done.

“I think all the PDF regiments of Nyx have volunteered to be included in your command,” her second in command teased. “General Maniakes has certainly the list available for you somewhere.”

General Jonas Maniakes was one of the many PDF officers born and raised in the middle-classes of Nyx that had been promoted during the recent purges of the nobility. Like hundreds of thousands of his soldiers, his loyalty was to Weaver first, second, and third.

“I don’t think he limited himself to a single sentence,” the Lady of Nyx said while caressing the back of one of her horse-sized beetles she kept to her sides constantly.

“No, he didn’t. He may have suggested we fill your division with as many ‘loyal regiments of Nyx’ as possible.”

“Politically impossible I’m afraid, no matter how much I want it. And we can’t forget that as long as we don’t have a return from Segmentum headquarters on my rank and the medals I won against the orks and the Enemy, I am a Major-General of the Imperial Guard, not a Lord Commander Militant. I have the authority to command six or seven regiments on any planet that is not Nyx, not ten or a hundred. And if I tithe four Nyx regiments to go with the Fay 20th and the Andes 10th, the Munitorum and the Commissariat are not going to be pleased at all.”

There were some rebellious murmurs in the hall, but overall nobody bothered to contest it. After all, it didn’t take a genius to know that if a Segmentum Lord Militant of the Imperial Guard gave an order and Taylor Hebert countermanded it, the Nyx guardsmen were going to follow the latter, not the former.

“The new division we will create will have one Nyx regiment, two maximum. What is the order of battle you came up to with the other veterans?”

“Assuming you aren’t promoted above Major-General,” the blonde-haired woman explained, “we will go with two brigades of three regiments each. Brigade A would include the Mechanised Infantry of the Fay 20th, the Artillery of the Andes 10th and the third slot would be filled by an Armoured Regiment. Captain Tovar is of the opinion we should take one from Lionheart. Captain Eldyev thinks the Patton columns are our best choice. There are good choices of tank regiments which have proved their worth against the orks across the Sector.”

“I will ask our Lord Commissar if there are a few outstanding regiments in the available pool before they are redeployed elsewhere. The second brigade?”

“It’s more complicated, but the general agreement is to combine a Line Infantry from Nyx with a Reconnaissance Regiment from one of the most dangerous worlds of the Sector, and an Armoured/Anti-Air Regiment to give us plenty of support. If we want to add a fourth Regiment, it would be either one of Artillery or a Drop Regiment.”

“The combinations look good on paper,” Weaver agreed. “But we will have to see how it unfolds military exercises. We have some months ahead of us, I want to be sure they will work like a true machine of war before beginning a long campaign. Prepare a list of regiments having the battlefield experience and the citations we need. I also want a list of candidates for two Brigadier-Generals. I am certainly not going to add the duties of a brigade’s commanding officer to my duties.”

Dragon had heard there were Guard Generals who had not the wisdom to release their authority until it was proved it was leading to disaster – and sometimes not even then. But the last twenty days on Nyx had given them all plenty of experience why you had to delegate. It simply wasn’t possible to rule a planet of more than two hundred billion humans on your own. It just wasn’t, unless you were some omnipotent being.

Then the lunch ended and they went to the adjacent hall. And Dragon won plenty of bets...again. No, she was not going to gloat.

“Plating everything in gold is really becoming predictable,” Weaver made an exaggerated sigh.

“If it displeases you, Chosen of the Omnissiah...” began one of the many, many Tech-Priests present in the room.

“No, it doesn’t displeases me. I just wish you use a bit more originality with the colour of your creations.”

It was difficult to tell she was wrong. For the Mechanicus, red, white and black were the colours they based their very existence upon. As for the Saints and everyone ‘blessed’ by the Emperor or a sufficient powerful Imperial authority from Terra, evidently they had to be clad in gold. “Dragon. I suppose these are the first models built on the Athena templates.”

“Indeed,” she made a gesture of her right hand and the cyborgs holding the platinum platters where the weapons and various pieces of technology were posed advanced slowly in their direction. “We have from left to right the first Larkine Pattern Lasgun, the two first Fay Bolt Pistols, the first Mongoose Analyser, four doses of Hebe rejuvenation treatment, one kilogram of Moonlight Argentamite alloy, the first Minerva Servo-owl, and the Masamune Power Katana.”

