**Decision 5.2**

**The Harder the Fall**

*Huge.*

*One thing to always keep in your mind, whether you are a General in command of a vast army or a civilian working in an isolated manufactorum on a Civilised World in the middle of nowhere, is that the Imperium of Mankind is huge.*

*I suppose that by the time a boy or a girl celebrates his tenth birthday, he or she has at least heard twenty times how mighty the Empire ruled from Holy Terra is. Propagandists are in general more explicit: they tell everyone in range of the vox-casters the Master of Mankind’s rule extends over a million worlds.*

*Like many propaganda points, this is a complete lie...although for once they are guilty of understating the size of the Imperium, not overstating its resources.*

*Maybe there is a hint of truth in their words. If one counts only the Solar core and the key bastions, the Military and Industrial nodes Terra can’t afford to lose under any circumstance, then yes the Imperium must have around one million worlds. One million worlds populated by billions and billions of humans each. And they are just a small percentage of the human population living in this galaxy.*

*I don’t know the real figures. I asked, of course, but even with one of the greatest gatherings of Explorator Tech-Priests in the galaxy in the same region, I was unable to get a firm answer. The Magi and Archmagi could agree there were more than one hundred and ninety thousand Sectors inside the frontiers of this era’s Imperium. As for the population estimates, they were in the quadrillions.*

*The size of each Sector is determined by several factors and exceptions, and the Administratum seems to believe it lives to create the latter. But on average, there are between three and ten sub-sectors dividing administratively an Imperial Sector and each of these sub-sectors has several inhabited systems to extract resources and soldiers from.*

*Dragon gave to me a large data-slate explaining that the Mechanicus had sufficient evidence to estimate that by the beginning of this millennium, there were around nineteen million stellar systems under Imperial rule.*

*The Imperium is absurdly gigantic.*

*There are Sectors which are priceless for the defence of the Imperium, so priceless that Segmentum authorities and higher-ranked men are ready to scour and bleed thousands of planets dry to make sure nothing will impact the contribution they give to the Imperium’s war machine and elite forces.*

*The Nyx Sector is not one of these priceless Sectors.*

*Not yet.*

*But I’m going to change that.*

Extract from Archive B-1112-T-527, secured in the Fafnir-Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by Lady Taylor Hebert between 294M35 and 296M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

“*The Nyx nobility wouldn’t understand the principle of a fair electoral process even if it fell directly on their aristocratic heads*,” attributed to Magos-Draco Dragon Richter, 289M35.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.728.289M35**

Thought for the day: Be strong in your ignorance.

**Prelate-Procurator Nostradamus Vandire**

Nostradamus woke up in excellent spirits.

Last night he had been able to enjoy three of the most beautiful courtesans of Nyx in Menelaus’ solar, after the sumptuous meal and the military parades given in his honour.

Today promised to be even greater, he knew, and not just because the lesser nobles in charge of the Governor Palace’s administration had given him the golden keys to the Menelaus palace.

His political manoeuvres had been finally rewarded and at last he had all the assets he wanted to advance his plans. Prince-Magister Samuel XIX Ionian and Prince-Magister Ephesus V Corinth had finally recognised the unavoidable and accepted his terms.

One would have been more than enough, but two granted him a legitimacy all other candidates were sure to lack.

“Did they appear suitably disappointed?” the Prelate-Procurator asked as three female servants washed his feet with pure water specially extracted and distilled from the comets of the Hades Nebula.

“They were, my Master,” his drink-taster sipped lengthily a bottle of his favourite Elysian Philtre before handing him a golden cup half-full. Nostradamus emptied it in three gulps before making the sign he wanted his day attire to be brought to him. For an instant he had been tempted to wear something belonging to this parvenu of ‘King of Kings’, but as amusing as it would be to see several of the feeble supporters of the previous Governor annoyed, they had not the same size or height. And Nostradamus didn’t wish to begin his long and fructuous reign of the Sector by appearing in unfit clothes. A reign which began with whispers of mockery and linked closely with the former dynasty tended to be an agitated reign.

“Good, you will pass the message, with your usual subtlety, Basil, that the ceremony where they will vote for me in the upcoming gubernatorial election will take place in eleven hours.”

“Yes, my Master,” Nostradamus nodded and the women washing his feet in the golden recipient threw themselves to his feet, knowing they had no rights to contemplate his magnificence.

“The process is well in hands. I’m satisfied. I will take the red-gold suit with a red cape, today.” The Prelate-Procurator decided as a hundred different robes, suits and clothes befitting to his rank were displayed in the second bedroom he had just walked in. Obviously, he had never worn any of these clothes before today; an Adept of his rank, name and influence couldn’t afford being seen with the same appearance twice. It would be a grave fault and invite attacks on his clothes’ supply.

Nostradamus didn’t give the order to his servants to dress him, of course. Maybe some lesser aristocrats did in their mediocre existence, but he was a Vandire of Terra and he had an image to maintain.

Now that the clothes for his morning were chosen, it was the turn of his hairdresser, his Master of Cosmetics, his First Squire and the Grand Provost to manifest their devotion and their duty as it was proper. His hair was dyed golden, for it was the colour of the God-Emperor, and using it would bring proper respect to the hearts of those having been granted the hard-earned right to look directly at his face.

The next twenty standard minutes were spent in the Governor’s Chapel, where, in presence of the three senior ecclesiastics of the Moira Hive-Continent and his Grand Bishop, he prayed for the God-Emperor to give him triumph over all his enemies and assist him in spreading his authority over tens of thousands Sectors and covert billions of barbarians to His Holy Worship.

Once that was done, it was time for his first meal of the day, which was by design light, only three full meals and appetizers, with his secretaries and the Master of Ceremonies presenting him the efforts of their nightly efforts to devise a proper schedule. Most of it was unsatisfactory, for who else but him could know how perfect the next days had to be? But it was a beautiful day – at the top of the Hive Spire, they were far above the clouds of pollution and could enjoy the sun light in an appropriate manner – and feeling generous, he kept about a quarter of the basic plan, demanding the rest to be changed and improved.

“The preparations for the election are progressing well, Master,” his Lord Chancellor affirmed once he had kissed his ring. “We have the hundred million signatures in your support and the other conditions were so laughable you will all have them before this day is over.”

“Repeat them to me a last time, I want to be sure nothing has been forgotten,” Nostradamus Vandire ordered as one of his Cupbearers handed him of his favourite pastries.

“Yes, Master. To become Governor of Nyx, per the regulations fixed per the Menelaus Dynasty’s laws, one needs to be a loyal subject of the God-Emperor of Mankind, a member of the nobility and gain the support of ten nobles of superior rank. One also needs to deliver a sum of one hundred billion Throne Gelts in advance as a guarantee of good conduct when the final result will be announced. One needs a member of the Ecclesiarchy of Pontifex rank or above to bless your endeavour. One must have the vote of one of the Great Ten Prince-Magisters and be acclaimed by one of the elite PDF guards defending the principal Hives. The seniors Adepts of the Adeptus Administratum and the Adeptus Arbites in the Sector must not exert their veto rights. The one hundred million signatures must be...”

Nostradamus listened with one ear while savouring the meat of his first meal, a new interesting culinary delight from the Tang Sector. Inside, he was laughing. By the Golden Throne, the Lord Inquisitor had really opened him the path of ascension! Of the Ten Great Houses, there were only six left today, and all he had to in the aftermath was wait and arrange for a few accidents for the agents and acolytes who had not rushed to the battlefield in the north of the Sector. For all its reputation of supremacy and invincibility, the Inquisition was filled with short-sighted idiots. There were rumours of archeotech marvels discovered, but how could they possibly matter when in the meanwhile he was grabbing the real prize, the Nyx Sector itself?

The Inquisition did not dare harm him, they were too fearful of the terrible vengeance his Clan would inflict upon them should they dare touch one of his hairs. No, the Inquisition was out of the game. Nostradamus met all the conditions the former Menelaus dynasty had enforced for one thousand and six hundred years. The Moira Pontifex and the Nyx Purebloods, the Governor’s Own, were begging for the contents of his purse. The one hundred billion Throne Gelts had been levied in record time from several planetary tithes he was responsible to oversee.

“I am convinced by your excellent portrayal of the future election.” The Prelate-Procurator declared after sending back half of his meat to the kitchens. It would not do to give the cooks lofty ideas of their culinary talents, wouldn’t it? “I have the votes of two Prince-Magisters out of the six remaining ones. Have my other...rivals...changed their positions since our last official negotiation?”

“Regrettably no, Master,” his Lord Chancellor affirmed with a sad expression. “Prince-Magister Michael XXXXI Argos and Princess-Magister Sophia XVI Seleucid remain convinced to challenge you in this gubernatorial contest. Prince-Magister Justinian XX Euboea and Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica remain neutral. I wouldn’t worry about them, Master. The man is a few days away from death and the woman is so poor there were rumours about relegating her household in the Lesser Houses and elevating someone more dignified to the Prince-Magister title.”

“But the possibility, tiny as it is, exist one of the two could sell his vote to Argos or Seleucid in order to spite me.”

“I would find it...unlikely, my Master. First, Attica absolutely hates Argos. He tried to assassinate her not three standard months ago, I think, and it was not the first time. Euboea and Attica know that if Argos becomes Lord Nyx, they will not live to see the end of the year.”

“And Seleucid?” Nostradamus asked as a sculpture of sweets covered in fresh fruits was inspected and tasted before being delivered to his plate.

“That Princess-Magister is an airhead and more concerned with her little court and her next rejuvenation treatment than anything related to the rule of planets.” His subordinate shrugged. “Her fellow nobles know she would be a disaster worse than ten Argos and Menelaus put together. Attica herself is too poor to risk putting her candidature forwards alone. And Euboea won’t risk supporting her financially unless he feels her chances of victory are above yours, Master.”

“Very good,” Vandire devoured his sweets and fruits with an excellent appetite, if he could say so to himself. “Very good, but in the unlikely and ridiculous case you are wrong and that a Lord-Magister or another noble manages to gain two votes against mine...”

“Then it will be, as per Menelaus conventions, a grand contest of gladiators in the Menelaus Royal Arena, Master. Only the Prince-Magisters, the Governor candidates and the licensed gladiators can descend into the arena to fight. And you have in your employ two thousand out of two thousand and one hundred of the licensed gladiators of Nyx. Quantity is a quality by itself, Master, and even formidable soldiers stand no chance against these odds. And House Menelaus has forbidden transhumans, abhumans and mutants from setting a foot on the soil of Nyx Tertius, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Vandire agreed while swallowing more of this delicious meal of fruits and sweets. “And the latest issue I asked you to study?”

“Regrettably, my Master, Imperial law is absolutely intransigent on this point. An Adept of the Administratum can’t be elected to the title of Imperial Governor before first resigning from his duties...there are exceptions for the Astra Militarum and the Rogue Traders, but it is impossible to invoke them for our purposes in the days we have left.”

Yes, this indeed reeked of the Militarum’s manipulations. These brutes were very good at smashing things while the Administratum was doing the real work, but it was those mongrels and dirty-blood wastrels who received privileges at the end of it. His priority would be to change the laws for the Nyx Sector once he became the Lord Nyx...

Bah, once he would have resigned, the senior Administratum Adept in the Sector would be Tithe-Master Varus Hyson, and that one was so far in his debt the very thought of opposing him was ridiculous in the extreme.

“You told me you had a substation title for the mere four days before the election?”

“Yes, Master, it is an old title of Nyx...Supreme Autokrator.”

“I like it,” Nostradamus Vandire signalled one the Nyx Purebloods in the corridor to escort away for his punishment a servant who had dared looking at him eye-to-eye. “Yes, I may even keep it once I am Governor and Lord of this Sector...Supreme Lord Autokrator Nyx Nostradamus Vandire...I like it, it is...majestic.”

When he rose from his table, two hundred gold clarions sounded and over ten thousand nobles bent the knee to welcome him. Yes, they recognised their new master. Nyx was his. The Sector was his to rule. He was in control, and no one could stop him from beginning his ascension. The Imperium belonged to the victors, and he was born to win and govern.

He was Nostradamus Vandire, and soon everybody in the Sector would know his name.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Brockton System**

**7.698.289M35**

**Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius**

The life of an Imperial Tithe-Master of the Adeptus Administratum serving His Most Holy Majesty was not a thing the bureaucratic order disdained, and the measures protecting his existence had reflected this.

Tithe-Master Varus Hyson, thanks to his current title and duties, had been granted the archive-transport *Great Labour* for his personal use and a company of Eris Infantry for bodyguards. The security systems had not been the best, but they were respectable and since half of the crew were servitors, any infiltrator would have to make himself very discreet to not attract undue attention.

It had not saved Varus Hyson, evidently. But then, security measures rarely did any good when it was your own subordinates who volunteered to end your life.