Every weapon or object, as Taylor had evidently remarked, were plated in gold and had received one or two precious stones as decoration. It went without saying that, if the exploitation of the Athena Template gave a tenth of the immense profits expected, these first samples would be worth a fortune for collectors.

“The technical details compared to the weapons currently in use by the Imperial Guard?”

“The Larkine Lasgun is on average ten percent superior to the M35 M-Galaxy Short Pattern which began production two centuries ago. This lasgun can fire five more shots for the same las-cell, weighs two hundred grams less and can shift to a second anti-light armour mode to considerably increase the impact strike of the shot at the price of a reduction in shot numbers.”

It was also more expensive to produce, but in the hands of a veteran guardsman, this was a difference well-spent.

“The Fay Bolt Pistol is estimated to be fifty-eight percent superior to the Ceres-Eta Pattern Bolt Pistol used by Rogue Traders and Imperial officers.” This was not a weapon normally issued to lowly guardsmen. Due to its weight and its recoil, the usage of this weapon is going to require at least carapace armour lest it provokes severe arm damage.

“The Mongoose Analyser has a four percent advantage over the best of the five hundred Explorator models we have test-compared it with. The Hebe treatments overall appear to be one hundred and forty percent more efficient than the ones found in the best Pleasure-rejuvenation centres. The Minerva servo-owl has two percent of increased performances but a far more pleasant aesthetic when put into competition with a servo-skull. And the Masamune Katana has an edge of three hundred and sixty-four percent in all categories compared to the Munitorum-approved officer blades.”

“The engineers of the Dark Age of Really Technology built high-quality equipment for their military and civilians.”

“And it is just a glance of what humanity was able to develop at the pinnacle of its strength.” Sometimes it was easy to pretend the rumours about humanity rearranging stellar bodies and creating marvels the size of planets was the fruit of some credulous imagination. But the more she read the database, the more Dragon was convinced that humanity had risen incredibly high after it spread through the stars. Maybe too high.

She clicked her fingers and made the agreed signals to the Fay officers and the Astartes waiting in the background. In a few seconds nearly everyone had vacated the room.

“Ah. This is going to be another instance of the game ‘let’s surprise poor Taylor’, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Dragon cheerfully answered as a large robot pushed in the room a bulky container before leaving her alone with the other parahuman. “Don’t worry, it is going to be painless. I promise.”

“Ha! My heart thank you...” the comment was interrupted as the container’s door opened to reveal its inside.

“Is it?” Damn it, she knew she had forgotten the material to take photos. It wasn’t often now Weaver was caught with her mouth open and an astonished expression on her visage.

“Yes, it is the first power armour on the Angel’s Tear template. It will be the *Angel’s Tear*, in fact, if you accept.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. How much Auramite, Argentamite and Rubies have gone into...”

“Taylor, shut up.” The young woman closed her mouth. “Yes, this armour cost more in raw materials more than what five billion people will probably earn in their life, and I ignore the cost of using the template. But I had to stop a few hundred data-duels within the Mechanicus at the very idea this armour could go to anyone else than you.”

“Well, I suppose I have to accept.” The insect mistress grimaced before amending. “I mean, I will be honoured to accept. Damn, this armour makes my previous armour looks like a golden tank...”

Yes, this new power armour was really blowing everything off the scale. And this was just in appearance. Though for the first creation, all the Artisans had worked hundreds of hours in concert to make it something worthy of their ‘Chosen.’ The torso, the legs and the arms had been forged in a combination of Auramite and Argentamite, giving it a gold shade with large silver stripes. Several dozen rubies finished the ornamentation. The helmet had been shaped in an angelic mask and the jump pack integrated behind had been hidden behind gold-silver wings. Yet this was only the basics. Or maybe it was more than the basics. As Taylor had said, the modified Ignatus-patter power armours used were like portable tanks. This power armour, by comparison, was clearly made for speed, mobility. It was a protection finding refuge in the offensive, in speed and raw lethality. It had, in a way, more in common with the armours of the eldar xenos armours she had been able to examine in the battle’s aftermath.

And even that was underestimating things somewhat. Because the Angel’s Tear template could receive blows which would have disintegrated the Ignatus pattern. It had an integrated energy shield, and even if Auramite wasn’t used, ceramite, power coils and adamantium alloys had been used in its construction.

Right at this moment, it was simply the most powerful power armour in Imperial hands, if the Astartes and transhuman equipment was not counted. The advantages were massive in mobility, strength advancement, life-support, resistance, adaptability and comfort. It had seven hundred percent superiority over the Ignatus family of power armours. It could function without implants but there was the possibility of surgically adding two of them and thus give an imperfect variant of the Black Carapace.

“The *Angel’s Tear* name suits it,” Taylor whispered before asking louder. “How long does it take to don it?”

“There’s the sub-body glove underneath, the gene-coding and the verifications...I think we will be able to do it in one hour.”

“Better to start now...I suppose your fellow Magi might feel a bit insulted if I do not come to the negotiations wearing this power armour...”

“Noosphere wars between Forge Worlds have been declared for far less,” the Artificial Intelligence gravely declared. And she wasn’t joking.

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

The negotiations were going to take a while. And since he was now an Archmagos of the Adeptus Mechanicus and precision was a cornerstone of the Quest for Knowledge, ‘a while’ could be easily replaced by ‘five or six standard months of debates, threats, technological blackmail and data warfare’.

Since it was an STC database which was at stake, the violence, be it in the Noosphere, the physical or the circuits, was far below his most optimistic predictions. But having Astartes regularly patrol in the main was an enormous incitation to reduce hostile actions to a minimum, and if the Archmagi and lesser Tech-Priests weren’t feeling threatened by them, there was always the swarm.

Sometimes Desmerius Lankovar asked himself before resting what he had unleashed on this galaxy. But his doubts never lasted. The Omnissiah clearly approved of his efforts, otherwise He would not have chosen to intervene to save them against the Enemy.

Back to the negotiations, the principal problem was the overabundance of delegates. By the time they had moved to Nyx, there had been over a thousand Forge Worlds represented. Twenty standard days after the fall of the unlamented and very despised Nostradamus Vandire, there was easily three times that number, and it didn’t count the many officers of the Guard, the Navy, the Priests of the Ecclesiarchy and so on.

And there were also influential positions to seize. As it became evident Lady Taylor Hebert was going to remain as the Basileia of Nyx and Sector Lady, the absence of any kind of superior authority was felt. The Chosen of the Omnissiah, it was said in the forges and the manufactorum, was negotiating for hundreds of thousands Tech-Priests and Skitarii to come to Nyx and work for the glory of the Omnissiah. But the highest positions were vacant, and the ambitious Magi were legion.

Desmerius himself rarely took part in these negotiations. The payment promised by Stygies VIII – tens of thousands Tech-Priests, thousands Skitarii, a brand new command cruiser and many templates on auspex and security technology reserved to the allies of his homeworld – were on their way and he had been named Master of Exploration on the Mechanicus Council of Nyx. His area of responsibility were the insect acquisitions, the Explorator fleets, their discoveries, the proper pursuit of the Quest for Knowledge and continuous overseeing and survey of the Nyx Sector.

It was a neat change to what he had been a standard year ago.

“The negotiations on the Hebe template should be over by the end of the day,” Wismer informed him. Like him, she had been promoted. She was now Magos Explorator like he had been not so long ago. “Megyre, Rangda IV, Ordana and Verica VII will have their copy-templates along with Triplex Phall and Dantris III.”

“Do we have the complete copy of what offered?”

“No, not a complete copy. The transactions are completed by Dragon Richter under orders of Taylor Hebert, and in the end it is extremely likely some things have escaped my attention. I can guarantee however these are most likely minor things, not Ramilies-sized omissions.”

Desmerius Lankovar huffed and sent a silent prayer to the cogs present in this hall of the machine.

“Yes, seeing Triplex Phall outbid all the other negotiators the way they chose was extremely surprising.”