The Tithe-Master was now in front of the Emperor, Theodora knew. And judging by the secret Ecclesiarchy reports she had been allowed to read by her Nyx colleagues, Varus Hyson was certainly not going to enjoy the God-Emperor’s judgement.

Still, it had been a bad way to die. The door had been broken down with an improvised ram, and the Adept had been stabbed fifty-plus times with different types of blades before one of his assassins had finally the idea to slit his throat. While he agonised, the Tithe-Master had been dragged to his bathroom and the murderers had taken an unholy pleasure plunging him head first into the toilet’s hole.

“There is absolutely no point investigating further, Lord Inquisitor,” declared the Arbites Investigator. “It is a suicide.”

The Schola Progenium had trained this young man well, Theodora acknowledged. There was no smile, no sarcasm and no hint whatsoever he found his words illogical or humorous.

It was obvious that Varus Hyson had been assassinated. If the young Arbites felt the need to take the complete opposite direction despite an intelligent face and alert eyes, the real question was whether Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor had arranged the murder himself or had simply communicated with several of the Adept’s servants and let them know no one was going to shed any tear – or ask any questions - if the Tithe-Master ‘took his own life’.

“Thank you for your valuable contribution,” the grey-haired Inquisitor commented before turning to the Administratum official waiting next to the guards close to the door. “Grand Prefect Carl Blum, as the second-in-command of our tragically departed Tithe-Master, I think he would have wanted you to replace him in his duties. I will try to confirm your promotion within a few days by Kar Duniash. In the mean time, you will exert all the functions of acting Tithe-Master.”

Theodora felt sure Varus Hyson had planned nothing of the sort. Unlike his superior who had taken several apollonian treatment to lose weight and give himself a grand appearance – in vain – Carl Blum had the behaviour and the traits of someone who year after year had been constantly ignored by the promotions and the rejuvenation treatments in spite of doing the majority of the office’s work.

“Thank you, Lord Inquisitor,” the declaration was curt, emotionless, and there was no sign of surprise. Blum had evidently been warned of the upcoming demise of Varus Hyson, and had in the best of cases done nothing to oppose it. “What are your orders?”

“The Abbess-Crusader and the Tithe-Master had a vital appointment with Major-General Taylor-Hebert aboard the *Opera Exitium*. Unfortunately, Adept Varus Hyson has taken his own life and is logically unavailable, but I am feeling sure you will be able to replace him superbly.”

This time the former Grand Prefect didn’t maintain a stern expression at all; Theodora could very well understand it as meeting a Saint without any warning or preparation was not for the faint of heart.

But as the person giving the suggestion was a Lord Inquisitor, there only was one answer acceptable if you valued you life and wanted to avoid another tragic ‘suicide’.

“Of course, Lord Inquisitor,” the elderly Adept bowed and marched by Theodora’s side on their way to the hangar bays. No word was uttered during these three minutes of walk and elevators’ use; the acolytes of the Inquisition were crawling aboard the *Great Labour* and any small talk beyond how the star was beautiful was going to be dissected by Inquisitorial agents. It was best not to say anything in environments like that.

It was only after two searches of her staff, the activation of several blessed relics loaned by the Atlantic diocese and the fact they left the hangar bay and were now moving in the void between the warships that she smiled and began to talk with the new acting Tithe-Master.

“Not very subtle, the suicide...” Diplomacy had never been her strength – notice the Crusader in the Abbess-Crusader title she had won during her career in service of His Holy Majesty – and there wasn’t enough time to dance around. For the conversations ahead, she needed to know where Blum stood. “I suppose it was the Lord Inquisitor’s idea?”

“It was,” admitted Carl Blum in an ill-at-ease tone. “But many of the Administratum personnel below the nineteenth level were furious he tried to deprive the Saint of one of her possession for his personal gain. He was never popular in the first place, but this lack of piety cost him what little influence he had outside of his inner circle.”

The new acting Tithe-Master adjusted his glasses and returned to the principal issue at hand.

“I can only suppose that the...appointment...with the Saint was going to include something Varus Hyson would definitely not approve.”

“In agreement with Cardinal Lumen, I will make the proposal that the Saint become the new Governor of Nyx Tertius.”

And thus gain the Governorship of the majority of the Nyx system’s assets and the rule of the Sector as a whole.

“I see.” The Administratum official breathed loudly a few times. “I am sure you have received the astropathic communications reporting that Prelate-Procurator Nostradamus Vandire has manifested his intent to run for the title.”

“I have. And the same is true for the Cardinal and the Ecclesiarchy figures of importance aboard this fleet. Do you intend to support our proposal?”

Carl Blum grimaced and, as far as she could tell, the expression was genuine.

“Have you ever had the dubious pleasure to meet Vandire, my dear Abbess?”

Theodora shook her head in a silent ‘no’. Her command was in the Atlantis Sector, and the last years fighting the ork raiders had never given her the leisure to visit Nyx. Not that it would have mattered, as Vandire was a very recent newcomer.

“Well, I have.” Her interlocutor admitted. “Five times, and I never enjoyed the experience. He is from Holy Terra, and so far from Segmentum Solar his relatively high rank and his family connections have filled his head with dangerous ideas.”

“You don’t believe he would be a good Governor, then?”

“He doesn’t treat his immediate subordinates like human beings, Abbess,” the man retorted flatly with a note of anger and loathing. “He doesn’t care about anyone or anything save his own advancement. Several planets and Sectors have seen their tithes tripled and I was one of the investigators who were in charge of...removing some of the discrepancies in our archives. I can assure you he didn’t need his noble friends to give him the resources to put forwards his candidature. Would he make a good Governor? The better question would rather be if the damn green xenos would be worse rulers than him...”

“We have your support, then for this audience?”

“You have...under conditions.” Blum frowned. “I was too busy aboard the *Great Labour* to see the Saint in person, but my sources told me she is quite young. On the one hand, it can be an advantage. A new dynastic beginning with a young and charismatic leader often signifies an increasing of the tithe and an improvement in the systemic economy. On the other hand, inexperience and a military background have also been known to provoke disasters. And while the last Nyx tithes were below what we expected of Governor Menelaus, I can’t be certain a replacement wouldn’t be able to create more disruptions.”

The bald Administrator gave her a look of apology.

“I believe she is a Saint, and when it is a question of battle, I have no doubt she will carry high the banner of the God-Emperor and bring death to the xenos and the heretics. But ruling a planet is not something Saints are noted to do very well.”

As much as she trusted the Emperor and His Plan for Mankind, Theodora could offer no counter to this one. Because, as much she wanted to deny it, the Grand Prefect was right. Being a Governor and being a commander in the Imperial Guard were two entirely different responsibilities.

The *Opera Exitium* began to grow in their armourglass window, and as the pilot was hailed and gave their identification codes, they stopped the conversation and admired the flagship of the Brothers of the Red. It was an impressive Battle-Barge. The Sons of Sanguinius were noted for the beauty of their craft, and though this warship was somewhat dominated in length, ornament and grace by other Battle-Barges present in the system, it was still a magnificent red spear destined to break and destroy the Emperor’s enemies.

The impression of beauty was of course a bit lessened as their transport made its final approach. Four Mechanicus repair craft were stowed to its side, working on the recent wounds the capital ship had received in the battle. And there were plenty of sections where fresh wounds were visible and only a months-long visit in the shipyard would change this.

The landing and their arrival did not cause a massive unrest, which was both refreshing and a bit disappointing. A double column of Imperial Guard was formed and a loud music reserved for Ecclesiarchy representatives was broadcast from the vox-speakers. It was...somewhat underwhelming and yet at the same time somehow fitting. Hundreds of Mechanicus red robes were continuing their reparations on their left and on their right, giving them no attention at all.

By reflex, she saluted the troops before walking with Carl Blum on her heels, towards the massive Space Marine waiting before the wall painted with the tear and the wings of the Blood Angels. The heavily decorated power armour worn by the Astartes clearly indicated he was no mere battle-brother, and his left pauldron told her he was a member of the Angels Sanguine Chapter. But it was his right pauldron which was the most interesting. Where the company markings should have been painted, a trio of symbols had recently replaced them: a red tear, a blue beetle and a golden flame, the three appearing in triangle on a white field.

The Space Marine had to be one who had sworn their oaths to this new ‘Dawnbreaker’ Honour Guard then. However, Theodora had no idea where the purple-amethyst cloak on the Astartes’ back had come from. It looked of high quality...she would have said silk or something, but the price for real silk, not the artificial abomination the cogboys sometimes tried to sell to the Cult of the Saviour Emperor, was extremely high and besides, where by the Golden Throne would Space Marines have found silk in so little time? Neither Baal nor the other Astartes homeworlds were famous for producing high-quality goods...

“Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius, welcome to the *Opera Exitium*,” the Space Marine said with a curt salute. “I am Captain Quintus of the Dawnbreaker Guard.” With his helmet on, nothing could be said about the Astartes’ emotions, but an inquisitive tone was heard when he turned towards the Grand Prefect. “I was told to await the Tithe-Master Varus Hyson and one Inquisitorial Representative.”

“Unfortunately, there have been...complications. The Tithe-Master is dead, and the Inquisition is examining his ship following his suicide. Grand Prefect Carl Blum is replacing him in his duties of Acting Tithe-Master.”

The red armoured warrior stood silent for several seconds, certainly communicating with his battle-brothers, before speaking again.

“Your presence is approved, Grand Prefect. Follow me and be careful: there are several sections our allies of the Mechanicus are still repairing.”

It was when the Space Marine turned that Theodora had a full view on the cloak, and that, with an incredible precision requiring hundreds of hours at the very least, the golden Aquila had been weaved in the middle of it, holding in its talons the symbol of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

Ten guardsmen surrounded them as they walked away from their shuttle. The trip was not long, albeit the fact they had to take several stairs instead of elevators and met a couple of hundred Mechanicus Tech-Priests confirmed the fact the Battle-Barge was still under heavy repairs.

It was not difficult to realise when they had arrived. The golden doors with the effigy of the Primarch Sanguinius the Beloved aside, two Terminator Marines with purple-amethyst cloaks were standing guard, and they stood vigilant and deadly as each step decreased the space between the two groups.

“Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius and Grand Prefect Carl Blum to see Lady Weaver, brothers,” the bolters stayed in place for long heartbeats before finally being lowered.

“She is waiting for you and your guests, brother.”

The golden doors opened, they walked in...and Theodora was quite happy she managed to stay silent and not whimper like Carl Blum did. The room they had entered was quite large and had certainly been intended with martial training in mind by the veterans of the Adeptus Astartes, if one or two cages in the corner were any indication.

But this wasn’t what immediately attracted their attention. What focused their eyes were the several dozen grox-sized spiders racing everywhere before them.

Past the moment of shock, the Abbess-Crusader acknowledged none of the spiders attacked them or even paid them the slightest attention. And their movements were not random or could be considered typical for the species, although Theodora would never pretend she was a Biologis specialist on the spiders of this galaxy.

Because the spiders were working, weaving their silk in harmonious and perfect forms to make...well, a lot of things. From her current location, Theodora could see many purple cloaks being completed – the origin of the silk being resolved without the need to ask – but there were also tunics, robes and gloves being woven with a facility and a celerity no human artisan could ever have possessed.

“Weaver...” Blum muttered, and Theodora winced as she recognised the truth. Yes, in hindsight it was evident. The Saint could control every type of insect on the battlefield, by her own words and the testimonies of those who had fought by her side. But why would this talent be cast aside when the battle was over? No reason, no good reason at all.

And evidently, the Saint had made good use of her skills. Not every spider was working; there were big black-purple columns eating and drinking from tanks the Tech-Priests were replenishing, but those which were active on silk production were producing a lot of it and fast.

Natural silk was not produced in the Nyx and Atlantis Sectors, or any of their neighbours when it came down to it. It was a luxury material produced on few planets and imported at ruinous prices into this region of the Imperium...and most of the time it was not natural but had been produced by some arcane process the Mechanicus loved to keep a secret.

The Saint evidently did not have these limitations. As Captain Quintus escorted them across the improvised silk atelier, Theodora could observe there were two different sort of spiders: the big ones, the more remarkable, producing the purple-amethyst silk, and the smaller ones, generating the gold weaving. In a natural environment, the Abbess-Crusader was sure the grox-sized spiders would not have waited long before feasting on the smaller ones, but here they were cooperating, the larger spiders producing the bulk of the silk before their lesser cousins arrived to put on the finishing touches.

There was some lesson to learn from this, but Theodora for the moment abandoned this reflection as she and Blum kneeled before the Saint.

“Rise, Abbess. Rise, Grand Prefect. You asked for an audience, it would be rude to spend half of it on the floor. I’m sure you and I have more important things to do and I can survive a few days without being shown long ceremonies of veneration and worship.”