And outbid everyone they had. They offered a brand-new Ramilies-class Star-fort, one that was destined to the Brothers of the Red if he was not mistaken, two hundred thousand Tech-Priests, forty thousand Skitarii and many, many machine-tools and mining rights. The rest of the offers were far less impressive: minor templates on healing, vaccines and anti-viral research, thousands of Tech-Priests, medicinal supplies and gene-lab construction materials. If Taylor Hebert had difficulties finding the funds and the supplies to create Space Marines now, it was not going to be the case any longer. In the mean time, Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies of Dantris III had received the title of Master of Healing and the privileges to oversee and build clinics, hospitals and a lot of facilities Biologis-related.

And this was just the second template to have its negotiations completed after the Larkine lasgun – assuming the Martian fleet on its way didn’t decide to modify the rules. There were still ten others at various states of debate and proposals.

“Archmagos Sultan is coming this way, Archmagos,” Wismer warned him in an old-fashioned cant of binaric.

Ah yes, Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan. Representative of Ryza and the highest-ranking Archmagi in the Nyx Sector, her participation in the Battle of the Death Star had made her indispensable and she had been the third representative - and for the present the most recent – to be admitted into the Mechanicus Council of Nyx, taking the title and the responsibilities of Master of Ships.

It was short, brief and to the point.

“The Chosen of the Omnissiah has requested your presence,” and Archmagos Sultan continued her march, leaving the two Stygies VIII Tech-Priests to race after her.

They had not to go far. Their Governor, benefactor and saviour was two doors away, consulting the latest offers made by senior Archmagi when they arrived.

“I have a meeting with the Lord Inquisitor in half an hour, so this meeting will have to quick,” Lady Taylor Hebert said while tearing apart a document showing the seal of an Admiral of the Imperial Navy. “Archmagos Sultan gave me the preliminary report on the repairs the *Opera Exitium* needs before it can return to the battlefield. The damage is within the skills of the Tech-Priests to repair, but unless the Emperor gives us a second miracle, the Battle-Barge will not be able to do better than it did to counter the disturbances of the Warp on future travels. Not as long as I’m aboard.”

“I can see the problem.” And it was a major problem. The Warp journey from Brockton to Nyx was a very short one, given the distances some Imperial and Mechanicus starships had travelled into the Empyrean. “Unfortunately, I have no solution to present you, Lady Nyx. The *Opera Exitium* is a magnificent Battle-Barge built on schematics used by the Ninth Legion for the better part of the late thirty-second millennium. It is smaller than the flagship of the Blood Angels Chapter, but not by a significant percentage prompt to alter the basic ethereal protections. The Gellar Fields and other counter-measures are based on the same designs. If the *Opera Exitium* can’t support the pressure of the Warp disturbances while you’re aboard, this logically disqualifies the rest of the Blood Angels fleet...and the fleets of Stygies VIII. The blessed technologies held by my Forge World have many applications, but naval battles and warp-protection are not where our greatest strengths.”

The last sentence was spoken to Arithmancia Sultan, who given the extensive Ryza databases, had surely been aware of this fact decades or centuries ago.

“I will take you at your word,” Weaver said after a brief moment to think about the implications. “Archmagos Sultan said there was an unconventional solution to these Warp disturbances.”

Just hearing the words ‘unconventional solution’ was throwing dread in his cogitators.

“I am listening.”

“The Gellar Fields of the *Opera Exitium* will not be able to support the Warp surcharge for inter-Sectors Warp travels,” the Archmagos of Ryza stated. “A null shield is not a solution as the light of the Omnissiah will make all furtive blessings useless in the Warp. We have therefore to find a warship with Gellar Fields more powerful and more resistant than the norm.”

“A perfectly rational and logical answer, Archmagos,” Desmerius convened, “but the *Opera Exitium* has blue-Alpha protections against the Empyrean. I suppose the *Phalanx* and several other massive Star-forts of the Imperium grant more protection, but they have to be towed through the Warp. And for all the ties and the friendship with the Adeptus Astartes, loaning a Gloriana-class battleship may not be possible.”

“And Quayran’s Folly?”

“Quayran...you think...”

“It would solve the problem,” Arithmancia Sultan pointed out.

“Yes...” cog and blessed oils, trinity of machine preserve him. It was true, but...

“Excuse me, but what exactly is Quayran?” demanded the insect controller, a rising mass of insects buzzing in the background. The Ryza Archmagos left her mechadendrites stay idle and Lankovar cursed her in binaric before answering in Low Gothic.

“Quayran is a medium shipyard owned by the Mechanicus in Ultima Segmentum. It is located in a Sector close to Estaban, and is often used by Stygies VIII Magos Explorators as a maintenance harbour when they want to travel to the Eastern Fringe. I have myself visited the system five times. Given the currents in the Warp and our logistics, it is practical. As for Quayran’s Folly...sixty years ago, Quayran was visited by an Archmagos. The local Fabricator welcomed him like he does any important visitor. But the foreigner had not come just to refuel or repair. He wanted a dry dock, Tech-Priests by the tens of thousands, and more resources than are usually used in a decade. And he had the writ of the Parliament of Mars to make his orders approved.”

He had not been anywhere near the system, at the time, but the story had become rather popular in the Noosphere, especially as Stygies VIII had vast interests in the system and its shipyards.

“Some thought he was trying to buy an Ark Mechanicus, but ultimately the hull which was built was those of a large battleship. It was an entirely brand-new class of battleship, though some of my colleagues thought it had a forty-two percent similarity with the first Apocalypse-class variant.”

“And?” the former Major of the Imperial Guard pressed.

“And nothing,” Desmerius concluded. “The battleship was completed in the record time of forty years, but despite its incredible trial performances, the Archmagos declared the battleship was short of its specifications and immediately re-sold it to the Quayran shipyards where it has stayed in dry dock ever since. It requires close to ten thousand experienced Tech-Priests alone for the basic maintenance, and no one has ever envisaged paying the price the Fabricator of Quayran wants...”

“But it has the record most powerful Gellar Fields ever recorded in its early trials,” Sultan countered.

“If the data of its first Warp transitions can be trusted, yes,” the new Archmagos agreed.

“What kind of battleship are we speaking about?” their host declared in a dubitative voice. “No offence to the Adeptus Mechanicus, but I was thinking a Battle-Barge was sufficient for the needs of my troops and the expeditions for the short-term future.”

“It is a rather large battleship,” Arithmancia Sultan replied in a half-apologetic tone and projecting with one of her portable hololiths the image of the incredible space leviathan. “It is eleven kilometres-long, and the prow is equipped with an integrated Nemesis-Hunter cannon twice more powerful than the Nova cannons. The broadside batteries have Plasma Projectors, every section has Great Crusade-type auto-loaders, Hecutor Plasma Macrocannons, and the hull is protected by three-layered void shields...”

The eyes of the insect-controller had widened in stupefaction at the long list of weapons and incredible amount of blessed technology thrown into the battleship.

“What sort of madman build a battleship like this only to declare it underperforming?”

“A very infamous Radical of Mars,” Sultan didn’t sound troubled by the accusation of madman. “But his discoveries and his successes have made him almost untouchable. And he’s leading his own faction, the Cawlites.”

Taylor Hebert made a succession of low curses in a language he didn’t recognise before playing with a few spiders which had jumped in her right hand.

“But this battleship remains my best option.”

Desmerius had to admit there weren’t many starships with incredibly powerful Gellar Fields available and ready to deploy like this...

“It’s Quayran’s Folly or we try to negotiate with the Black Templars for a loan of the *Eternal Crusader*.”

If the groan was any indication, this was not something Lady Taylor Hebert wanted. And for good reason, he didn’t think going wherever the Crusade-addicted Astartes went would be good for anyone’s health.

“See if the Forge World of Quayran has sent a representative to Nyx. It won’t cost us anything to hear what he wants...”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The long list of things ‘the Governor has absolutely to deal with’ today was almost over, thankfully. Or like the Ecclesiarchy loved to say, ‘Praise the Emperor’. The audiences with the Guilds, various military commanders and the last nobles that weren’t completely useless had not ended in shouts and protestations, which was as close to a victory as you could celebrate when you were on the throne.