She rose and watched the Heroine of the Battle of the Death Star. Unlike many Generals and Admirals she had met in her life, the Saint was clothed very modestly. Her field uniform was the grey-black of an average officer, with only the Ultima Honorifica on the emplacement where military awards were supposed to be.

This was quite a contrast with the formidable escort surrounding her. Three Sanguinary Guards were standing behind her, two in shining gold and one in white alabaster. And they weren’t the only Astartes present. There was a Brother of the Red Standard-Bearer carrying a large purple-gold banner of Sanguinius the Martyr and to her right the only black-armoured Space Marine of the room was here to protect her. Add to that four beetles, one centipede and a few insects Theodora had never seen before, and Theodora could safely concede any potential assassin or enemy force would not enjoy forcing their way into this room. Assuming he or she passed the Terminators standing outside and the spiders, of course.

“I see there has been progress in the creation of the silk,” the Abbess-Crusader stated in a polite tone to open the conversation. She received a chuckle in return.

“My new Honour Guard here,” a hand designated the Space Marines, “came to me to speak about the difficulties they had to create a banner worthy of the oaths they had sworn. As the Arch-Genetor had just delivered some new insect specimens into my custody, I thought I could make my contribution.”

Judging from the way several helmet-less Space Marines rolled their eyes, the ‘contribution’ had been several times more significant than expected.

“We will have to make more tests,” the Saint said thoughtfully as a spider landed in her hand with an impeccable jump. “The Purple Widows and the Golden Silk Spiders are the first useful species of spider I have been able to experiment with. Silk quality appears good, but all we had to compare until now were the mutant and radioactive aberrations from Wuhan. But I’m confident more negotiations with the Mechanicus will bring other spider species sooner or later. As interesting as purple-gold combinations are, I will have to dye the silk if I want any colour variety.”

“You may be able to create an entire monopoly on the silk trade,” Carl Blum said with an incredulous voice. “I suppose you have realised this?”

“To be honest...no,” the determined eyes had narrowed. “I always have the monopoly on the spider silk production wherever I used my powers. The reasons are evident, I think.”

Yes, Theodora could see why. If those spiders weren’t totally controlled, there was a high likelihood they would be far more aggressive. And without coordination, it was more or less impossible to weave a significant quantity of silk with precision.

“But I doubt you came to me to discuss my aptitude to deliver silk on demand.”

“Indeed, Saint Weaver,” it would have been impossible to miss the expression of annoyance which crossed the features of the young woman when the Administratum Grand Prefect spoke. “I presume you have heard the news coming from the Sector Capital?”

“I did hear some reports,” the reply was short and to the point. “It looks like the execution of the previous Governor opened a power struggle between the surviving nobles and the Prelate-Procurator...your superior, if I’m not mistaken, Grand Prefect.”

“That is a simplified version of the events, but essentially correct,” Theodora interjected. “For several reasons, the Ecclesiarchy is extremely worried by the events unravelling on Nyx. Nostradamus Vandire has several times in the past proved he was no friend of the Adeptus Ministorum, and his opponents are no more acceptable than him. Cardinal Prescott Lumen and I, along with many Priests, are particularly concerned that after the final defeat handed to the orks in this very system, the new Lord will bring deep instability and inner strife to Nyx.”

Theodora took a large breath before revealing the reason of her presence.

“The Nyx Sector needs someone popular, young and who has proved herself willing to defend the Imperium with her blood and her actions. Someone like you, Saint.”

For a second or two here was an emotion on the insect-mistress’ face and it was not pleasure. Confusion and maybe fear, but certainly not pleasure at the compliment. But it was gone quickly, so fast that Theodora wondered if she had imagined it, and all there was to observe after was a stony face.

“Let me see if understand correctly. You, a commander of the Frateris Templar and representative of the Ecclesiarchy, are not satisfied by the skills of the potential candidates in the upcoming Nyx Gubernatorial Election and you want me to challenge them.”

“Essentially, yes.” Theodora replied, trying not to react to the heavy scepticism in every word of the Saint. The smile which materialised was not exactly reassuring.

“You must really be convinced this...Vandire...is not the right man for the job. Let me remind you that I have not the slightest experience in politics and administration save the one I gained in the Fay 20th. I am more a Warlord than a Governor, Abbess-Crusader, Grand Prefect. And if the rumours are true, they want a noble.”

“You are a noble, Lady Saint,” Blum courageously spoke, receiving a glare in return. “By being awarded the Imperial Nyx Cross and the Sapphire-Sun of Nyx, you are now a member of the Nyx nobility. I think you took the title ‘Duchess of Brockton’ when you were at the ceremony...”

“Yes, yes,” she had rarely seen someone be so unimpressed at being formally a member of the nobility. “I accepted the title. We both know it’s an empty thing. I am not the owner of this system, I just have jurisdiction over this debris field the Mechanicus is exploring. And even if the Administratum sold me the system for one Throne Gelt, the two Death Worlds have resisted all the colonisation attempts of the last couple of millenniums. This system, save the archeotech the Mechanicus might be able to find, is worthless for the short term. In the long term things might be different, but by next year there will be a new Governor and he might not be so sympathetic if I try to challenge him.”

“I think you underestimate your popularity...”

One of the Sanguinary Guards placed a large data-slate in the Saint’s hands, and whatever she read didn’t please her.

“From what I understand, the elections in the Nyx System are not a popularity contest. It’s a nobility game where they play their favourite games of extortion, bribery and manipulation.” The diatribe was not over. “Aside from the little issue, I have not the tenth of the sum to participate in this idiocy...a detail because it’s explicitly the ‘winner takes all’ for the monetary awards...apparently you need the full support of a Prince-Magister to be entered. The support of two or three is required if one want to have a good chance. Plus the military acclamations and the signatures needed...”

“The Astra Militarum and the Inquisition would see with a good eye someone other than Nostradamus Vandire...”

For a second, Theodora thought there was a good chance there was a going to be a positive return. But the Saint took a new look at her data-slate before shaking her head in disgust and giving her final word.

“No. I won’t.”

“But why...”

Two more spiders landed in her joined hands before there was a single answer.

“Nyx Tertius is an overcrowded Hive World with an insane demand for finished goods and war weapons.”

“Err...yes. Many people think this is an advantage, Lady Saint.”

“In normal times, it might be,” the admission was very reluctant, it had to be said, “but if I want to make new weapons and archeotech recovery efforts, the Tithe-Masters will soon arrive and scream I disrupt production. I will also not hide the Brothers of the Red have accepted to stay at my side and will thus need a base of operation. The strict minimum is a few construction and maintenance space yards, with plenty of manufactorum to forge transhuman-specialised weaponry. And according to everything I’ve heard, it is safe to take for granted a lot of people are going to be unhappy if the tithe of Nyx Tertius...a tithe representing the effort of two hundred and forty-five billion souls...goes directly to fuel the war machine of the Adeptus Astartes and my own command.”

The reasoning was logical, but Theodora had enough experience to know there was more bothering the leader of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

“And regarding more personal problems?”

“This is a Hive World, Abbess. The rampant industrialisation has become so problematic we are speaking about Hive-Continents...the sky is so polluted I don’t think you can breathe without a rebreather...”

“You can’t,” confirmed unhelpfully her Administratum companion.

“Thank you for this admission, Grand Prefect. Where was I? Ah yes, the new Governor will have to deal with the mess left by the Inquisition, a nobility which certainly does not believe in anything looking like popular representation or rights. Poverty and criminality are rampant, and not just in the under-hives. And that doesn’t factor in the very real possibility I will have to put myself in half-pay because I certainly won’t be able to command a regiment or a larger formation while I’m ruling this...this madhouse.”

And several of her officers had affirmed to her it would be extremely easy to promise a Sector to someone...they may have forgotten the woman in question was a Saint, had just discovered an STC database and had the support of several Space Marine Chapters.

But she couldn’t leave her leave the Sector. The consequences for her personally were unimportant compared to the loss of faith the entire Sector would experience. The few Saints Nyx and Atlantis worshipped dated back to the Great Crusade. If they let a holy agent of the God-Emperor walk away because the planets of the Sector weren’t to her taste, the religious implications didn’t bear thinking about.

“I can’t speak for the other Adeptus of the Imperium, Lady Saint, but...I am the commander of the first offensive force of the Atlantis Sector. Should you agree to accept the Nyx Ladyship, I would put my forces at your disposal for any expedition you deem worthy of your attention. Considering the sums at stake for the election, I’m sure Cardinal Prescott Lumen and several Archmagi can borrow the money in time...and the Inquisition will give you the authority you need.”

She kneeled once more to impress the importance of the Saint staying in the Sector.

“I thought I told you not to kneel...” The Saint had risen from her seat and with a firm grip helped her stand. “Your points have been heard. The military help is always welcome and I will hold you to it. But the tithe problem remains.”

“I think...the Administratum could prove conciliatory,” Blum said in a hesitant voice. “I am just Acting Tithe-Master for the time being, but if Vandire suffers a...massive humiliation during the election, it’s entirely possible several of my supporters and I will be able to push his agents out of power, stop his little games, and confiscate his secret accounts. I am not in direct contact with Mars, but I’m told they are very complimentary of you at the time being.”

“You could say that, yes.”

“In this case, I think, Lady Saint, that should you achieve a victory in the gubernatorial election...we might be able to completely renegotiate the tithe system for the Nyx Sector with the Adeptus Mechanicus. I’m not saying the tithes will be reduced to zero; but for a century or two it might be possible Mars will demand a major Forge-World to increase its production to compensate, giving you the time to restore order and put in line new manufactorums, shipyards and the like.”

The seat was left unoccupied as the Saint marched out and plunged her hand into one box full of spiders to take out a pair of violet-amethyst gloves and verifying there was no flaw in the spiders’ work.

“I suppose I will have to make some gestures to the Adeptus Ministorum and the other Imperial self-governing branches...if I am willing to accept your proposal.”

“I of course can’t speak for the other Adeptus, but yes, it would appreciated,” Theodora bit her lip before deciding to have a go at it. After all, she was close to retirement now and it wasn’t like the proposition was unholy or deserved damnation. “The main cathedral of Nyx burned in a great fire ten years ago and I’m afraid the...piety of the former Governor was not satisfying. Another cathedral was built a few kilometres away, but it was something done for his personal vanity and the ornamentation is not exactly inspiring.”

“You want the funds to renovate the cathedral?” There was no condemnation, just interest in the voice of the Saint.

“No, the Ecclesiarchy is more than capable to do it alone...though we don’t refuse generous donations when they come,” she added to not sound like a hypocrite. “The problem is that even inside a Hive, the damage has gotten progressively worse and by now the decision is more to preserve the relics and the priceless pieces of the cathedral and rebuild one. It is of course a decision with deep religious issues...but it is the Governor of Nyx which has the final say.”

“That should not have taken so long to decide, even for a Nyx noble,” she was handed the purple silk gloves without a comment. Theodora tried not to gape...surely she couldn’t...

“I am afraid Governor Menelaus disliked how tall the cathedral was compared to his palace,” Carl Blum said. “When the belfry collapsed, his great spire-palace automatically became the tallest construction on Nyx Tertius.”

The murmur which came out of the lips of their host was not really intelligible, but she could have sworn the sentence was “and I was thinking they couldn’t get any more stupid...”

“I will have to think about it,” the insect-mistress said after a moment. “I hear what you say, but I will have at least to take a few hours to take my decision.”

Theodora nodded; a few hours they could afford, and besides by common accord it had been decided not to push out too much.

“Keep the gloves, Abbess, and try them, there aren’t any spiders inside. And as for the project of a new cathedral...”

“Yes?”

The spiders moved out from a corner of the room, revealing a sort of mini-architectural complex which looked like no monument she had ever seen before.

“Leet worked on this ‘memory-monument machine in miniature’ yesterday,” this was the explanation given, “and this one he managed to build without filling half of the room in flames. My spiders are still making a protection of silk around it...just in case. Anyway, if you’re willing to depart once from the Gothic style, Dragon and I would be willing to sponsor its construction.”

“What would be the name of this...cathedral?” She asked, wondering how by the Golden Throne a huge dome like this one could stand on such feeble support.

“It’s a Basilica...as for the name, I was thinking about Hagia Sanguinala...”

Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius never mentioned to the Saint that two of her Honour Guard had tears running on their faces mere seconds after she had spoken the words...

**Captain Valerian Benlio**

There were topics which broke no discussion when one began to speak about them. The influence of the Ruinous Powers had to be fought wherever it was discovered. The Emperor was, is, and will always be the Emperor of Mankind. The most dangerous tank of a Space Marine arsenal was nothing if its fierce Machine-Spirit had not been prepared. An army was nothing if its commander wasn’t able to find a battlefield with a map and the cannons thundering over the horizon.

The Black Templars were the most zealous Space Marines bar none when it came to the worship of the God-Emperor.

This...veneration had caused a lot of friction over the centuries. There was no denying it. Even today, Valerian was sure two-thirds of the Space Marine Chapters still didn’t worship the Emperor. He was their grandfather, in genetics, mind, soul and body, yes. He was the Master of Mankind, yes. He was the one they swore their oaths to when they became Astartes, absolutely. But they did not worship him as a God. For sure, certain Chapters came quite close, as they practised a sort of ‘praise our glorious ancestors’ with the Emperor as the greatest of the Ancients which was almost a worship by itself...but generally the Emperor was not worshipped as a God by the Space Marines.

Not in a manner the Ecclesiarchy recognised, anyway.

As a consequence, Valerian and the near totality of the Chapters of the Blood had...expected was maybe too strong a word, but...there would not have been a lot of informal bets lost should a close relationship between the Saint and the Black Templars be forged.

It was both a relief and a surprise it wasn’t the case.

The Templars had been...frustrated by the direction taken by the debates to decide the fate of the surviving Alpha Legion Space Marines. The members of the Guard and the Mechanicus called to witness had been on average grateful for the assistance of the accused, and while Lady Taylor Hebert had not come to testify in person, her written statement had not demanded a death sentence.

And when the young woman touched by the light of the Emperor had declared to Gamaliel it was better to be pragmatic in this instance and that killing the renegades of the Twentieth Legion would not help anyone except their enemies, the Black Templars’ unhappiness had massively increased.

And now that the last gathering involving the different Astartes contingents played itself on the Battle-Barge *Europae*, it was obvious the Saint-General and Marshal Markward of the Black Templars had very different conceptions of what the Imperium should be.

In hindsight, the Captains descending the Ninth Legion recognised in private, it shouldn’t have been such a surprise. The humans who were confirmed beyond any doubt to have been touched by a sliver of the Emperor’s power rarely presented the same traits.

But several ‘Saints’ across the last millennia had presented themselves as the wrath of the Emperor incarnate, and the Black Templars had not been shy fighting under these ‘holy’ figures. The Blood Angels preferred to avoid these crusade leaders, which also by a strangest coincidence happened every time to rise at a meteoritic pace in the Ecclesiarchy’s ranks. Few good things came out of this, apart from xenos and traitor populations put to the sword and the flame.

The fact that right now the Black Templars didn’t know how to cope with a Saint because it didn’t share their ideal of ‘charge first, purge the enemies of the God-Emperor and pray’ had caused plenty of amusement in the ranks, he was not going to deny.

The relationship still had a veneer of cordiality. Archeotech belonging to the sons of Sigismund had been recovered aboard a doomed battlecruiser along with precious gene-seed, and the Black Templars could not, would not forget this.

But there was no denying the exchange between the heroine who had defeated the Angel’s Bane and the Marshal was...not a declaration of deep friendship. The fact that it was public – distant or not, transhuman ears could listen to every detail of the conversation – emphasized further the differences.

“...and a Crusade needs to be a trial of Faith, Lady Saint. It is only by the assistance of the God-Emperor so many of our triumphs have been won...”

Marshal Markward was a giant for an Astartes, although tonight he wore a bland black and white penitence robe instead of his much more impressive power armour. As such he was towering over any normal human and Valerian knew this formidable presence must have played its part to convince Generals and Admirals to follow the Templars on one of their Crusades.

“Faith is important, of course, as it is the beating heart of an armed force. If soldiers don’t believe they can win, they despair, and in the seconds after, they rout. But a Crusade is a formidable industrial effort, Marshal. It must have Faith, or it is doomed, but there are things which must be there in support. Proper strategic planning, establishing supply lines, a massive shipbuilding effort...”

“Many things proper warriors can give to the staff and the rear-line administrators...”

The Marshal continued to repeat his brutal philosophy of smashing apart the enemy in a decisive engagement. It was not a speech the Major-General of Brockton appeared to enjoy a lot. It was difficult to observe too much of her visage, but the slim section of her hair which had turned golden was flashing in a more agitated manner, and the subtle golden glow was becoming more and more perceptible to transhuman eyes.

“If they are Faithful, they will obey their superiors and deliver the resources needed for our Crusades.”

“I think this would be a mistake to count on their Faith, Marshal. Faith is the foundation everything will be built on because for the Imperium of today, Faith is the pre-requisite for loyalty. But Faith must be properly supported by competence, ingenuity and wisdom. It needs a hint of pragmatism...”

“Pragmatism is the first step on a dark road...xenos and traitors begin by...”

“Anyone worshipping the Ruinous Powers needs to die and quickly,” the insect-mistress had seemingly run out of patience. “The orks and the eldar warriors need to go too, because they’ve proven we can’t expect anything but war and daggers in the dark from them. But no, Marshal, I don’t think pragmatism is something to be despised. I will kill the enemies of the Emperor, but I need to use the very finite resources at my disposal.”

“Resources like these...renegades?” Valerian would have to ask later to the other Blood Angels in this hall if they had recorded the growl-like sound the Black Templar had made with his throat.

“Resources like the Heracles Wardens, experts in counter-insurgency, xenos-slaying and other types of warfare, yes.” Markward had wanted a clear and sonorous ‘no’, and his grim face was something he would remember for the next decades. “Space Marines are a precious investment and it would be inconsiderate to throw them away just because they are by themselves the remnants of some shameful part of humanity’s history.”

“The Historical Revision Units and the Ordo Scriptus of the Holy Inquisition would disagree.”

“Marshal...” the violet cloak Lady Weaver wore was readjusted, allowing him to see there were several minuscule spiders waiting underneath to neutralise any unforeseen threats. If he had not had his eyes on it, Valerian would have missed it for certain. “There is an ancient saying history repeats itself because nobody was listening to the events the first time. It is my opinion that if you destroy the records, you are going to make more difficult the task of the next generations which will have to deal with your threat a third time.”

“Only by crushing totally and mercilessly an enemy, erasing every trace of his loathsome presence and consigning it to oblivion can the enemy be truly defeated!”

To her credit, their Shield against the Black Rage didn’t say ‘you like proving my point’...but everyone heard it nonetheless.

**Major-General Taylor Hebert**

Listening to the ramblings of the Black Templars’ Marshal for a good half-hour had given her a massive headache, to which was added frustration and sadness that the equivalent of a Space Marine Captain could be so obtuse, narrow-minded and unwilling to recognise reality when it poked him in the nose.

The very existence of these black-white fanatics in the thirty-fifth millennium proved something was wrong with the reality of this galaxy. The forces of the Frateris Templars were recruited on their fervour too, but at least their commanders understood your faith was really unlikely to bother an ork when your lasgun-cell was bereft of power, your bayonet was broken and your supplies had been diverted by an ignorant Munitorum imbecile to a battlefield six hundred light-years away.

The Black Templars...they seemed to live in a fantasy world where they could crusade for all eternity without caring about the consequences of their actions.

And they believed that the God-Emperor guided their actions.

Well she was not sorry to say she was not going to endorse their rampages across several Sectors. Maybe one day she would call them...when she was sure there was no risk of innocents being caught in the crossfire and an eldritch horror needed to be killed yesterday.

Removing her cloak and the diverse decorations she had gone to the reception with, Taylor fell on the large couch which had hours before been moved to her quarters. For ten seconds, there was blessed silence...and then her vox cracked and the Astartes guards informed her she had a parahuman visitor.

“Let him enter,” she ordered. Moments later, she regretted her crisis of curiosity. It was Leet, and he had in his hands something which looked like a hybrid of armour, latex disguise and futurist cloth. Oh, and it was a shining bright blue hurting her eyes.

“Leet, what in the name of the Simurgh is this thing?” Taylor thought it was a miraculous restraint on her part she didn’t order Gavreel to immediately bring the incinerators to dispose of this hideous thing.

“You don’t like it?” Nightmare or hallucination, she would never dignify this with an answer. “It’s Samus’ Zero Suit! I was reminded of Metroid, and you are, after all, a girl...”

The more he spoke, the more Taylor was reminded why gangs, heroes and independents were happy with the idea of giving a long and painful lesson to Leet and his unlamented partner, together known as the duo of villainous failures.

“I certainly didn’t demand this...this..”

“Zero Suit,” commented unhelpfully the villainous Tinker.

“This abomination you have the gall to call a power suit.”

“Hey, it’s perfectly safe and reliable...” given the faint odour of burning electronics, she was ready to think it was not, thank you very much. “I thought it would make a nice present for your enthronement as Lady Nyx.”

“I haven’t decided if I will participate in this nobility mess,” Taylor managed to say, wondering when her Astartes had suddenly become gossipers and started feeding the rumour mill’s monster.

“Oh come on, you will do it...and you will need someone classy! Someone millions of people will remember!” Would the Dawnbreaker Guard help her if she had a corpse to dispose of? Murder sounded more and more like a pleasant option...

Truly, she would prefer fighting the C’Tan and the Angel’s Bane together than wearing this blue abomination in front of the Nyx population. Seriously, if she arrived in this, the best-case scenario was the one where all the nobles died of laughter.

“What do you want, Leet?”

“I want a place to fulfil my grand vision of a city entirely dedicated to video games and Tinker experiments...and I heard there were Hives missing some of their owners. I would be the perfect noble to rebuild the video game industry and boost your popularity...”

Over her dead body, and not a millisecond earlier.

“I will consider it.” See Dragon, she was beginning to learn diplomacy. In military language, it said ‘no and don’t waste any more of my time until the next century’. Unfortunately, the chance of Leet noticing the pretty big hints left by her temper and her visage’s expression were close to zero or ridiculous, depending on your point of view. “Now get out of my quarters, and please take your ‘zero suit’ to Dragon before you provoke a massive fire.”

Given that there was already smoke coming out of the monstrosity against those with eyesight, it was the latter point which was the most concerning.

“Gavreel, tell the Magi in charge of the reparations in sector J-3 to prepare the anti-fire foam...I think she’s going to need it.”

“At once, my Lady,” and she hoped for a moment of peace as the cold water she had demanded two minutes ago arrived...and so did Dennis Peters and his partner-in-crime Wolfgang Bach, when Leet allowed them to pass before running to save his latest catastrophic invention.

“I won several bets, by the way,” announced the Ward who back in Brockton had been known as Clockblocker. “Several troopers were thinking Leet could convince you to try this space suit...”

“Sorry to disappoint them, but I value my life.” Taylor gave a glance at the door to where Leet had made his exit. “I don’t even know how in the last battle he managed to survive using half a dozen of his own inventions...”

“Luck?”

“With that kind of luck, you can win billions at gambling,” and while she knew the number of Tinkers available for this galaxy was currently capped at two with no hope of increasing it...was she a bad person for dreaming about a replacement parahuman should they remove Leet from the order of battle?

She watched them from every angle with her insects and her eyes as the two were given seats by her guards. Clockblocker – though he had insisted time and time again she had to call him Dennis – had not changed much from Brockton Bay. He had the same red hair, the same blue eyes, and she was still taller than him. His lips were twitching like he had a joke on his tongue – something which alas couldn’t be ruled out where he was concerned, as she had discovered the last days.

His companion was pretty much the image of a rebellious young man playing the heroic role. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and about half a head taller than her, Wolfgang Bach was good-looking...and she was going to stop that thought before she thought about things that weren’t there.

“Let me begin with the fact that I’ve not decided whether I will accept or not the proposition which was made to me earlier today. If Leet is aware of this, I’m pretty sure the entire crew of the *Opera Exitium* and your four ears have heard the conversation in one form or another.”

“Right,” Dennis replied for the two of them after a silent exchange with Wolfgang. “Obviously, the future plans are still in flux, but we noticed you lacked space assets, whether you decide to immediately pursue your Major-General career or not.”

“You’re not wrong,” Taylor admitted. It was a weakness which had become incredibly obvious during the massive space battle fought around the Battle-moon. Her control range for insect had increased a bit these last months...it was actually at precisely eight hundred and thirty-five metres.

A ‘normal’ exchange of fire between two warships often occurred at distances over one hundred thousand kilometres. Her chances to cripple a warship principally laid in leading a boarding party with ramming shuttles full of Death World-born insects.

So far, none of the Explorators had affirmed having in their stasis vaults space-faring arthropods. And ignoring the problem of these hypothetic creatures momentarily escaping her control, the warlord in her didn’t see a tactical use for these creatures. Her control was not likely to go over a kilometre, but assuming the opposite, she would have to keep these insects at incredibly close-range to the ship she used, and the risk of collision when the warship’s velocity was in fractions of light speed...well it didn’t bear thinking about.