Not that it was an uncomfortable one. Leet may have made a joke or two about the ‘Iron Throne’ or some other nonsense when he had seen the eyesore Menelaus had used for a throne, but she had replaced the ancient and ugly thing minutes after. If she had to sit on a throne, it would be one with pillows, and which didn’t tower over everyone like a small mountain.

It was strangely similar to the duties of a Sector Lady, in a way. Planetary Governors’ duties were extremely well defined by the Adeptus Terra. Pay the tithe of the Departmento Munitorum – in other words send soldiers to join the ranks of the Imperial Guard. Pay the tithe of the Adeptus Administratum – give the central government a percentage of the Gross Systemic Product. Pay the tithe of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica – give your psykers to the Black Ships. Defend your planet against all enemies of humanity and the Imperium, and keep the mutant and xenos population as close to zero as it is feasibly possible.

But Sector Lord – or in her case Sector Lady? There were no big guidelines, save the most important: the defence of the Sector against the enemies of humankind.

Logically, one could say the Menelaus dynasty had utterly failed its duties given the size of the ork infestation which had plagued the Sector for the last decade.

But apart from that, the ‘rules’ seemed to be based a lot on precedent and tradition. According to Gamaliel and Wei – and Dragon had confirmed it by combing through the records – this was because the Sector’s rule was not necessarily given to the most powerful of the Planetary Governors in the available systems. It wasn’t the case at Nyx, but uncountable times, be it for politically, economic or religious motives, the Sector Lord was more a *primus inter pares*, the first Prince of the great princely assembly. Ironically, Menelaus very title, King of Kings, was supposed to embody that reality.

As a result, it would be her actions in the coming years that would probably be regarded as the legal precedent. It was an heavy responsibility...somehow being in the position of George Washington for something like a hundred-plus worlds was not something she had ever imagined doing in her life.

“Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor, for his Holy Majesty’s Ordo!” barked the announcer. “Chapter Master Genseric Dupleix, for the proud Iron Drakes Chapter!”

Taylor stood from her throne immediately as the gates opened to let the Inquisitor and the Astartes pass. Technically, there was no need to, but these two names were perhaps the only humans in the Nyx System which had ranks on par with hers – as long as her Saintly status didn’t enter consideration anyway.

The new...throne room to call the reality of the thing, was not especially long by Nyx standards, but the newcomers still had to walk one minute before arriving at sword’s range. Absently, Taylor nodded the two had been authorised by the Dawnbreaker Guards assigned before the doors to keep their side arms.

“Lord Inquisitor, I understood you asked for this audience...”

“Yes, I-“

“The Master for the Guild of Archeology Namor Koschai!” and the gates opened again to reveal a lone figure.

Taylor tried to contact the Astartes with her emergency vox-communicator and there was no answer.

“It seems there has been a schedule conflict,” to his credit, the Lord Inquisitor appeared to take it well. Taylor knew it wasn’t going to last.

“There is no schedule conflict. I have a new staff of over two hundred people to make sure my schedule isn’t perturbed by the time I wake up in the morning, and only your high rank is enough to bypass it, Lord Inquisitor. Besides, if there’s a thing I learned in twenty days, it is there is no Guild of Archeology whatsoever on Nyx. The closest we have were a few eccentric nobles, and Archmagos Lankovar recruited those who weren’t involved in assassination plots and tax evasions.”

Chapter Master Dupleix had drawn his bolter by this point and Gavreel and Gamaliel had come forwards to make a mall of power armour between her and the intruder. Silently, she was bringing the tens of thousands of insects she kept on the adjacent rooms. And all the while, she could hear no heartbeat from the newcomer. The appearance of a blue cloak and the classic robes were good and the face was bland and average...but it was not good enough to fool her.

“Don’t shoot,” Taylor commanded. And she fired the gold-plated Larkine lasgun she had been offered several hours ago.

The laser shot was intercepted well before it hit its target in a bright green field, but Dupleix added to it several bolter shots and suddenly the illusion was no more. Where seconds ago, there had been a human with a blue cloak, now there was a tall creature of silver metal garbed in a violet cloak with a long sceptre glowing with green energy.

“Oops. It is exactly what it looks like?” tried Trazyn the Infinite Collector.