The oaths and the assistance of the Space Marines would negate this problem a bit, but there was no denying that in the immensities of space, she was nowhere near the Mistress of the battlefield.

“The Imperial Navy will watch with a falcon eye any attempts to acquire capital warships. I’m planning to be...creative. I plan to pressure Stygies VIII somewhat to grant Archmagos Lankovar a new flagship and an Explorator fleet worthy of the name, but these ships will remain Mechanicus owned and crewed.”

Saint she might be, but the battle had created enough joy and resent to fill Brockton Bay three times over. And you had to be deaf and blind to fail to realise certain officers of the Navy had been worried by the forces allied to her name.

There may have been a few cases in certain Sectors where liberties were taken. Not with her, though. She was a Major-General and the talk of the entire Sub-Sector. She was a member of the Imperial Guard. The millennia-old rule written after the Great Heresy decreed the Imperial Navy and the Imperial Guard were allied but separate organisations. The rules were not going to be lax for her. A Guard officer commanded a vast amount of ground troops but no warships. A Navy officer commanded sailors and batteries taller than many cities, but no ground troops. End of the story, end of the discussion.

“Yes, and I’m sure you will have plenty of them to provide help,” Wolfgang Bach spoke for the first time. “The cogboys believe those who find precious archeotech are destined to find more, so the moment you leave on a Crusade or an expedition for a non-Imperial controlled war zone, hundreds of thousands Tech-Priests will volunteer to accompany you. I think you able to imagine what it will do for the discretion of your quests.”

“And I suppose you have a solution which will prevent the Navy and the Guard from...resuming their legendary rivalry in insults, trials and duels?”

“We do,” unlike Dennis, Wolfgang had not a clownish smile, “we thought about becoming Rogue Traders and exploring the stars in your stead.”

“Err...we are speaking about these pseudo pirate-corsairs operating outside Imperial-controlled space, right?”

“That’s an unfair description,” Dennis protested.

“But not an inaccurate one,” Wolfgang countered a second later. “I suppose you’ve learned the basics?”

“I did. The Warrants of Trade were some of the ‘rewards’ certain representatives of the Adeptus Terra loved to propose to me yesterday. In theory, the principle is not bad. One gets one Warrant of Trade, one ship to explore the unknown, and only the conditions written on your Warrant to respect as long as you discover new planets and spread the worship of the God-Emperor in Terra’s name. It’s when you look at past history that it begins to be really awful.”

Rogue Traders were a law by themselves as long as they stayed in the unknown. Yet at some point, ship maintenance, fuel and technical issues forced those who survived the perils of the unknown to come back. And once they were back in Imperial-controlled space, too often the very crimes they had committed caught up with them...that or the massive debts which had skyrocketed out of control in their absence. Warrants of Trade provided protection, but it was not an impenetrable protection and many Inquisitors would have no compunction to shoot those who dabbled in the trade of xenos and tainted artefacts of extinct civilisations.

“For me, the possibilities are not worth the risks. I would have to resign directly from my responsibilities in the Guard with no hope to take them back. And since the Warrants’ reason of existence is to explore what lies beyond the frontier, I would be a near-foreign presence for the Imperium. No, being a Rogue Trader is not for me.” The parahuman met the blue eyes of Wolfgang for a long moment until he blinked. “I suppose that you two don’t have the same issues and motivations.”

“The Navy will never offer me an Ensign’s commission unless they literally have no other choice.” Wolfgang smiled like it was mark in his favour. Maybe it was, as the Navy had a lot of expensive uniforms and the officers were all of aristocratic background.

“And I don’t feel trying my chance with the Guard or the other military forces,” Dennis added. “No offence, but they do not how to enjoy a joke and several organisations make the PRT personnel looks like nice guys.”

“None taken.” If they really wanted to live their lives outside the system, it was their decision, not hers. “I would need some precision about your project as a whole before deciding if it’s worth negotiating with the Mechanicus.”

To their credit, it looked to be a far more interesting and well thought-out plan than Leet’s idea of ‘take a Hive and fill it with video game consoles and exploding labs’.

“Sure. Segmentum representatives of the Adeptus Terra are the easiest way to obtain a Warrant of Trade, but they are also the most reluctant to pour resources into a new Rogue Trader. The best way to obtain the Warrant of Trade is to have it from the hands of the High Lords of Terra.”

“A majority vote?”

“No, in general the personal recommendation of one High Lord is considered sufficient. Although I think it must depends a lot on the personal power of the High Lord supporting you...”

“I see,” at least no insurmountable problem would appear from this. The Fabricator-General of Mars had largely the resources and the influence to deliver a few warships. Either he said yes or he said no, but Mars was the greatest Forge-World in the galaxy and no doubt it had already given thousands of starships to other explorers of the stars. “Give me a sum-up of what warships you want, your trade and exploration strategy as well as the resources you want, and I will discuss it with Archmagos Lankovar. Do you want two Warrants or just one?”

“Two would be better,” Wolfgang and Dennis said in unison before the latter continued. “We plan to do a bit of exploration together, but we might pursue different goals and separate one day or another, and the travels of Rogue Traders are not risk-free.”

“Okay...now go repeat all your arguments to Missy, Dennis. I’m sure she is going to find some counter-arguments I’ve not thought of...”

By the way the time-stopping parahuman shivered, this was not a conversation he had prepared with his fellow Ward...too bad for him.

**Magos-Draco Dragon Richter**

Months ago, the arrival of several three metres-tall armoured giants would have been the imminent sign of an impending disaster. Nowadays, it was becoming business as usual. Dragon didn’t know if it was a very good thing or simply the fact her sanity was finally slipping away confronted to the craziness of this galaxy.

In this case, of course, the Space Marines were merely the vanguard and the bodyguards for the parahuman she had invited to the section which had by default become her base of operations for the last ten days. It was far from the factories and the labs she had been able to consider hers on Earth Bet, but it was acceptable as a short-term temporary solution.

“Good evening, Dragon,” Taylor seemed in dire need of a good night’s sleep, and the Tinker realised she would not have the time to speak about everything she wanted. “Or is it good night?”

“It’s evening, by the ship’s hour...” for all the good it did as beings of metal and artificial components needed far less sleep than unmodified humans.

“I will take you at your word. Your message said you had good news?”

“I have. Your staff and I have finally completed the negotiations for the Larkine lasgun template.”

“Already?” A genuine smile appeared on the young woman’s face. “You’re right, that is good news. Who are the buyers?”

“As per your wishes, one copy for the Imperial Guard, one for the Imperial Navy and one for the Frateris Templars of the Ecclesiarchy. The Forge-Worlds of Accatran, Estaban III, Gryphonne IV and Beshic V were the Forges to offer the better terms on the Mechanicus side of things.”

“I see...and in exchange?”

“Remember we tried not to be too greedy,” it was a template they wanted to spread fast across the Imperium, and it was ‘only’ a lasgun template in the end. “On average, the negotiations gave us fifteen thousand Tech-Priests for each copy, so one hundred and five thousand Tech-Priests overall. Most will be generalists and useful for training purposes. A grand total of fourteen thousand Skitarii will accompany them. There will be a transfer of twenty second-grade data print-outs, principally focused on the creation of machine-tools and manufactorum-builders. In no more than ten years, you will have three non-Warp capable monitors and the support ships to keep them operational. The only refusal we couldn’t overcome was the transfer of veteran regiments to serve as training cadres on Fay. The Munitorum refuse to waste its best assets in a backwater Sector. Their words, not mine.”

“Well, that’s good, right?”

Dragon clicked her fingers and grinned.

“It would be even better if we had a world to install all these Tech-Priests...”

Taylor’s reaction was to roll her eyes in fatidic resignation.

“Not you too...by the way you have not revealed to me how long it would take if we want to start from scratch.”

“Didn’t I?” A poor lie, she hadn’t and the two parahumans both knew it. “With Mechanicus support and pressuring the Administratum a bit with some good arguments and short-cuts, I think we could begin our work on a relatively virgin world, or at least on the ruins of a former Imperial world, in two decades.”

“Twenty years?” She didn’t need to watch directly Weaver to know it wasn’t the answer she wanted.

“Twenty years at the very minimum. Colonies well-suited for the development of a space society are in high demand, you know.”

“Yes, but twenty years...” the youngest Major-General of the Sector closed her eyes before reopening them filled with determination. “Nyx would be available in a matter of days.”

“Nyx would be available in a matter of days,” Dragon repeated with a nod. “And the oversight over your head would be far less than the one considered normal for a new Imperial colony. Nyx is the capital of the Sector, so as long as the tithes are paid and the planets are defended from the enemies of humanity, your obligations will be really minimal.”

It had taken her a long time to study the millions of rules and make her own opinion on them, but ultimately the Imperium was more a big nasty confederation than something you imposed a tyrannical rule on. Of course, the closer you were to Solar, the more the High Lords could exert their very theoretical authority.

“It is not a decision without drawbacks,” the Tinker pretending to be a dutiful daughter of the Adeptus Mechanicus amended, “we will have to deal with a lot of powerful players and control over the industrial efforts will be partial at best. But it is a Sector’s capital and whether the Inquisition planned it that way or not, this kind of chance is unlikely to be given every ten days.”

“Why is everyone so disposed to give me logical arguments?” Weaver complained, not realising there were Space Marines exchanging a few data-chips behind her after this rhetorical question.

“Because we know you listen to them?” There was no real strength behind the glare she received the next instant.

“Give me the other news, please.”

“The Karon Tank is meeting a lot of...doctrinal resistance from the Mechanicus. Several Magi worked with me to replace the obsolete parts by M35-approved ones and for a majority of the upper Mechanicus, the design is too radical.”

Taylor did not bother hide her dissatisfaction.

“The Guard’s armoured regiments scream in every Sector for more Leman Russ Vanquishers and Tank Hunter Destroyers! It’s not like a new model will kill the tank-buster market!”

“I know that, and you know that,” Dragon said patiently, “but there are some... conservative figures out there. And with the astropathic communications already established here, we have their reactions with a day or two of delay. And they’re not happy.”

Weaver grimaced.

“Solutions?”

Dragon shrugged.

“Not all the Forge-Worlds are unreceptive to the Karon Battle-tank. Tigrus, for one, has been interested, something I find formidably ironic as they are the biggest producer of Leman Russ Vanquishers in the Segmentum.”

“That is because a lot of production is immediately rolling onto the frontlines of the Eastern Fringe,” the former warlord commented. “Who are the other supporters?”

“Samech, Triplex Phall and Stygies VIII. The last one admittedly does not help our case, for the Magi of Stygies have an infamous reputation among their Adeptus. To break this stalemate, there are not twenty solutions: we use a large manufactorum under our complete control, and we produce something like a thousand of them. All the tanks of this first wave would be given to the Mechanicus for battle-tests in varied environments and against a wide range of foes.”

“All right, I see the logic. How long it will take to have one thousand tanks ready?”

“Impossible to say as long as I’ve not the tank manufactorum in question inspected. But optimistically, two to three years. A lot will depend on the efficiency and the talent of the Tech-Priests I will have at my disposal.”

“If it’s the best scenario, it will have to do. The dragon armours?”

“This one is far more attractive for the Archmagi and their allies,” she admitted. “It’s likely because they have no good counter to these hellish Heldrakes.”

“Or they love piloting these badass dragon-shaped vehicles.”

“Yes, that too,” It would not do to show her satisfaction at the superiority of the draconic over the cog. “We’re still in the design stage. The Saphira Pattern was satisfying in many ways, but if it’s designed to go one-on-one against these abominations, the need to reinforce the anti-scrapcode defences is of utmost priority, and obviously we need to transform it from a remote-controlled machine into a pilot-controlled armour. It will not make a big impact if I am the only one to deploy them in this galaxy. As for the deployment rate, I think I will have the first prototypes ready by the time the Martian fleet arrives. Ryza and Anvillus have placed it on their high-priority list.”

“Any idea how many tech-Priests and templates print-outs you will be able to negotiate from them?”

“No, but the date until the mass production and prototype completion is still far away.”

Taylor Hebert shook her head before giving a nod which betrayed her exhaustion.

“I think the rest can wait until tomorrow,” the young woman yawned. “Thank you, Dragon.”

“You’re welcome,” she answered as the VIP of the Dawnbreaker Guard turned away.

“Oh, and Dragon, I really hope this golden armour you’re building in your atelier in the rear is not for me. Seriously, do you want be to blind the enemy with all this gold paint or what?”

Ah, busted. Her anti-bugs protections had proved insufficient once more.

**Missy Byron**

“I have decided to accept the proposal. I will become Planetary Governor of Nyx...that is, if I win this farce of an election.”

At Brockton Bay, Vista was sure this statement would have largely been enough to give plenty of nightmares to the average US citizen in the street. She could imagine how Skitter would have ‘convinced’ everyone to vote for her. Tides of insects unleashed from the PRT headquarters to the Boat Graveyard, a sea of chitin, mandibles and spiders drowning everything and forcing the remnants of the city administration to surrender in a matter of minutes.

It said a lot about the Imperium, none of it good, that the average Nyx workers were going to consider this a very good thing.

“This shouldn’t be too difficult,” newly promoted Sergeant Wei Cao interjected. “The Prince-Magister of House Euboea and the Princess-Magister of House Attica will support you. And some of the propaganda broadcasts have already been played on Nyx. The response for the moment can be described as...overwhelmingly positive.”

“I wonder,” Weaver said snidely, “how bad the opposition is for them to consider a woman who has never set a foot on their planet...”

“Don’t sell yourself short, General,” Wei replied with a serenity that had to have been taught to her at a very young age. “The Imperium loves military heroes and since you were proclaimed a Saint in the same battle, your reputation is more than excellent.”

“Vista?”

“I think I told you to call me Missy a few days ago...” She sighed in an exaggerated manner.

“Fine. Missy?”

“Yes, I agree with your supermodel Sergeant. The public relationships service was completely useless compared to the things the Imperium has at its disposal. And there have not a tenth of our Director’s morals. Give them a few months, and I’m sure they will be able to make a legend where you smashed the entire fleet with one strike of your sword.”

“Surely they wouldn’t go that far...” there was a distinct lack of conviction in Wei Cao’s voice.

“We will have to wait and see. There are departments where battlefield authority means little to certain people.” On this point, she supposed Taylor Hebert had more experience than her. “What did you want to speak about, Wei?”

“I studied a few hours the list of insects currently available for your database and I arrived at an evident conclusion.”

“Oh?” The single word was a good indicator of how unimpressed the insect-mistress was.

“Yes, General. With the adequate economic strategy, you can become extremely rich in less than a year. Your spider silk, for example...”

“Wei,” at least by the way she smiled and the informal use of her Wuhanese subordinate first name, Taylor was in a good mood. “I didn’t forget the robe you brought me for the ball...”

“A robe?” Missy grinned. “A ball? Please tell me you have kept the pict-casts...”

“Of course...”

“Don’t you dare,” the former warlord growled in a threatening tone as suddenly the two beetles by her side took a bipedal posture and revealed a number of blades which would have made Wolverine jealous. “If those pict-casts see the light of day, I will make sure the court-martials are ready in the next couple of hours...”

“Come on, General, it’s just a few...very compromising...pict-casts...”

“You are not helping your case, Sergeant.”

“Fine, fine...” Wei breathed in and returned to a more serious expression. “The robes you and I wore at the ball were similar to silk, but they’re certainly not coming from any natural sources. The textile was created in very specialised ateliers, and the owners of these places are always at the mercy of the Mechanicus Tech-Priests, for it is they who have the secrets of these materials’ creation. There is a lot of demand from the nobility and the high merchant class, but the robes are in extremely limited quantity and they do not last long. I never saw the price tag, but I wouldn’t be surprised if your robe cost around two million Throne Gelts.”

“Wow.” The exclamation escaped her lips. “And Taylor can create in one day enough to make a hundred robes...”

Missy had not visited for long the ‘spider room’ as Clockblocker had dubbed it. But she had seen very well the thirty-five Astartes of the Dawnbreaker Guard receive their new purple-gold capes and there had been a lot more silk stored for ulterior use.

“But you were telling me yesterday it wasn’t going to sell very well...”

“The silk will sell very well. The clothes you had imagined...not so much. But that’s not a problem. Missy and I will take care of the fashion trends, the clients’ wishes and everything related to the attractiveness of the robes.”

“I will?” Somehow this was the first time she was made aware of this!

“You will,” Wei told her in an amused voice. “I will need our support and your powers to convince our first model to present herself with our creations...”

“Who are you talking about?” Taylor said with a heavy dose of mistrust. Then a horrified expression crossed her features. “Oh no, Wei. Certainly not!”

“Just think about the importance of the event. A Saint is wearing clothes of true spider silk, and it’s possible to buy something of the same quality!”

“Absolutely not!” Vista wondered how many days were going to be necessary for the Wuhanese girl to change the mind of her superior. “I have seen what you consider proper...”

“I will behave myself...the cleavage will be conservative this time.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes, and this is just the first idea I had reading the list of insects you had. Spider silk is a luxury product, and, since I doubt anybody will manifest an ability to teach the spiders how to weave on their own within the next millennium, you have the monopoly on this one. Then there is the Horned Yellow Weevil.”

“That insect is useless for a modern battlefield,” Taylor said in a voice which was close to a teaching mode. “It’s so slow to move on open ground the battle could be over by the time it has moved a hundred metres, and one lasgun is more than enough to kill a large specimen. And it’s large, so it is a superb target for everyone not blind. What?”

Wei Cao had taken a patronising expression which was a mixture of pity and amusement.

“General, we would follow in a Warp storm if you asked, but honestly your flair for investment could use some improvements.”

“Very well. What’s the point I’m missing?”

“The tusks of the Horned Yellow Weevil are pure ivory, and the Magi who wrote the report was convinced it could grow them whenever it wished. This is because fights between males can be incredibly violent...”

Taylor raised her hand to stop what promised to be a lengthy explanation.

“I understand what you’re saying. I control sufficient members of this species, I have ivory when and where I want. But this...”

“Dye. Wool. Meat. Chitin and other types of insect hides. Honey. Oil. Pearls. Soap. Perfume. Medicine.” The Sergeant enumerated calmly. “I went to Dragon and she confirmed in a few minutes that with your skills, you can pretty much do whatever your insects can, so extracting the important parts isn’t going to be a problem.”

“But this will end with me...” Missy had never seen Weaver look so...insecure. It was quite a contrast with her implacable determination on the battlefield for sure. “If I’m not around, nothing will get done. The Mechanicus can servo-control a few insects, but they will never be able to attain my mastery over them and the moment I’m not there anymore...”

“General...Taylor...a lot of your products will always be luxury goods. You are a Saint. There is only one to control the insects, so it’s not like the supply will be able to meet the demand. But with the money you will receive from the purchases...you will able to create a lot of good.”

Taylor winced before nodding.

“It seems I am outmatched.” The parahuman rose from the beetle she had used as seat. “We will try it your way. Contact Magos Lankovar and choose the five species which seem the most promising to you from a financial perspective. Five species, not including the spiders.”

“I will head directly to the bridge, I think he was still in conference with the Arch-Genetor...what is that?”

The exclamation was not unwarranted, Missy thought. The insect which had arrived by the rear door was...weird. It was not tall, maybe half her height. It was not a species which had had similarities with an insect living on Earth. It looked like someone had taken one of these dangerous herbivore dinosaurs with the tail club and the heavy armour to resist the attacks of the carnivores, before adding another two legs, giving it a white-black pattern more appropriate on a zebra than any insect, and adding here there things like horns and a large red tongue.

“Yes, what is that, General?” She demanded and had a very bad feeling when Taylor Hebert gave the two of them a predatory smile.

“That is the Queen-Tortoise of Ark Mora...eh, I didn’t choose the name!” Weaver rapidly added as Vista sent her her best ‘are you kidding me’ stare.

“And what is the utility of this...Queen-Tortoise?” Honestly, the insect – assuming it could be considered one, Weaver had proved she could control all arthropods, not just insects – was armoured but apart its skin protection, did not look like much.

“I’m so glad you asked,” and in the heartbeat following her words, the back of the Queen-Tortoise opened to reveal ten, no twenty, no forty large spikes more than a metre high pointing at the ceiling. Missy stared with her mouth wide open, and she was sure Wei had the same expression on her face.

“The spikes can be launched at deadly speeds on my command, and the tests have concluded the bone spikes can pierce ceramite. The ‘Queen-Tortoises’ in their natural habitat saturate the air with these spikes to protect themselves from their rare airborne predators. You were asking me the utility of this young newcomer? It will be my new anti-air battery.”

Vista suddenly had a vision of human-sized ‘tortoises’, hundreds of them, launching their spikes in coordinated waves and darkening the sky with these natural arrows no soldier had ever had the chance to field on a battlefield. Flyers arriving for their landing would be dead meat, if the lethality of the bone spikes was not overestimated. Even tanks and most of the common Imperial heavy armour would not survive two or three ‘salvoes’...

“I really hope the next campaign will not begin within a decade or two...” Missy murmured to herself before walking back to her quarters, hoping Dennis had not concocted something crazier while she was away.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**7.739.289M35**

**Major-General Taylor Hebert**

On a scale from one to ten, the Warp-travel from Brockton to Nyx was approximately a nine. The inner Gellar Fields of the *Opera Exitium* held. There were no eldritch things materialising aboard. The number of wounded and deaths was extremely low, though as she understood it over two dozen people were mentally hurt and may have to be euthanized for their own good in a few hours.

A few months ago, she would have considered ridiculous the prospect of something trying to prevent them from arriving to their destination. But they were in the Warp, and the darkness she had felt pressing against the energy-protections of the Battle-Barge couldn’t be joked about.

The Warp was not empty. The Warp was full of horrors. And she knew deep inside that with her last battle, she had attracted the attention of the demons. It was not her imagination. Two of the reserve Navigators and three dozen psykers had to be placed in a medical coma before they tried to take their own lives. Some had stayed coherent long enough to inform her that there was something out there screaming ‘Weaver’ in agonising rage...she had a good idea of the identity of the demon responsible, as it happened.

The previous battle had changed her in some way. It was easy to ignore it as long as she was resting and controlling her beetles, but in the Warp denial was no longer possible. Her body had taken to shining in a golden aura and the golden light of her hairs had increased, not diminished. There was endless darkness and malice waiting in the depths of the Sea of Souls, and the light...she was not so naive to pretend it was strong enough to fight these infernal beings.

The escape from the Warp, when it came, was incredibly violent. Over half of the secondary bridge’s crew collapsed, vomited or did both in the firsts seconds. Those who didn’t were showing expression going from ‘thank God it’s over’ to ‘I’m sick I want to die’ and there were plenty of relieved faces as the voice of Chapter Master Agiel Izaz reached everyone’s ears.

“We are twenty-three thousand kilometres away from our projected re-emergence point and one point three standard days late. Warp travel completed successfully.”

No one would ever mention it in daily conversation, but from the tallest Space Marine to the lowest trooper, everyone unconsciously relaxed and the heavy tension dissipated.

“The Chapter Master gives his compliment, my Lady, and states the Observation Bay will be available for your personal use in five minutes,” Gavreel affirmed formally.

“Give the Chapter Master my thanks and my gratitude for a safe travel through the Warp,” it was not the fault of the Brothers of the Red that they had been forced to ride the demonic storms.

All in all, it took nearly fifteen minutes before she was able to watch the Nyx System in all its glory. Though frankly the ‘in all its glory’ was maybe a bit of an exaggeration. For reasons which had as much to do with defensive measures as the human captain’s sanity, warships of the Imperium materialised far away from the main planets, and the *Opera Exitium* had not derogated this rule.

As such, the first impression Taylor got of the Sector Capital was the system star, a bright giant which was essentially white to the naked eye.

“It is a star not unlike Canopus as it was studied at home,” Dragon said conversationally as she arrived on the observation hall – at two hundred metres long it was difficult to call it anything else. “I think the luminosity is significantly less than that...”

“I will take you at your word,” Taylor answered. “As a certain Endbringer was always preventing space exploration attempts, classes about astronomy and the wider galaxy...let’s just say they weren’t the most popular courses at Winslow, or in other schools.”

“I completely understand.” Dragon replied politely. “We will have a good view of Nyx Sextus in a few seconds.”

The prediction was fulfilled at the appropriate moment. Instead of the void, the Space Marines and the guardsmen watched as a big ball of blue was magnified on the left bay.

“Nyx Sextus,” she murmured, “also known as Blue Anchorage. This is the primary base of the Imperial Navy in the Sector. Promethium extraction facilities, promethium refineries, maintenance and construction shipyards and five Primaris-grade defence stations are orbiting this blue gas giant.”

“Unfortunately, orbital facilities are all there is to see,” Dragon whispered. “Neither this giant planet nor its six moons are inhabitable in their current state.”

“It might be for the best,” Taylor continued to speak with the same tone of voice. “Planetary Governors of the past would certainly have made more efforts to dislodge the Navy and the Ecclesiarchy from their holdings on the outer planets.”

“I wish I could disagree. I can’t.”

The observation bay became a thing of beauty and spectacle as the cogitators calculated, analysed the long-range auspex readings and began to share their findings with the parahumans, humans and transhumans present. The white-looking star, the aster the locals had taken to call the Sapphire-Sun, was granted plenty of representation under different angles, but the other planets of the system were also given their own moments to shine.

From afar, Nyx Quintus was the planet which looked like the most like Earth. Its appearance was a swirl of green, brown, blue and white. Unlike a lot of planets, it had no moons whatsoever. The common points with Earth Bet were not legion. Nyx Quintus, official name Saint Clare’s Stand, was a world turning around the local star at five times the distance Earth did from the Sun. Of course, the Diamond-Sun of Nyx was far more luminous than the star of the Solar System, but it nonetheless resulted in a cold world, famed for exporting religious artworks and books, as well as the extraction of ore and unrefined resources. It was also not under the control of the Nyx Governor, as it belonged to the Ecclesiarchy diocese ruled by Cardinal Prescott Lumen.

Nyx Quartus was warmer and far closer to Mars when viewed from millions of kilometres away. It also couldn’t be different from the Red Planet where the Mechanicus reigned supreme. The planet shone red like a ruby, and the first explorers in the Great Crusade-era had evidently agreed, as they had called it Ruby’s Harvest. It had rapidly become the breadbasket of the system...in other words, it was an Agri-World. The two moons around it, Ochre’s Harvest and Kilimanjaro, were fulfilling the same roles, although one was according to her staff’s findings producing food only for the Governor and the Nyx aristocracy. Over eight hundred million workers were toiling in these uncountable farms and plantations.

“Difficult to believe one planet and two moons are really entirely reserved for the food production of another planet.”

“It’s not like they have a lot of choices...to be fair, the Mechanicus has managed to reduce the use of pesticides and improve the living conditions of the agriculture workers a bit. The harvests and the tithes are all delivered as millions of tons of food. The five main exportation goods are ruby rice, ruby grain, ruby potatoes, dodo eggs and grox meat.”

The names were very familiar, but she had to remember names often weren’t closely linked with reality. Her ‘queen-tortoise’ was absolutely not a tortoise, the Ulm ‘horses’ would have given heart attacks to a horse-owner on Earth Bet, and plenty of animals and insects had at best a vague resemblance to their ancient name-holders.

“And that leaves the two last inhabited planets.”

“Nyx Secundus, aka Luke’s Mine,” Dragon spoke with a grimace of distaste. “The conditions on the surface are...hot, and the radiation is far above any threshold I would recommend. Mining World or not, this world is certainly not a place I would spend my holidays.”

“It looks pretty from here,” Taylor was not joking, the dark blue orb had its charm. “But you are right. I understand they are mining from it the famous Nyx Sapphires and a lot of iron ore.”

“That is correct. The production of iron ore in magnetite and hematite is monumental...and so is the damage to the local environment. There is also a lot of oil extraction on the equatorial belt. The other significant mines are there to grab whatever titanium and molybdenum they can find.”

“And I will have to deal with...that. One hundred and twenty million miners living in the depths of this industrial nightmare...”

There was a moon orbiting this planet, but Luke’s Vigil was more a Departmento Munitorum depot and a conference centre for the nobles supervising the mining facilities than anything else.

“The mining guilds and the cartels are directly named or confirmed by the Governor at the beginning of each year...I think you will have a few days to decide if you want to hang them or not.”

And that left the grey-black orb between the Agri-World and the Mining World. It was in many ways the only world which mattered, and the number of ships, orbital stations and man-made structures made this opinion impossible to refute.

Taylor had at first wondered why the system had been called Nyx in ancient times. The Greek Primordial Deity of the Night was obviously not a good name for a system with a bright white sun. But the system had not been named for the star. It had been named for a planet of dark rocks and dark waters, and the pollution and forcing millions and millions humans into gigantic ‘Hive-Continents’ had not given the planet a fresh breath.

Nyx Tertius, more commonly called Nyx by everyone not wanting to compliment the Administratum, had been a less than cheerful world when it was discovered, and four millennia-plus later, the situation had only worsened.

The single moon, Obscure, was a tiny black orb where the Astra Telepathica station relay and some Administratum archives had been installed. A few million men and women were born, lived, worked and died there.

The two hundred and forty-five billion remaining souls were on Nyx itself.

Yes, it was a Hive World, and yes, it was more populated than Wuhan was before the Inquisitorial unpleasantness.

“Well,” she whispered with a slight smile. “I suppose the real fun begins now...”

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

Odysseus had when he set foot again on Nyx with one Lady Inquisitor, five Inquisitors and over forty Acolytes standing behind him. Several thousand guardsmen had landed before him to secure the Moira spaceport and there were more shock troops coming in the next two waves.

It was not a force mustered to receive a cheerful welcome from a grateful population. The arrival of any Inquisitor could and had in hundreds of instances been the death warrant of an Imperial planet. The fact there were more than three of them returning to the Sector Capital shortly after a well-deserved execution of its previous Governor was not done to thank the surviving nobility for its undying loyalty to the God-Emperor.

Yet if there was something the men and the women wearing the sigil of the Inquisition were not used to, it was being utterly ignored as they descended the metallic ramp.

From time to time, Inquisitors were ignored. In the near-totality of the cases this happened, however, it was because they made a priority to not advertise their identity and hid behind carefully selected secret identities.

But when so many of the Holy Ordo walked openly on a civilian spaceport, it was more or less unprecedented.

The people should be afraid...they were not. The reason for this absence of fear was two hundred metres in front of them, being cheered by a crowd of hundreds of thousands.

“Of course the Nyx Purebloods had to try to arrest her...” He grumbled.

“I think they are going to regret it a lot when they wake up, my Lord.”

The Lord Inquisitor didn’t answer. No word was necessary. The moment the commanding officer of the Nyx Purebloods leading the spaceport security force had tried to fulfil the orders he had received, thousands of twirling butterflies had danced in their ranks and the former Gubernatorial Guard had not bothered sealing their carapace armour or making the slightest preparation for battle.

Ten seconds later, the five thousand men of the ‘finest PDF regiments of Nyx’ were soundly sleeping and the Space Marines who had descended with Major-General Taylor Hebert were trying to impose some order as a massive crowd pressed on to see the Heroine of the Imperium.

It was not even a tenth of the population living between the Moira spaceport and Hive Menelaus, but by the Golden Throne it gave an impression of numbers beyond counting...and they had the voice to make themselves heard.

“WEAVER! WEAVER! WEAVER!” Thousands of throats were shouting.

“I think the previous Governor never had a third of this popularity,” Rafaela Harper snidely remarked.

“Menelaus never went to war. He never tried to rule except when he wanted someone interesting to him in exchange. He had the popularity he deserved, which was none.”

And as thousands of faces sang the name of the Major-General, Odysseus knew Nostradamus Vandire must have left the very same impression on the Hive World in the short time he was in charge. There would never have been so many delighted visages otherwise. The Lord Inquisitor saw white-haired PDF veterans, men months away from retirement, cry without restraint as they were touched by a single flying insect. They were children in dirty clothes jumping and trying to catch one of the insects next to scions of well-off merchants. There were young women and aged workers, thousands of the middle and the lower classes of the planetary society. Several hundred servants had brought music instruments, and since there was no orchestra master, all were playing their own music, adding to the massive din. And the ‘Weaver’ calls were not the only acclamations to be shouted. There were also many cries for the Saint to bless them, and to the Angels of Death to thank them for their protection and to tell their names to the God-Emperor.

The surviving troops of the Battle of the Death Star had to nearly fight their way across this ecstatic sea of human bodies, but after ten minutes, they managed to create a small cordon for the Vanquisher of the Angel’s Bane and her Dawnbreaker Guard to advance through.

The Tech-Priests and their assistants who had stayed in the halls of the *Opera Exitium* had accomplished much in the days of travel to Nyx, he was forced to acknowledge. As often as he had met important dignitaries, the procession now honouring Nyx with its presence was rarely seen by servants of the Imperium, and even more rarely under peaceful circumstances.

The members of the Dawnbreaker Guard were shining red beacons in the middle of the grey crowd. Each wore armours entirely devoid of damage, decorated by many purity seals and valour decorations. Their purple cloaks where the golden Aquila was triumphant were positively regal and the presence of not one, but three Sanguinary Guards, two in gold and one in white, was a shadow of the Great Angel Himself walking among mortals.

And they were just the escort for the one the growing crowd was watching enraptured. The new Power Armours were not ready for production yet, but evidently the Mechanicus must have rushed ahead and opened their archeotech vaults, for the new Duchess of Brockton had been given a priceless battle-armour which in all honesty could not proclaim her sainthood more obviously. The helmet had been forged in an angelic visage, while the jump pack was merged with the white feathers of angelic wings. And the colours, by the Throne, the colours. The power armour was seemingly burning in a fusion of gold and silver fire, and there were only two known alloys recognised to produce this effect in the thirty-fifth millennium: Auramite and Argentamite. As this armour was the perfect combination of the Sun and the Moon, of the gold and the silver, of the strength and speed, of the angelic and the saintly, it was no wonder that as they left the spaceport, tens of thousands of Nyx PDF soldiers were saluting before prostrating themselves or bending the knee.

“WEAVER! WEAVER! WEAVER! LADY WEAVER FOR NYX! LADY WEAVER FOR NYX!”

“Make sure all the Nyx Purebloods are arrested or neutralised before tonight,” Odysseus ordered to Rafaela. “I will leave to Lady Taylor Hebert the fate of Menelaus’ dogs, but the fewer fights we have today, the better for the first days of governance. Deploy our battalions and the Leuthen troops around the main barracks across the Moira Hive-Continent. Use the PDF Reserves if you need assistance. If the Administratum leaders treated them like vermin, they will jump on the chance to participate in the fall of the Purebloods.”

“AVE IMPERATOR! NYX AND WEAVER! AVE IMPERATOR!”

“Do you intend to unleash your Assassin on Vandire, my Lord?” asked one of the Acolytes belonging to another Inquisitor. This one he was sufficiently amused by to ignore the mild insubordination. Besides, it was a good question.

“No, this time the Inquisition is not going to lead the charge. Vandire wanted to become Governor of Nyx, I think we can watch the face of this grox when he realises he just jumped into the arena with the swarm and the angels.” The Lord Inquisitor bared his teeth in a parody of smile. “I already have solicited the Navy to arrest all his declared supporters on Quartus and Secundus. In a few hours, all the spaceports will be under our control. The former Prelate-Procurator won’t be able to escape. And when the new Lady Nyx will release him into my custody, I will make him rue the day he chose to kill the agents I left here. Oh yes, soon he will realise the folly of not heeding my command to take his pleasure boat and return to Holy Terra in disgrace...”

“SAINT WEAVER! DEATH TO THE XENOS! IMPERIUM EVER VICTORIOUS! WEAVER!”

Between the vid-casts, the servo-skulls and of course the crowded avenues, there had to be millions watching this historic moment and singing her name.

The reign of Nostradamus Vandire was going to end before it had ever begun.

**Nostradamus Vandire**

“I think this little enterprise is falling apart, my Lord. The prospects of a one-sided victory being what they are, my suggestion would be to reach an accord with this new challenger. We may not win in the end, but at least it will allow us to limit the financial losses of this affair...”

Nostradamus finished his bowl of crimson shrimps before turning to look at Prince-Magister Samuel XIX Ionian. The man was weak, he had always known it, and it was anything but a surprise the feeble aristocrat was now searching for an exit when the real challenges started.

But then what could you expect of this courtier? Ionian was still convinced a dark blue wig was the height of fashion, whereas for the people who mattered, it was a reject of the thirty-third millennium. The golden robes the Prince-Magister wore today could have saved his appearance...if he had not tried to put some fluorescent red icons on it. Samuel XIX Ionian was ridiculous, but Nostradamus was sure the aristocrat’s cousins and his circle of advisors were not whispering that in his ears.

But before he had the time to rebuke the Prince-Magister for his cowardice, the other Prince-Magister seated in the Grand Lodge of the Gladiatorial Arena spoke.

“I completely agree, Prince Ionian,” Ephesus V Corinth declared. “As we see from these vid-casts,” his hand made a vague gesture towards the direction of the hundreds of servo-skulls and hololithic displays showing them the scenes of...agitation outside and inside the very Hive they were on. “The peons and the PDF are rallying by the millions the cause of this new ‘Saint’. The Navy is not supporting us, and Euboea and Attica have decided to vote for her in a desperate attempt to ingratiate their Houses with a new Mistress. The Inquisition is here too. There is no support to be gained from the Arbites, given the number of court judgements we removed from their jurisdiction last year. Over four-fifths of the Ecclesiarchy priesthood is in the streets with the rioters.

We have lost, Lord Vandire. The only thing we can do now is force this new opponent to consider our powerbase and gain some concessions.”

“I knew Ionian had no spine,” Vandire snarled, “but you, Corinth...I thought your service in the Navy had at least given to you the fire the God-Emperor expects from his officers.”

The aristocrat of House Corinth, even today, was wearing a modified Admiral uniform of the Imperial Navy. Of course, everybody knew Ephesus V Corinth had returned to take the title of Prince-Magister as a lowly Lieutenant when his father was killed. The ‘promotion’ his clothes had experienced in the months and years after had been commented upon extensively in certain circles.

“The Navy does encourage honour and defiance against the odds when it comes to pirates, xenos monstrosities and heretical threats, Lord Vandire,” Ephesus V babbled as his face became redder. “A last-stand here will serve no purpose.”

“It’s not a last stand!” Nostradamus tried to calm himself as he realised he had shouted the last sentence. “It is not a last stand.” He repeated more calmly. “I have plenty of assets waiting to be played. The *Great Labour* of Tithe-Master Varus Hyson is here. I sent him his marching orders, he is going to veto all the candidatures save mine, beginning with the one of this so-called ‘Saint’.”

“Assuming Hyson is still alive,” Samuel XIX Ionian retorted in a quavering voice, “I don’t think he will be so eager to embrace this course of action.”

“Unlike you, the Tithe-Master knows his duties,” duties to him and the God-Emperor, it went without saying. Between his debts and all the favours his subordinate owed him, there was no possibility of Hyson betraying him. None.

“I have your votes, the resources, the signatures and the support of the Moira Pontifex.”

“A Pontifex who is certainly not going to keep his priesthood privileges once Cardinal Prescott Lumen is done with him...”

Nostradamus glared at the defeatist noble, who had the temerity to look away instead of looking him in the eyes.

“Pontifex Spiro is a saintly man, unlike these traitors and heretic scum following a False-Saint!”

“I’m sure he is,” Ephesus V snorted a heartbeat after speaking those words, proving he thought nothing of the sort, the ingrate. “And I’m sure his devotion had nothing to do with the relic-coffers full of sapphires Menelaus regularly ‘gifted’ to his cathedral.”

“And in the end,” Samuel XIX Ionian idly affirmed, “the support of a Cardinal trumps the one of a Pontifex every time. That you have our two votes against the two of Euboea and Attica isn’t the problem. The problem is the popular support this Major-General is enjoying, there are millions in the streets believing she is an angel coming to save them...”

“Our military forces will deal with these traitors.”

“How?” The Prince-Magister of House Corinth questioned incredulously. “The Nyx Purebloods may be the elite of the Nyx PDF, but there were only seventy-six regiments of them yesterday, and at least half of them are already arrested or dead. Our personal Magister Guards are even smaller than this...and the primary reserves of the Moira PDF are on the opposite side now. That is over two thousand three hundred regiments standing against us.”

“They won’t dare using them against us.” Nostradamus announced. “They won’t! If there is the slightest hint of intimidation in the electoral process, the outcome will be invalidated. I have powerful supporters in Ultima and Solar which will make sure the new Governor will be ejected from the throne she usurped in record time.”

He was a Vandire of Terra. His word was enough to gather millions of soldiers and purge entire Sectors who had failed to pay the proper tithes they owed to the Golden Throne.

“You are delusional.” Ephesus V Corinth rose from his seat. “You are no longer a Prelate-Procurator, since you resigned your titles to participate in this election, and I don’t think the Administratum as a whole will be impressed by your willingness to abandon your duties for a secular planetary governorship.”

“You underestimate my influence and the forces I can unleash if you give me cause. There are assassins in my Clan’s employ no human can protect you from.”

“I am not impressed by your threat,” the Prince-Magister in his brilliant Navy-blue uniform spoke as he pushed his throne against the buffet table. “I will take my chances with the new Governor.”

“If you dare take a step out of this lodge without my permission,” Nostradamus threatened, “I will make sure all your debts and economic troubles are revealed and your creditors will ruin you before this year is over. You will lose your Hive, your properties, your fortune and your reputation. You will be forced to live with the plebeians and experience poverty!”

“You speak like it wasn’t going to happen anyways once you lose this contest,” the roll of the shoulders and the curt dismissal momentarily forced Nostradamus to pause. The Prince-Magister didn’t care...well, let’s see if cared about another secret. As the first words were out of his august mouth, though, Nostradamus acknowledged there was no possible return after revealing this.

“I know that your daughter loves to disguise herself as a masked duellist and partake in some illegal activities where the Dolos PDF refuses to investigate. I’m sure the Arbites would love to ask her a few questions...” The livid shade the former officer of the Imperial Navy told him the information which arrived in his possession had been more valuable than adamantium. “If you cooperate, your secret will stay safe. Your daughter will not pay the price. This I promise on the name of Clan Vandire.”

The promise would be enforced...by the new Princess once he eliminated her father. Having such a priceless asset to make one of the Great Ten follow his decrees was made to be used.

But the eyes of Ephesus V went not to him, the servants or the guards protecting the Great Lodge, but the gloating face of his fellow Prince-Magister. Samuel XIX Ionian had heard everything...and the hate between the two was so deep there was no question the information was going to leak out.

“No.” The Prince-Magister growled. “My daughter will have to pay the price for her actions. I will not play your games anymore, Vandire.”

The blue-clad great noble left the lodge, surrounded by his Silver Shields as the Menelaus Arena was letting enter tens of thousands people, not all of them whom had bought tickets for the event. In the background, the Purebloods officers barked orders and tried to prevent the crowd from entering the spectators’ stands, but there were a few thousand of the black-carapace armours and millions of rebels and rioters.

“My gladiators will butcher this so-called ‘Saint’ the moment she enters the arena,” Nostradamus boasted but deep inside, he wasn’t so certain anymore. There were so many plebeians...and they were not shouting his name.

“WEAVER! WEAVER! WEAVER!”

“I think the time has come to make...how did Ephesus put it? Ah yes, it’s time to make a tactical withdrawal, Lord Vandire...”

“Don’t you dare!” He turned to stare at the wig and the powdery attire of the Ionian Prince-Magister. “I promise you Corinth will pay for his defiance, and if you leave this lodge, I will make sure his final fate will look pleasant compared to yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean your activities with underage boys,” Samuel XIX Ionian shivered and his face froze in fear. “Yes, I know what you do in your ‘fortress of spiritual renewal’. Betray me, and it will be all over the vid-casts in a few hours.”

The shoulders of the Nyx aristocrat fell in defeat, and Nostradamus smiled. Good, at least one knew when he was beaten. He would have to eliminate him nonetheless; you couldn’t count on such a corrupt and feeble noble after revealing you were aware of one of his darkest secrets.

Returning his attention to the arena below his lodge, the location looked to be filled to the brim...and wait, where were the Purebloods he had posted at the critical chokepoints across the whole structure with heavy weapons?

“I saw the fury of the orks. I saw the evil of the Ruinous Powers. I saw the malice of a metal entity. I saw a city drowning as heroes died in vain to slow down the destruction wrought by an Endbringer.”

The voice came from behind him, but Nostradamus hadn’t the time to see who had spoken as his throne was thrown aside and he fell to the ground hard. When he rose once again, his lodge had ten Space Marines landing and all his guards were unconscious.

“This is an outrage...” a smaller figure, all in gold and silver, revealed itself where seconds before it had been hidden by the massive armours of the traitors Astartes.

“You should look at the definition of an outrage, Nostradamus Vandire,” this had to be the False-Saint...they had given to her an expensive armour in support of her claim, but if she hoped he was going to let himself intimidated, she was solely mistaken. “Your behaviour may be taken as an example to illustrate it...”

“You do not respect the laws of Nyx!”

Several Space Marines chuckled at that. They had the gall to chuckle!

“Oh, yes. And you respect the laws of the Administratum in a perfect manner, don’t you?”

“Absolutely!” He tried to stand right and project a righteous expression, as the Space Marines made an honour column and he was forced to descend the stairs leading to the common spectators’ stands while their voices echoed in the arena’s sudden silence.

“In this case,” the female traitor answered, “you will surely have an explanation how by the strangest turn of fate you were able to provide the one hundred billion Throne Gelts for your candidature? The Tech-Priests checked, and one hundred years of your current income would not be sufficient to pay for it, whether you had other expenses to afford or not.”

“I am a Vandire of Holy Terra!”

“You are a greedy and arrogant imbecile siphoning the planetary tithes you were supposed to collect instead of sending them to colonisation, trade or development purposes,” the woman corrected before one black-armoured Space Marine parried a laser shot like it was nothing. Certainly fired by one of the Purebloods’ snipers...

But the False-Saint was uninjured, and the next second, more Space Marines arrived, half of them throwing decapitated heads on the sandy ground of the arena.

“You have no right to interfere...”

“Neither do you. But obviously, it didn’t stop you.”

“We have the same number of votes! I demand you face my gladiators!”

“Ah yes...your gladiators,” the angel-shaped helmet inclined slightly on the left. “I’m afraid they are receiving at the moment we’re speaking the visit from my new Champion in their training grounds.”

“A Champion? This is not...” but the insolent woman interrupted him again.

“He is one of my Dawnbreaker Honour Guard now, but a few days ago he was known as Champion Kratos of the 1st Company of the Flesh Tearers Chapter.”

Vandire felt dread hearing the name of the Space Marine Chapter. He had never heard of any ‘Kratos’, but he was well-aware of the infamous reputation of the Flesh Tearers.

“You are guilty of ordering a massacre...”

“Maybe,” the false-saint shrugged, “to be honest, I think this is karmic justice. The former Governor loved to unleash his professional killers against unarmed and untrained civilians in this very arena. Unlike him, I will give these men the choice to surrender and I won’t make a spectacle of their deaths. But I won’t shed a tear if they think they have a chance against a veteran Astartes at close-quarters.”

“This...you think because you’re the heroine of a battle and have Astartes by your side, you have what it takes to be the new ruler?”

“Let’s find out...” several hand moves were given and seconds later the voice of the treacherous woman echoed in the entire arena.

“People of Nyx, your attention please.” The low rumble of the arena ceased instantly. “I am honoured by the support you have given me today, and I assure you it will not be forgotten. For your loyal service, this day will be paid the wages you normally are given for seven days of hard labour.”

The thunder of acclamation which followed was so loud Nostradamus felt his ears were bleeding. Tens of thousands hands were saluting, making the sign of the Aquila or applauding like they were crazy...

Nostradamus wanted to tell them to stop but by the time the sound went back to acceptable levels, the damned false-saint made an even more outrageous announcement.

“One of my first measures will be to decrease the duration of your working weeks. The eighty-four hours working week is in my opinion counter-productive and I intend to decrease it to a more tolerable eighty hours.”

The acclamations were ten times more powerful this time. It was like a volcano of joy and celebrations was exploding everywhere in the arena. He felt disgust. These plebeian traitors cheered at the first non-entity, and they rebelled against their betters at the first change of dynasty. Their punishment was going to be terrible, his Clan was going to decimate them and teach them the true meaning of obedience and loyalty.

“Let me guess,” Nostradamus hissed as the sound-amplifying broadcasts were switched off. “You are going to order a farce of a trial and then send me a Prison World for my so-called crimes?”

“You really are an unrepentant slimy piece of excrement,” the judgement left him with his mouth wide-open, “so I am going to leave you a choice.”

Golden flames began to dance on the armoured gauntlets.

“You name the names of your conspirators in the Administratum and reveal where you have stashed the tithes and your uncountable secret accounts...”

“Don’t count on it!”

But his refusal didn’t appear to bother the false-saint at all.

“It would have saved us a lot of time, but so be it. The other choice, your only choice since you refused the swift execution you don’t deserve, is to be delivered to the hands of the Inquisition. Since you are unrepentant and uncooperative, they have strict orders that you survive the days of interrogation awaiting you...and then you will be the first volunteer of the 1st Nyx Pureblood Penal Legion. I wonder if the officers you bribed to arrive here today will kill you before the orks feast on your corpse...”

“I changed my mind! I changed my mind!”

“Too late,” Lord Inquisitor Tor emerged from a previously invisible door, flanked by two other black-cloaked figures, and his visage was terrifying to behold.

“By the will of Lady Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, Lady Nyx, Basileia of Nyx, Duchess of Brockton, Commander of the Dawnbreaker Guard, Major-General of the Imperial Guard, your crimes against the Imperium deserve exemplary punishment. Take him away.”

“I changed my mind!” Nostradamus Vandire screamed as two brutes manacled him before they placed a shock-collar around his throat and began to drag him away. “It’s not too late! I am Nostradamus Vandire! Give me another chance! Please! I do not deserve this!”

**Author’s note**:

A little advice for all these ambitious bureaucrats who think it’s feasible to take the Governorship when it has already been promised to a Heroine of the Imperium. Don’t. It will never ends well for you.

This chapter is now properly beta-ed.

Thanks for all the reviews, the likes and the support!

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption