**Decision 5.5**

**Queen of the Swarm**

*Like a lot of things I inherited from the Menelaus rule, the system of clearances in the Nyx Sector was a disaster by 289M35. The last generations of Nyx nobility had not been shy in creating more and more clearance levels, often for the simple reason they could or to block an upstart Governor from reading the dirty big secrets the Lord of Nyx wanted to keep private.*

*It would have been bad if the Menelaus dynasty was incorruptible and counted in its ranks paragons of virtue and loyalty, but it wasn’t the case. A lot of the Governor’s sons or cousins sold the state’s secrets to the highest bidder and clearance authorisations were sometimes sold on the black market for a few tens of thousands Throne Gelts.*

*In this case, reform of the existing system of clearance rules proved impossible. Abuse and law-breaking were out of control for far too long. By the best estimations of Dragon and Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius, the Menelaus system had accumulated four hundred and six levels of clearance, not counting the priority ones of Segmentum Command, the Tithe Fleets and the Imperial Guard.*

*It was necessary to remove this fiasco and build everything from scratch, something which caused no end of headaches as we continued to find misplaced libraries of data-stacks and forgotten archive-vaults.*

*But I think that with the beginning of this year 294 in the 35th millennium, we have put the worst of the problems behind us on this front. At the price of four new Penal Legions and close to five hundred executions, the clearance system is a bit more logical and visible. Below is the new ladder of clearance, going from least important to Lord Inquisitor-levels. My personal clearance for now is Sapphire-ultima.*

*Yellow*

*Orange*

*Omega*

*Violet*

*Indigo Tertius*

*Indigo Secundus*

*Indigo Primus*

*Black*

*Crimson*

*Sapphire-black*

*Sapphire-ultima*

*Magenta-black*

*Vermillion*

*Vermillion-gold*

*I rarely have to sign anything on every day’s basis of black clearance and above, though they are always exceptions. These are largely unpleasant, like the Catachan yellow ant.*

Extract from Archive A-3160-T-200, 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.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**7.047.290M35**

Thought for the day: The cosmos cries out for salvation.

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The Vulkan’s Arsenal shipyard was really different every time she visited. And she visited it a lot. For best or for worse, it was the largest man-made orbital structure in the Nyx System these days, though when the Ramilies-class Starfort of Triplex Phall arrived, there may be a change in this size hierarchy.

But yes, the shipyard looked very different from the station she had first watched from the bridge of the *Opera Exitium* months ago. The number of Tech-Priests was the first major difference, but far from the last. The proper security procedures were followed, be they for machine parts, good transports, or travellers arrivals. It did not smell like death and fuel anymore, as hygiene recommendations were properly enforced. The civilian parts of the dockyards had now a general plan written in High and Low Gothic, plus binaric for the Tech-Priests. The system number for the gates was now logical and not random. There was even talk to open some middle-classes shops in the restored sectors of the station.

All in all, the Vulkan’s Arsenal looked far more like a space airport and a place people didn’t fear to travel to. The number of accidents and worker’s deaths had decreased by seventy percent, and it continued to drop. The hiring rates had never been higher, and many people who had been long-time employees of the shipyard were declaring their willingness to don the red robes of the Mechanicus. Anyway, the efforts to make the lines of production simpler and more logical were bringing great benefits. Records of production were routinely surpassed, despite the 72 hours being now in full effect everywhere in the Nyx System. Since at the same time attendance in the churches of the Ecclesiarchy and the forge-altars of the Mechanicus had never been higher, there was a lot to be satisfied and not much to complain about.

“We are two days ahead of the planned schedule, and Omnissiah willing, the production will continue to increase in the same manner for the rest of the year,” the Magos in charge of this shipyard’s sector informed her.

“Impressive,” she complimented him...she thought the cogboy was a ‘him’, anyway. With all these mechadendrites, it was difficult to be sure. “Transmit my congratulations to your subordinates. I am satisfied with their progresses and their work.”

“Thank you, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” the Magos bowed, and her escort and she continued their walk across one of the hallways leading to a Thunderhawk Transport. Because as much as this surprise inspection was interesting, it was not the reason she had come here today.

“I suppose the orbital industry is still far, far from what a Forge World like Ryza takes for granted,” the Basileia told her Mistress of Ships Arithmancia Sultan. The Archmagos emitted a buzzing sound which was her equivalent of a laugh.

“Most assuredly, Lady Weaver,” replied the member of the Mechanicus Council. “But Ryza was not built in a day, and we had advantages you currently lack for this system. We had several massive investments from Terra and Mars during the Great Crusade and thousands of years to build our blessed machine-complexes to their current size.”

Yes, it was a recurring issue for a lot of things the Sector did. Obviously, Nyx was very much a third-rate or a fourth-rate Sector depending on how one looked at it, with thousands of Sectors older and more prestigious standing between it and galactic recognition. Changing this was not only going to require deep reforms and change of mentalities. It was also going to take time, and time in this instance meant centuries and a lot of production and industrial achievements.

“Your efforts are sound for the moment, so I see no reason to upset the current schedule. Are the automation upgrades proceeding to your convenience?”

“They are. We should reach the 15 percent-mark demanded by Phase B on 400.293M35.”

She talked about a few more industrial points, but for now the Ryza Archmagos had things well in hand and the construction programs were a few days ahead of schedule and the security procedures were getting more and more efficient as primitive scrap-codes were purged and the incompetent and the traitors were getting meetings with the recruitment office of the Penal Legions or the executioner, depending on the magnitude of their crimes. And it was good, because while she understood how and why these removals were necessary, it was exhausting and mentally sickening. By all accounts, she, Taylor Hebert of Earth Bet, had sent a few millions of men and women to certain deaths, and she was not enjoying the reality she had the blood of these people on their hands, even if most of these criminals deserved their exile and punishments.

“Excellent. I will await your report on the installation of the torpedo auto-loaders before the month’s end.”

They left most of the Mechanicus delegation behind as they went into the Thunderhawk’s hull, and two minutes later they were on their way to the Mechanicus Cruiser *Star Machine*.

It was an interesting sight, but by no means an eye-pleasing one. The *Star Machine* was a Laboratory-class Light Cruiser of the Mechanicus, and did exactly what the name of its class was supposed to do: serve as a mobile laboratory for Explorator teams when they discovered new planets and life forms. With the philosophy of the Mechanicus in them, the Magi owning this M34-built ship had added thousands of cogs and machine symbols to the bulky hull. It could not be considered beautiful, but at least it left no doubt to its allegiances. And whatever skull pictures and cogs symbols the Tech-Priests enjoyed worshipping, the security and quarantine measures aboard this starship were designed to hold anything save demons and extra-dimensional entities.

They were rapidly welcomed by a company worth of Skitarii and the PDF detachment which had been sent to inspect the Star Machine yesterday, saluted Magos Tyranos 0011000-Nu-Ryza-Techno – and yes, this was apparently his real name – and were escorted to the control station.

Like the strategium which had been built at Hive Athena, there was an impressive array of technology installed. Photon lines were feeding information to thousands of screens, data-manifolds were manipulated by the dozens by entire cohorts of binary-canting tech-Priests, tri-dimensional hololiths were showing several of the container-compartments of the *Star Machine*, and messenger cherubs and servo-skulls flew over chronometric displays and energy fields.

“We can begin when you are ready, Chosen of the Omnissiah. The Queen-ant has been transported to Area Primus-A. Distance between our location and Area Primus-A is approximately three hundred point nine metres. We await only your command to deactivate the stasis field.”

“Broadcast the image of the Area on this screen first, please.”

“As you wish...”

A combination was uttered in binaric, and on the cinema-sized hololith the image of the Catachan yellow ant the Mechanicus had managed to capture flashed into existence. It was, to put it simply a monster. And no, it was not because it was the size of a horse. Now that she had hundreds of Biologis experts in her service, Taylor knew that with some time and a lot of specific hormones, the Magi and Archmagi could theoretically increase the size of a small beetle to something bigger than a tank.

No, the reason why this Catachan ant was a monster was because everything from top to bottom and from front to rear was conceived to do one thing: kill. And from the Catachan local population and the Mechanicus had successfully learned, this...this hive-queen for the lack of any better term, was definitely not the front-line warrior. Yet it was armoured heavier than a centipede of the same size, and every part of its body seemed to present spikes, blades, claws, or was coated in some sort of poison.

How in hell had humanity managed to survive on Catachan with thinks like this trying to kill them every day?

“You can deactivate the stasis containment field. Prepare to re-activate it as soon as I or Gamaliel gives the command.”

“Acknowledged. For the Omnissiah...” The cants of the machine-adepts rose in a crescendo of pistons and inhuman voices, and one by one blue fields and several protections vanished.

Taylor had expected for her powers to take control of the gigantic ant as soon as technology didn’t protect it anymore. For a second she almost felt it. And then for the first time in months, since the first time she had her Trigger, the parahuman felt something she had never felt before.

Resistance.

The Catachan ant was trying to resist her control.

Someone was shouting in the background, but she wasn’t listening anymore. All her will in these instants was directed towards controlling the ant, but the Death World species, impossibly, was fighting back. It was like she was a torrent of white-gold energy, and she was fighting something dark, something hungry.

And as the resistance increased, Taylor knew she wasn’t facing one ant, be it a Queen. She was fighting tens of thousands of them. She couldn’t say how she knew it, but there was no doubt in her mind. The Mechanicus expedition had managed to capture the leader of the ant colony and escape for a few minutes, but the ants knew their Queen was still alive, and each time the monster was brought out of stasis, they sustained it mentally and were informed where she was in the galaxy.

And the more she intensified the pressure, the more she fought, the more millions of ants noticed it on Catachan and joined forces to repulse her. That it was completely impossible for a species to have this sort of power didn’t prevent them from doing exactly that.

But her opponent was obviously not used to fight someone like her. The connections made the queen-ant stronger, but they were severable, and she could touch, feel, and cut them. The ant was legion, but controlling swarms and exploiting their capacities was what she had grown used to do.

Still, it was weird. Why would the Catachan ants have this sort of abilities if they never used it in their day-to-day’s life?

The insect-mistress had cut about half the threads when she felt something new join the battle. Unlike the ants, which were almost desperate to protect their Queen, the newcomer was different. It was...like a storm of darkness.

No, it wasn’t right. It was like a maw of darkness. Despite being far on the material plane from whatever it was, she could feel its malevolence, and its terrible intelligence.

It was not like the Angel’s Bane. It had not the smell and the feeling of unnaturalness brought by the Warp.

It was hungry. And as it began to turn its strength towards her, she struck it, a legion of mental beetles, spiders and centipedes, an infinite swarm that no one could stop.

The creature stopped its attack and tried to send tendrils of darkness. She disintegrated them, and for the first time, she felt something different emerge from her. Her attacks against this opponent were beginning to burn gold.

The dark maw abandoned the Catachan ant. For a brief moment, she felt its fear, its hunger at her powers...and then it tried to escape. But before it did, she had a second to see what it looked in reality.

It was a horror. If the Catachan ant was something purposely built to kill and murder its way on a Death World, then this thing was gene-engineered to massacre every form of opposition. It was the size of the long-extinct Tyrannosaur, but the dinosaurs, could not, should not have evolved to this state. Everything was pincers, claws, poisons, barbed tails and fangs. It was violet on its back, and white on the belly, but the colours were unimportant. The hunger, the malice, the sheer hunger to devour everything...it was prisoner in the entrails of Catachan, and it was giving regularly a single order to the fauna and the flora of Catachan.

**KILL**

She sent one word in answer, along with more power and determination she had ever felt.

**PROTECT**

And the ants stopped, their connections severed. The ant’s resistance stopped, and she at last was in its mind...only to feel emotions and *sentience*.

The shock was such she stopped her invasion. Coughing and breathing heavily, she was once again aware of her surroundings.

“PUT IT INTO STASIS NOW!” This was Gamaliel’s voice...why was he roaring...

“How...long...”

She blinked, and then she realised two Space Marines were holding her and preventing her from falling.

The ant disappeared from her power’s notice. And suddenly she felt exhausted, like she had participated in the Astartes Decathlon before staying awake for two nights and days.

But after a few seconds, she was able to stop trembling, and less than a minute later she had recovered...let’s say two-thirds of her strength.

“The event lasted thirty-four seconds point five one,” the Magos intervened.

Thirty-four seconds? It had lasted...not an eternity, but far longer than a minute in this...everything was fuzzy, where exactly had they fought for control?

“It lasted much longer,” she admitted. “The Catachan ant was fighting my efforts to control it...and I think it was receiving help from all the other ants back on Catachan...”

“That’s...” one the Tech-Priests was about to say ‘impossible’, before reminding himself to who he was talking to. “That’s extraordinary! We had no idea the Catachan ants could manifest hive-mental capacities like this!”

“That’s because the Catachan ant is probably a descendant of a very, very dangerous xenos life-form hidden in the planetary crush of Catachan,” she gritted between her teeth, before taking an energetic drink from Gamaliel and emptying it in one gulp. “Jonas, you are the best at drawing in the Guard, right?”

The Angel of Defiance inclined his head.

“Yes, my Lady. You have need of my talents?”

Taylor grimaced.

“I had just a glimpse of the creature, but it’s better than nothing.”

The son of Sanguinius had not brought to the Star Machine his artistic tools, but in less than two minutes, several Tech-Priests had manufactured enough tools to provide adequate substitutes.

In a low voice, she began to describe to her Dawnbreaker protector what she had seen. The barbed tail, and the purple-white colouration came first, but there was the maw, the claws, the spikes, and the sheer hunger...the young woman could not help but shiver. And here she thought the demons were the worst this galaxy had to offer.

It took over half an hour to complete it, during which Gamaliel and Gavreel informed her of what had transpired during these thirty-four seconds. There was not much to say. She had apparently not moved or spoken to them, but when she had began to burn in gold flames, and the ant had convulsed and shrieked in agony, they had immediately activated the security measures and activated back the stasis field.

One look at a mirror-like screen confirmed that yes, more of her hair had turned golden. Before today it had been a small strand, but now the ‘golden mark’ had tripled in size in her hairs. Damn it, she had a feeling there were going even more prayers and worship in the near future.

“Are you sure there is no mistake, my Lady?” Quintus of the Angels Sanguine demanded with something like unease in his voice as he watched Jonas drawing what she described to him. “Even the most dangerous Death World creatures are not...”

“I don’t think it is a Death World species. I think...I think it is the reason why Catachan is a Death World. Before I forced it on the defensive, it was constantly emitting a single order to the ants.”

She watched the screen where the Catachan ant was now captive once more. And these golden scars on the black carapace had not been here before...

“A single order?” She didn’t know who had asked the question, but it didn’t matter.

“Kill.” The Basileia revealed to them.

“We will classify this species in our *Xenos Horribilis* files,” Magos Tyranos 0011000-Nu-Ryza-Techno said with the fatalist voice of someone used to do this twice per year.

“Yes, please do so.” And for the first time since had been crowned and taken the responsibilities of Lady Nyx, she had the urge to call the Inquisition and order them to prepare Exterminatus weapons for Catachan.

Jonas had last stopped drawing and many Astartes and Tech-Priests advanced to look at the result.

“Omnissiah saves us...”

“Blood of the Primarch...”

It was about as awful as in the short vision she had of it. Something that should not exist, filled with a malice and an hunger that could not be extinguished, and the physical attributes to kill everything in its way, be it a tank or a Space Marine.

“I think Hive Tyrant is an appropriate name for this creature,” her suggestion caused varied reception in the sea of mechadendrites, but there was no refusal.

“In this case,” Magos Tyranos 0011000-Nu-Ryza-Techno voiced while analysing the behaviour of the Catachan ant while she was free from her restraints, “I humbly propose the name of ‘Tyranids’ for this perversion of the animal gene-codes.”

For a reason which escaped her, the name felt instantly right, like the xenos had been waiting to be called like this. And yes, she was very well aware the Magos wanted to name the new species after himself. The Mechanicus Magi were strange like that.

“Any objections?” No one stood to say no. “Then it is official. This thing will be called officially ‘Hive Tyrant of the Tyranids species’.”

And she was going to pray very hard once she was back at Nyx to never meet one of these things in person. Granted, with her odds-chattering luck, it was probably going to be in vain, but it shouldn’t hurt. Probably. Maybe.

“Gavreel, prepare a memo for the Inquisition. I doubt they will authorise us to glass Catachan and ruin the best Jungle Fighters Regiments of the Imperial Guard, but I suppose it’s best to inform them of the little problem I have discovered. Add a copy of Jonas’ drawing, if only to convince them how serious the problem is.”

“Right away, my Lady,” the black-armoured Astartes replied.

“Gamaliel, please contact Lankovar. I don’t think any Exploration fleet would have failed to report this super-predator if they had met one and survived, but I might be wrong. It’s important every Forge representatives collaborate on this. I want to know if we ‘re dealing with the last specimens of an extinct gene-breed horror or if there is a planet worth of them somewhere waiting to swallow the unprepared visitors.”

She ate a food bar Midas had kept in reserve.

“We go back to Hive Athena. Tell Dyson to prepare the Thunderhawk. I need some rest.” In other words, she needed something amusing and cheerful to change her thoughts. If she had been weaker than this monstrosity...if she had been less experienced...the thought gave her more fear than when she had faced Ka’Bandha.

“Chosen of the Omnissiah, what do we do about the Catachan ant?”

It was a good question...and she had no good answers.

“For the moment, keep it in stasis. I don’t know if my control is total over it...it was sentient, and largely able to resist for a few seconds my power. I need more preparation for a second try. I suggest you keep analysing the vid-casts and the sensors of the few seconds it was out of stasis, and make sure it doesn’t try to escape.”

Because for this insect ‘disaster’ would not be enough to describe accurately the magnitude of the failure. Sentient and armed to the mandibles, the Catachan ant would decimate the population of Nyx in a standard year.

And it was not half as dangerous as the thing it had taken its hive tendencies from.

This was a very big problem.

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

Contrary to what the average citizen thought, one Inquisitor meeting another was not the prelude to the End of Times, and it did not result in thousands of planets burned and reduced to ashes.

But it was always difficult to convince the public of this. Many Inquisitors in the course of their careers faced things that no mind could endure for long before becoming raving mad. Some, like those who had been established in the Nyx Sector, were perfectly content to close their eyes on minor heresies if it allowed them to increase their personal power and influence among the Imperium social structure. And unfortunately sometimes, Inquisitorial meetings indeed resulted in the announcement a planet had to be thoroughly purged. Not because the men and the women wearing the Inquisitorial rosette had become crazy. Sometimes they were genuine threats requiring a Cyclonic Torpedo to be exploded in the atmosphere of a formerly loyal world.

 It was why Inquisition bases were well-guarded and their location was a secret reserved to a few chosen agents and the Inquisitors themselves. Even the servo-skulls and the servitors had whatever cogitators and brains they used regularly mind-wiped.

The thousands of devices and the extreme measures were not sufficient to convince an Inquisitor to lower his guard, of course. Be it in their headquarters or outside, there was always someone to want you dead, and in an Inquisitorial fortress, this enemy was most likely one of your fellows Inquisitors. Few souls in the Holy Ordos were ever accused of paranoia. Those who voiced the accusation in general paid for it before the year was over. It was not paranoia if thousands of traitors, heretics, aliens, mutants, and other abominations were out to kill you.

As the new Conclave of Nyx was in full session today, with no less than fourteen Inquisitors seated around the same table, Odysseus Tor was sure they were men and women who would be astonished to know there had been no violence and no tragic deaths to report. So far.

There were many dignitaries, of course, who would ask why such a large number of Inquisitors was necessary for their beloved Sector – and not just because they tried to hide their illegal activities, perish the thought.

The answer was simple: there were too many duties and responsibilities for a single Inquisitor to successfully complete.

Odysseus knew it better than anyone, for as the Chairman of the Conclave and the senior member of the Ordo Malleus present in the Sector, the purification of the Neptunia System and the interrogations and captures of cultists at Nyx were taking every hour he had. This was despite him having under his authority four junior Inquisitors, an elite Guard regiment, a Venenum assassin, six dozen assistants and hundreds of agents operating from Theta to Patton. And he had the authority to requisition anything he wanted from the local forces, though he had for the moment demanded the bare minimum. The new Lady Nyx was very popular, and those who annoyed her tended to have a lot of taxes and logistical complications coming their way.

To his immediate right was Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper, of the Ordo Xenos. He had worked many times with her in the past, and she was probably the person he trusted the most around this table. Alas, the multiple fronts of the war against the orks were still demanding a lot of oversight, and she had also to monitor the Brockton System just in case the greenskins used it again as a mustering point. It was not a surprise she was showing a lot of grey hairs which had not been there a year ago. Like him, she wore a plain black robe over her dark carapace armour for the occasion, and her rosette was placed above her heart.

Continuing in this rotation, there was his third ally of circumstances: Inquisitor Zoe Zircon of the Ordo Machinum. Her role was unenviable, for she had to oversee the activities of the Mechanicus and shoot the ones ignoring the limits – which with the cogboys arrived four or five times per month. Five years ago, it may have been a simple task, but now there as many Mechanicus starships at Brockton and Nyx as around a full-fledged Forge World. Still, she could be trusted to investigate diligently and punish heresy wherever she found it.

On Zircon’s right, the next Inquisitor was an unknown quantity. Unlike the other thirteen Inquisitors, Boniface Capua had been a member of the previous Ordo Nyx. Unlike the rest of his peers however, he appeared to have discharged his duties seriously. The problem was that his duties were those of the Ordo Militarum, the oversight of the Imperial Guard and its hierarchy, and they had required his presence at Petersburg and Harbin for the better part of the last three years, thus he had been unable to control his colleagues. Today he was clothed in what was one of his favourite disguises: the uniform of a Lord Commissar. The only thing which was out of the ordinary was the big cigar between his teeth.

Whatever Boniface Capua thought of the new Sector Lady being a General of the Guard in half-pay, he had for the last months not said a single word on the subject.

The fourth Inquisitor was Ulrika Plauen. She could not have been more built in contrast to Capua. Where the member of the Ordo Militarum was tall, stern, and tight-lipped, Ulrika Plauen was loud, vivacious, and loved to wear robes in general most commonly found on the bodies of famous opera singers – her robe for today was a bright blue which attracted very much attention.

Of course, she was also representing the Ordo Astartes at the Conclave. Which meant that if one of the Space Marine Chapters decided to renege on their vows to the Emperor, it would be Ulrika and the forces at her disposal which would be charged to eliminate the Traitor Astartes.

Her other neighbour at the table was the representative of the Ordo Chronos, Inquisitor Juan Geronimo. Authorising him to be take a seat had been a very long dilemma. The reputation of the Ordo Chronos, once on the ascendant, was now very much on the decline. To their list of ‘exploits’ in late M34 had been the creation of a dozen Imperial calendars, all inexact and terribly flawed, the creation of several time anomalies where numerous warships were still trapped, and a few explosions and events best removed from all records.

That Juan Geronimo was currently hidden in something looking like a white spacesuit and no part of his body was even visible – though they were a lot of lights switching on and off on his arms and legs – did not give Odysseus Tor a great respect for the sanity of this Inquisitor.

To his right, looking like a Judge of the Adeptus Arbites, albeit a very young one, was the red-haired, dark-skinned Pedro de Moray. He belonged to the Ordo Obsoletus, the overseers of miracles and unexplained phenomena. These last months he had been very busy collecting witnesses and evidence from the Battle of the Death Star, as well as details of the new governance of Nyx.

In spite of his relative young age, Odysseus thought Pedro had the traits to become a great Inquisitor.

He was not that confident the same could apply to the two female Inquisitors next to him. The names they had given were Inquisitor Contessa of Ordo Originatus and Inquisitor Cleopatra Coral of the Ordo Excorium. The former, in her strange suit, was supposed to dedicate her life to unravel myths, exaggerations, and lies. Odysseus did not trust her, not a single second. Her motives, even by the standards of the Inquisition, were obscure and mysterious. Her past and present were shrouded in secrecy, and her walking with a small group of grey-armoured Astartes that even Lady Weaver had confirmed knowing nothing about was not reassuring.

The latter kept a mask of black silk on her visage in permanence, as such the Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus could not truly say what she looked like. On the other hand, he was sure she really belonged to the Ordo Excorium. The Inquisitorial battleship *Judgement* she used as her personal transport had indeed the weapons to kill half of this Sector if it was unleashed.

The other Inquisitors were more convivial, with one notable exception. Inquisitor Benjamin Lorenzo of the Ordo Astra was buried in his maps and star-calculations. Inquisitor Sardis Navarre was in the clothes of an Errant Pontifex, fitting for his duties demanded he kept both eyes on the Ecclesiarchy as part of the Ordo Fidelius. Inquisitor Evander Platonist had arrived in the robes of an august member of the Adeptus Administratum, and was part of the Ordo Redactus, the classification and the protection of the Inquisition’s history. Inquisitor Henry-Charles Severus III was in the blue of the Imperial Navy, for he was a Captain of Battlefleet Ultima and appointed by the Ordo Navis to monitor the Imperial Fleet.

And then there was the fourteenth member. He was four seats on his left, and Odysseus Tor would lie if he said this Inquisitor was not worrying him. He had identified himself as Inquisitor Thanatos-Gamma of the Ordo Thanatos. Whatever happened, nothing could be distinguished of his traits, his height, or even his sex. Some might say it was the same problem with Geronimo, but at least with Geronimo, the protection was technological. With Thanatos-Gamma, the reason was more esoteric: it was psyker powers which shrouded his body from the other Inquisitors’ gaze. No one really knew what he did, or what his Ordo stood for. No one had ever seen him enter or leave the room. He was just there at a moment, and not here the one after. And they had used a lot of devices and artefacts to try to understand his secrets, for the moment in pure loss. Only the fact his rosette came from a former Inquisitorial Representative of Holy Terra had allowed him – or her – to be included in the Conclave.

With these fourteen different backgrounds, the debates were lively and were rarely short. There had only been ten orders of the day for this Conclave, but they had just voted on the eighth, and the Conclave had been officially started five hours ago.

“Ninth point,” Rafaela began. “According to three of our senior agents, Governor Sylvester Beagle IV of Matapan is contemplating ideas above his station. He’s not exactly discreet about it either.”

“Excuse me, where is exactly is the Matapan System?” Evander Platonist asked.

“It is an unremarkable system in the Atlas Graveyard Sub-Sector, Inquisitor Platonist,” Benjamin Lorenzo did not raise his eyes from his star maps. “I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it. It only has a single inhabitable planet, Matapan Quintus, designation Matapan, and while the classification of the Administratum proclaims it is a Civilised World, the society is primarily based on agriculture. The last census gave a population of two and a half billion inhabitants.”

“The tropical climate and the abundance of water ensure the primary harvest consists of the Matapan rice.” Boniface Capua stated with a light of disgust in his irises. “The world could be far more prosperous if it was administered correctly, but the ruling aristocrats have long ago strangled the planetary economy and the investors aren’t running to be robbed by the local Governor and his associates.”

“I think the tithe grade is Solutio Secundus.” Zoe Zircon declared thoughtfully. “I don’t remember them mustering many Guard regiments for the fight against the orks.”

“They didn’t,” the member of the Ordo Militarum declared between inhalations of his cigar. “They gave two regiments in the last five years, and all of them were disbanded after their first planetary campaign. The Munitorum wasn’t impressed by them, and neither was I. There were investigations launched, but with a war going on...”

“What are the accusations against the Governor of Matapan?” the emotionless voice of Contessa cut most of the small chatter and murmurs.

“Let’s see...” Inquisitor Pedro de Moray consulted his files. “First, four months ago he ordered an increase in his Planetary Defence Forces effectives, a move that was not reported to the Administratum or the Munitorum, and he failed to give out a regiment or two to account for the differences in the Guard tithe. Secondly, his deliveries to the Administratum have been falling out in the last decade, and since Matapan was not attacked and they contributed less than fifty thousand men to the crushing of the Imperium’s enemies this century, this economic decline can’t be explained by military issues. Third, the authorities of Battlefleet Ifrit reported he purchased last year four ancient monitors of the Golem-class, but Nyx and Atlas were not informed. And fourth, since the last Sanguinala, both officials and Priests in the Matapan System have taken a very vocal tone against the emergence of ‘False-Saints’ in the capital of the Sector.”

Odysseus Tor wanted very much to strangle the previous Inquisitors and Governor Sylvester Beagle IV of Matapan.

“Please, Beagle can’t be that stupid,” the comment had come from Sardis Navarre, attracting the attention of the other thirteen Inquisitors. “I have not much respect for the nobility lines the Menelaus Sector Lords allowed to thrive around Nyx, but surely even a noble of his calibre should know he stands absolutely no chance against the retribution of Nyx. By the Golden Throne, I’m sure Lady Weaver and her Dawnbreaker Guard can walk over his SDF and his PDF in one afternoon! Matapan’s capital has no planetary shields, and the twin fortresses which guard the approaches of his seat of power are built to prevent uprising from bare-handed peasants, not a serious assault from the Imperial Guard.”

“I agree with your assessment,” Ulrika Plauen flashed them a joyless smile. “And yet I have met in this very Sector many nobles which are sufficiently idiot to believe it can work. Inquisitor De Moray, in your opinion how advanced are the Governor’s plans?”

“He might declare secession from the Imperium before this year’s end.”

It was, as Navarre had affirmed, utter insanity. Lady Weaver was not going to let a world secede like this under her watch, and with the orks effectively wiped out, she would have both Battlefleet Nyx and the Imperial Guard to stamp out any potential rebellion. And anyone who believed the swords of the Imperium were not going to follow her orders was so far removed from reality he or she did not deserve to live.

“The living conditions on Matapan are not pleasant to live for the average citizen, right?” The Lord Inquisitor wondered out loud.

“I’ve seen and heard worse,” Boniface Capua shrugged. “But the taxes and the...dictatorship Governor Sylvester Beagle IV and his friends have enforced did not make them popular. What do you have in mind Lord Inquisitor?”

Odysseus Tor refused to give a smile, but there was plenty of satisfaction in his voice when he spoke again.

“I will review all the information at our disposal, but if it is confirmed, I think the best outcome in this situation is that we do nothing...nothing save give Lady Nyx the great lines of Governor Sylvester Beagle IV’s secessionist plans.”

“This is *evil*,” Benjamin Lorenzo said in appreciative tone, raising his head for the first time in hours his head from his mountain of highly-secretive documents. “You realise, Lord Inquisitor, that she’s going to slaughter the Matapan nobility and create dozens of Penal Legions?”

“Oh surely not,” Boniface Capua protested. “The Matapan nobility can’t have more than one million people in its ranks, and that’s speaking generously. I think there will be three or four Penal Legions when this treacherous conspiracy is exposed.”

“I stand corrected,” the Inquisitor of the Ordo Astra replied sardonically. “But my point about the slaughter and the extermination of the Matapan nobility does not change.”

Odysseus stared calmly in the blue eyes of his colleague.

“The Inquisition tolerated the structure of this Sector being dominated by the nobility because it was for them the most efficient method to keep Nyx and the surrounding planets loyal. But we have to face the truth, Inquisitors. Nobles at the top are a hindrance at best, a source of corruption, stagnation and problems at worst. And if the nobles refuse to remain loyal because the new Lady Nyx’s rule is unpalatable to them...then I think it’s time they are removed permanently.”

“This is going to cause problems with Terra and the Segmentum Solar, Lord Inquisitor,” Thanatos-Gamma warned him, though his voice was emotionless and the shrouding from his psyker powers continued. “Maybe not in a decade or in a century, but sooner or later, they will remember where Nostradamus Vandire ended his career, and there are plenty of Adepts, Princes, Clans and Houses which will not like this new Order.”

“Then it is best to strike the hammer while it is hot,” Juan Geronimo chuckled in his white spacesuit. “I approve the Lord Inquisitor’s course of action. Let Lady Nyx remove the problematic nobles as soon as we have evidence of her misdeeds. Maybe the other aristocrats will learn from the dead traitors’ examples.”

“And if they don’t, we can deal with them,” Henry-Charles III Severus agreed. “Unfortunately, I won’t be able to monitor and oversee whatever happens in the Matapan System for several months. I leave for my deployment in ten hours for Theta via Liverdance. Who wants to oversee the Basileia of Nyx?”

“I will do it,” Pedro de Moray said humourlessly when it became obvious no one was going to propose himself. “I will have to operate openly, however.”

“I will detach a Light Cruiser for your operations,” Cleopatra promised. “Tenth point, one of Lady Weaver’s Dawnbreaker Guards delivered to me a troubling request to execute an Exterminatus on Catachan.”

Rafaela Harper chuckled, and it was rapidly followed by Odysseus and the Inquisitors in the room.

“I’m sorry,” the Lady Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos stated with a large smile, “but the Ordo constantly receives similar demands from the Adeptus Mechanicus, Rogue traders, Commissars, and several other prestigious commanders. Generally, the demands come from the ones which have tangled with Catachan wildlife and somehow managed to survive long enough to escape.”

The representative of the Ordo Excorium just placed an expensive drawing on the projector at the centre of the table.

The laughs and the chuckles died instantly.

“What in the name of the Emperor is this horror?”

“The official name is now Hive Tyrant...from a contact with a dangerous insect species of Catachan, Lady Nyx is convinced there is one dormant in the planetary crust of the planet. It may be the reason Catachan is the way it is...”

“That’s ...not very likely,” Benjamin Lorenzo protested. “I mean we have solid evidence that Catachan was that way before M20. There’s no intelligent life-form that I’m aware which would accept to remain dormant for tens of thousands years.”

“And what if there was one?” Boniface Capua crushed his cigar against the table.

“I will have to veto the Exterminatus for now,” Cleopatra Coral told her colleagues. “We don’t know where this ‘Hive Tyrant’ is, so we would have to use our most powerful Exterminatus-grade weapons, and the Munitorum and the High Lords would never agree to use it on Catachan.”

“I agree,” Odysseus Tor said with regret. “Still, I think we need to learn all what we can about this monster. I will ask for a new audience with Lady Weaver before the end of this week. Inquisitor Coral, please ask for a few of your operatives to compile a file on what we really know about Catachan. Inquisitors Lorenzo, Contessa, and Platonist, please contact your sources to see if no one has seen this...horror before. Gene-abominations like this one are not generally the only one of their species.”

“Maybe it was the last specimen of something which went extinct against the eldar, long before humanity’s rise to the stars.” Navarre said in an unconvinced tone.

“You believe that as much as I do, Navarre,” Rafaela replied sharply. “Given the recent encounter of Lady Weaver with the Necrons, I think it’s more prudent to assume the worst from the start...”

In the decades to come, Odysseus Tor would remember this Conclave and know the ‘worst’ they had imagined in their nightmares had fallen short of reality.

**Magos-Draco Dragon Richter**

There were many things Dragon found unpleasant in the Adeptus Mechanicus, but one you couldn’t accuse them of was to be neglectful in their production methods and construction protocols. Everything was checked, re-checked and re-re-checked close to a hundred times per hours, scrap-code defences were inspected as many times as it was timely possible, and the runes and ‘oils of sanctity’ were used with the most profound reverence.

Binaric cants sung algorithms of activation, and metallic bells tolled to announce the moment was at hand.

“Pattern, code and number!” the Magos she had personally chosen shouted over the infernal din, and the data-shouts of thousands of Tech-Priests around the immobile dragon-shaped flying armour paused.

“The first is Nyx! Let that be thy pattern, as it is your home. The second is zero-zero-dash-one zero one. Let that be thy number! The third is 056290, millennium 35, Terran checksum 7. Let that be thy inception code!’

Slowly, extremely slowly the dragon armour advanced towards the exit of the assembly line. The last groups of Tech-Priests added the last touches and made their last verifications.

And just like this the first Dragon Armour Nyx-Pattern Mark V was completed. It was a beauty. It was the elegance of the dragon in red colours, with thousands of gold and obsidian glyphs from the Mechanicus.

It was bigger than the *Saphira* had been, but this was normal. The model Lankovar had approved last year required no pilot, while this one would need one at the helm. And the number of engines had increased from two to four. The new model as such weighted eighty tonnes without its pilot, and had slight length, width and height size increases too. Twelve Secundus-grade cogitators had been integrated along with a Ryza-Pattern interface. The main armament and the defensive measures had not changed too much, on the other hand. The Nyx Pattern was going to have the Inferno Cannon, twelve miniaturised Storm Eagle rockets, the Lightning Claws and the Lascannon for the attack, and the Melusine Armour, the Ladon force-fields and an Ion Shield for the defence.

“Awaken!” shouted the Archmagos who had been chosen to be the Magos Activator today. “Machine Spirit I call upon thee! To life, to life! Awaken! Warm the Cogitators! Bless the fuel! Engage the engines! Awaken!”

And her creation answered. As button after button was pressed and the cant of the Mechanicus soared above all, the lights of the Dragon Armour lit one by one. The armament whined as they rotated. And the engines roared as the systems all came online.

“All systems engaged. Bless the Omnissiah.”

“Does it lives?”

“IT LIVES!”

“Holy Life! Cog and Bear! Bless the Omnissiah!”

“BLESS THE OMNISSIAH!”

“Your Pattern, Code, and Number shall be entered in the Liber Armorum Nyx, Blessed Machine! As shall your name! I name thee *Hope of Nyx*, and by this name you will smite the enemies of the Omnissiah!”

It still took two full hours of activations and verifications, two hours of prayers, oil blessings and paint adjustments, completed by ceremonials Dragon was only beginning to understand, before the Dragon Armour Hope of Nyx left the Mechanicus manufactorum at slow power by a magnetic elevator and the Tech-Priests crowd began to disperse. This first activation had been a success, and in a not so distant future, Dragon Armours would be waited in this line by the hundreds their activation. Today this was not the case, nor would the *Hope of Nyx* be destined immediately for the battlefields. Taylor had bought it for her, so for the time being it was going to stay in the upper structure of Hive Athena.

“A flawless activation if there ever was one,” Archmagos Metallurgicus Unity-Victor Omega-Manville of Accatran canted in high-level binaric. “I congratulate you for bringing this project to completion, Magos-Draco Richter.”

“It was a pleasure,” she answered politely. The Master of Metallurgy and Mining had been named five days ago, so she did not exactly know him like she knew the other Archmagi of the Mechanicus Council.

“I understand the first phase of production will begin in twelve standard hours minus three minutes, praise the Blessed Motive Force.” Like Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund, the Accatran Archmagos had decided to make his body a work of art, but where the Tigrus Artisan had chosen a silver theme, Unity-Victor Omega-Manville had settled for a black-red one. He was also far more massive, like he wanted to imitate a bulldozer for the front of his chest and his legs.

“It will, if it is the Machine’s Plan. Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius remains confident we will be able to build and maintain the three assembly lines of the original plan for this year. Counting the traditional margin error of one percent, one hundred and sixty Nyx-Pattern Dragon Armours will be built this year.”

“I understand all of them have been already bought by different Forge Worlds.”

“They have, minus the ten – *Hope of Nyx* included – the Basileia bought for the use of the Nyxian Mechanicus.”

It had created a storm of debates she had not anticipated, to be honest. Vista had tried to convince her superior to buy more, but the expensive prices the Archmagos who remain uninvolved with the industrialisation of Nyx had offered were too tantalising for any Governor, even Taylor Hebert, to refuse. At the moment, the Hive World drank energy and ate ceramite, ferrocrete, adamantium, and highly-refined alloys like there was no tomorrow. Nyx needed the Mechanicus to remain pleased, and so one hundred and fifty Dragon Armours had already been sold to major Forge Worlds.

“Factoring the expansion, training and mysteries of the Omnissiah, the Magi Logis believe we will reach the thousand-mark per year here at Hive Romulus in five standard years. In a standard decade, the production should be at the three thousand-mark. But of course a lot depends on the production capabilities, the will of the Council and the outside context.”

And yes, this was her being diplomatic here. While she could with the support of the ruler of the Nyx bypass all the Archmagi and order them at will, she was trying to construct something united and functional here at Nyx.

“I will not argue with you on this. So many things have changed in so little time...” the mechanic pistons, the clang of the bells and the cants didn’t allow her to recognise if the Mechanicus was chuckling or sighing. “I understand there have been...more issues with the Karon Tank production lines.”

Had Dragon been a flesh and blood being, she would have gritted her teeth and shouted one or two inventive curses. But she wasn’t, and thus she was able to remain calm.

Sort of.

The Karon Tank was certainly for the moment her personal bane. In all logic, building and operating the assembly lines shouldn’t have been a problem. Unlike the Dragon Armours, Nyx built and sent across the stars tens of thousands tanks every year, and it was not like it was terribly difficult to repurpose an assembly line or for that matter to build an entirely new one from zero.

This was logical and supported by all evidence in the machinery process. But the Mechanicus tech-Priests, no matter how many times they pretended the contrary every day of their existence, were humans. And like poor Taylor had created a mini architectural doctrinal war with her refusal to embrace the Gothic style, the Karon had done the same thing for the Mechanicus. Arguments, insults and doctrinal debates had raged for the last months.

It would have been funny, if she had not to prevent from turning into a true civil war...something that needless to say Nyx really couldn’t afford at such a crucial stage of its existence.

It didn’t help that the Mechanicus Council was divided on the issue. Lankovar, as one of the Tech-Priests who had benefitted from the performance of the first Karon, was in favour. So were Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan and Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius. But Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies was completely uninterested in the issue, and High Magos-Enginseer Cathar-4-Fredrick was proving extremely...obstructive. It was a big problem, since he was the Master of Enginseers. And he had allies. The Master of Electro-Life High Magos Thomson Siemens of Voss Prime was with him. The Master of the Magisterium Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1 was more reasonable, which was good for his were the responsibilities to track hereteks and punishing techno-heresy while ensuring the internal security of the Nyxian Mechanicus. But he nonetheless remained reluctant where the Karon was concerned.

Master of Destruction Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus of Estaban VII was in favour, but since every engine and weapon of destruction found grace in his bionic eyes as long as they weren’t of Chaos origin, it wasn’t the unconditional supporter she wanted.

At least it had made her arrive to a conclusion.

The truth, as unpleasant it was to hear, was that a lot of the Mechanicus doctrine was based on hypocrisy.

By all rights, M3 or M30 technology, the Dragon Flying Armours should have generated a thousand times the doctrinal civil war the Karon had stoked the fires of. But the Imperium needed her Dragon Armours. Many dark lairs of the Dark Mechanicum loved raiding and corrupting by sending entire flights of Heldrakes in this era, and the Mechanicus had no perfect counter against them.

The Karon, on the other hand, had a cousin called the Leman Russ Vanquisher. It didn’t matter that the few Forge Worlds producing it like Tigrus never managed to build enough of said tanks for the Imperial Guard – in fact the figures she had been able to see were unanimous: Mars was more or less producing every Leman Russ Vanquisher which arrived to the Guard regiments in the 35th millennium.

“Yes, there have been many issues with the Karon. I won’t pretend I am not...annoyed by the resistance of several high-ranked Adepts to the production of this tank. At the same time, I have realised the...concerns of several members of the Council and the thousands of Tech-Priests must be addressed.”

Walking at a fast pace, they rapidly left the assembly lines of the Mechanicus enclave to walk into the Forges. It was a spectacle Hephaestus and every Smith God of old would have applauded with both hands. Massive pools of molten metal could be seen as far as her augmetic eyes watched, and great pumps, pistons, hammers and tens of thousands machines, some invented in M2, some invented far later, were striking metal and alloys, bringing millions of tons of plasteel, ceramite and other materials into their final forms.

“I am relieved by your logic and your doctrinal ideas, which is why I have come to you today to propose a...political solution to the problem.”

“I am willing to hear it, Archmagos,” and she was perfectly sincere.

“Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1 has declared the design is perfectly sound and has no minor techno-heresies in its heart, but the concerns about the unclear origins and the lack of compatibility with the holy template of the Leman Russ remains. I propose to solve this in three moves. First, by ensuring Magos Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 will formally take position against the Karon Tank.”

This one she understood in less than a second. The Martian Magos was...hated was maybe a strong word, but his presence was not appreciated at Nyx. Anything he declared his opposition to, the more conservative Magi and Archmagi were going to re-think if their doctrinal reasons were really worth being on the same side as him.

“The second is to come back to the first template you used to build the prototype. I know many Blessed Patterns have been developed and several prototypes built, but the purity of the machine primes above all else and the Karon Mark One has stood against the horrors of this galaxy in defence of the Omnissiah servants.”

Ta-dah! This was the sound of hundreds of hours coming up in smoke. Dragon recited a thousand times in her head ‘I must not strange one of the Archmagi’ quickly. It didn’t help much.

“Your third proposal, Archmagos?”

“As galling as it is for your efficiency, I must advise you to...call for production goals which are not threatening for the Tech-Priests convinced of the absolute sanctity of the Leman Russ template. Practically, ensure that for the next five years the regiments Lady Weaver wants to send to the Guard and take with her personal Army Group are receiving Karon Tanks, but not more than that. Ten thousand should be considered an upper limit.”

Fine, this was not completely bad news. When Guardsmen began to scream for more tank-hunter machines, the same Tech-Priests who had played the obstructionism cards were going to have to eat dirt and work twice harder to recover from the fall-out.

“I will analyse and study the benefits and the drawbacks of these moves. May I present you an amended preliminary production schedule in three days for the next Council?”

“You may,” Unity-Victor Omega-Manville replied rather graciously. “Oh, and another fourth move that may help things.”

If he said try to be conservative, she might not be responsible for the consequences...

“It would be judicious to change the name. Karon was not a name many Magos and Archmagos like to remember. A more pleasant designation might turn a lot of reluctance several of our Tech-Priests are exerting by reflex on this Battle Tank.”

Bah if this was the price to pay... she stuck her tongue at the memories she had of Magos Troy Alpha-Karon-1462 and prepared a list of alternative names she would propose to several assiduous subordinates.

“Let’s see,” the Tinker whispered to herself once she was back in one of her command centres alone. “Leman Russ was a Primarch, so to counter his memory, it would be best to have a Primarch memory to draw on.”

It did not take her long to find the best candidate for the honour. The Primarch of the Fifth Legion, the White Scars. By all the information she had readily accessible, this Son of the Emperor was a formidable hunter and the space reincarnation of Genghis Khan, and known to use his Space Marines in lightning-speed offensives.

It was going to take another bureaucratic battle, but for the first time she removed the name ‘Karon’ and replaced it with ‘Jaghatai Khan’.

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*His Most Holy Majesty’s Ship* Enterprise*.*

*Long before the last days of the 35th millennium, the name had already become a legend and a symbol of hope. Unavoidably, it caused certain tergiversations in the upper ranks as the popularity of the battleship never stopped increasing. Many Imperial Admirals grumbled such a ship should never have been bought by someone not answering to the Imperial Navy, but their discontent was largely drowned by the billions of cheers and support.*

*For the common citizen of the Imperium, and especially the Nyx Sector, the* Enterprise *was the lance of the Saint, and its arrival instantly transformed desperate last-stands in glorious victories.*

*It went without saying that it made the warship a first-rate target for the traitors, the xenos, and the damned from the moment it entered service.*

*These cowardly and treacherous attempts all failed. Monstrous xenos warlords could pretend all they want the destruction of the battleship, the Big E, as it had been nicknamed, returned again and again to protect Mankind and the Imperium.*

Extract from *Legendary ships of the Imperium*, 005M41, Neptune Editions.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III’s Orbit**

**7.160.290M35**

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

“There are some Captains who are complaining the work on the Mars-type dry docks is not proceeding as fast as we can,” Dennis whispered to Wolfgang as he took his place in the procession walking up one of the main avenues of the Vulkan’s Arsenal shipyard.

Wolfgang did not raise his eyes to the ceiling to show his annoyance, but Dennis had spent enough time around to know he was exasperated.

“I have a feeling some of these rear-line Navy officers are frustrated they are not given a ship, and they want to make the life of everyone’s life around them miserable. I like more and more the cogboys after each appointment these Navy officers waste my time. The Mechanicus may have an incomprehensible language, but they are efficient and cooperative.”

The time-stopping parahuman did not disagree with anything that had just been said.

“I fail to see how we could accelerate the rhythm of construction. The Tech-Priests started to work on these dry docks three days ago, and it’s an expensive and complicated work. It’s not going to be done in a month!”

In fact, and they had been forced to recite it so many times to the administrators and their subordinates that they knew it by heart, this orbital building project was going to be completed in late 292M35 if it was on schedule. And it might not be. This was first-rate technology, automation systems and modular infrastructure they were using, and Nyx was not at the technological levels a Forge World took for granted.

“I don’t think even these loudmouths are finding their own protests very rational,” Dennis commented with a half-smile. “But they have to do something to justify their pay, and complain seems to be the option they have chosen.”

If they had been part of another branch of the Imperium and not of the Imperial Navy, hundreds of these Lieutenants, Captains, and other naval officers would be in a Penal Legion transport by now. But they were of the Imperial Navy, and for obvious reasons, Weaver threaded lightly around them. The Ecclesiarchy, the Mechanicus, and the Adeptus Astartes were in love with her, and while the Adeptus Arbites, the Astra Militarum, and the Adeptus Administratum kept a face of neutrality, the ran-and-file men and women in these organisations worshipped the ground she walked on.

The Navy...the Clockblocker part of him who had constantly been waiting before Piggot’s office knew the naval military branch of the Imperium were never going to be the Nyx government’s biggest fans.

“Well, at least if we could not make these pompous officers happy, the Mechanicus Magi are satisfied we began on schedule. They really want to try to have the first Arsenal Star-Forge Galleon ready by 300M35.”

“I still think it’s extremely optimistic,” the young red-haired man admitted. “Assuming we are completing the dry docks on schedule, it will be the end of 292M35, which will give us at best eight years to build a Galleon in time. And the Arsenal-class is not exactly the smallest type of warships ever built by the Imperium.”

Really, what was officially called a ‘Star-Forge Galleon’ was in size equivalent to a very big Heavy Cruiser or a small Battlecruiser. This was just for the hull. Inside were systems, cogitators, foundries, space parts-producing manufactorum and tools which cost a fortune. Nothing really surprising when one Arsenal Galleon was supposed to be able to take care of roughly fifty percent of Battlefleet Nyx’s supply needs.

Honestly, the only thing a Star-Forge Galleon couldn’t do was play the role of promethium or plasma tanker, but in its hulls it could build without assistance and then deploy automated extraction stations and refineries provided it had enough resources on hand.

Furthermore, the Arsenal-class had teeth. It was a support ship, not a true man-of-war, but any pirate stupid to try to attack it would regret it extremely fast. The prow had four torpedo tubes delivering the same projectiles as capital battleships. There were twenty turrets and hundreds of counter-measures for the interception of enemy fire. And on each flank, were ten massive Plasma Macro-Batteries. Each according to the simulations could eviscerate a Cruiser if they found their target.

As a consequence, Dennis thought it was far more likely the first Galleon would be ready by 315M35. They might be able to gain something between a couple of months and a year, but something battlecruiser-sized had never been built in less than fifteen years at Nyx.

“I think our local cogboys are a bit frustrated Ryza is going to build the first Arsenal-class Galleon before them. The template copies Sultan negotiated before officially entering the Basileia’s service will certainly reach the Forge World in two or three months, and after that they will certainly begin construction immediately. Ryza owns hundreds if not thousands of Mars-type dry docks, obviously.”

“Bah, I think we will be able...”

Most of the conversations, including theirs, stopped as they arrived in the gigantic terminal and saw the gargantuan warship waiting in the void on the other side of the observation bays.

Dennis had seen the images given by the sensors. He had read the technical data. But...nothing could really prepare to see it. It was a battleship bigger than the two Battlefleet Nyx had in its order of battle, but this didn’t do it any justice. It was a lance, a mountain of destruction that had been created and woken up in the immensities of the Mechanicus shipyards.

You certainly couldn’t create such a thing planet-side and hope it would manage to rise through the atmosphere of a planet.

In its shadow destroyers and frigates were dwarves, and the less said about the monitors, the shipyard tugs and the shuttles, the better. It was eleven kilometres long, and looked like no other ship currently present in the Nyx System.

It was His Most Holy Majesty Ship’s *Enterprise*. According to the Lady who had chosen it, it was in no way an attempt to immortalise the Star Trek franchise – ignore Leet weeping in the background. It was to honour the memory the honour of the USS Enterprise, the ‘Big E’, the Grey Ghost of World War Two.

May it write the same legend as its predecessor had done more than thirty millennia ago.

The terminal and countless hangars nearby gave a thunder of applause, but these demonstrations and enthusiasm and joy were nothing when the Quayran representative Archmagos entered the terminal with a massive cohort of Skitarii and saluted Taylor Hebert.

“Lady Weaver, the *Enterprise* is yours to command.”

Then the shouts and the acclamations were really heard from Nyx below.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Graveyard Sub-Sector**

**Matapan System**

**7.191.290M35**

**Governor Sylvester Beagle IV**

“It is obvious at this hour that the capital of the Nyx Sector is in the hands of upstarts and brazen commoners! The authority which was supposed to protect us from the xenos, the mutants, and the heretics, surrendered to a False-Saint and is now the enemy we must fight against!”

The crowd cheered in approval, as it should be, and Sylvester Beagle IV smiled.

“You all have heard of the purges, of entire bloodlines massacred and sent to die in Penal Legions. You all have heard of the execution squads and the hangings! This so-called Saint is not holy or blessed by the Divine! A true Saint knows His Will! And the Will of His Holy Majesty is clear! It is His Will the descendants of the men and women who helped Him forging the greatest realm that ever was and ever will be would ruse the planets of the Most Blessed Imperium in His Holy Name.”

His nobles and his supporters cheered louder, proclaiming their support to the natural order.

“Matapan will not support this folly any longer. There is a right granted to every Governor of His Most Holy Majesty if he thinks the Lord of his Sector is in league with dark forces, and it is with regret I affirm this is the case today. Nyx is no longer the bastion of order and strength that stood like an adamantium-clad Titan since the time of the Great Crusade! The rights and the privileges of the ruling classes have been trampled in the mud and grievously wounded! But fear not! As dark as the shadow is, Matapan is not the only light in the darkness! Astropathic calls have been sent! Loyal Planetary Defence Forces, Guard regiments, and starship commanders have embraced our cause! Soon dozens of worlds will join our banner and join our crusade to topple the False-Saint! But Matapan will be the first to refuse the yoke of this Usurper! By the authority granted me by the Adeptus Terra and the Holy Divine God-Emperor, I, Governor Sylvester Beagle IV, declare Secession from the Nyx Sector and demands all loyal subjects of the Imperium to forsake the oaths they swore to this treacherous ‘Lady Weaver!’”

“DEATH TO WEAVER!”

“A NEW START FOR THE NYX SECTOR!”

“MATAPAN WILL BE THE LIGHT OF THE IMPERIUM!”

Satisfied he could count on the unconditional loyalty of his Dukes, his Counts and his PDF Generals, Sylvester made the sign of the Aquila before descending the steps of his podium and joining his most favoured advisors.

“It was a magnificent speech, Governor. I know the entire Sector has heard the call. The days of the False-Saint are counted,” declared Archbishop Walton Fountain.

“Your words are a balm for my soul, Archbishop.”

Fountain had arrived to Matapan a mere three months ago, but Sylvester had noticed the faith and the intelligence of the high-ranked Priest. If only there were more like him...but alas, Walton Fountain had been the only Archbishop of Nyx Tertius to escape the purges. That Cardinal Prescott Lumen’s signature had been on the arrest and execution documents was mere holo-falsehood for the masses. Everyone at Matapan knew very well who had given the order behind the scenes.

“The PDF stands ready to fight the followers of the False-Saint, Governor,” declared Supreme Marshal-General of the Red Host Tiruyih Stone, commanding officer of the Matapan PDF in red-gold parade uniform. “We have ten million PDF elite guardsmen ready for deployment across the Sector.”

“Good, very good,” Sylvester beamed. “With the modifications our friends did to the Golem-class monitors to transform them into Golem-class Destroyers, we have an unstoppable force of liberation that the Nyxians traitors will never see coming.”

All of this had been a bit expensive for his resources, but when Matapan became the capital of the Sub-Sector instead of Atlas, all his debts would be forgiven and the standing of Matapan would rise higher than it had ever been in a millennium.

“My Lord, My Lord!”

A messenger in his deep green System Defence Fleet’s uniform rushed in the ballroom, and Sylvester Beagle IV frowned. Was it a bit too much to ask for his officers to have some decorum and dignity?

Making a discrete sign to his bodyguards to not shoot the impertinent, the Governor of Matapan gave a smile the ingrate didn’t deserve.

“What is it, Lieutenant? I hope it is urgent, we are a bit in the middle of serious affairs, you know. Have the forces of Calypso already sent their answer?”

“Governor...” it was then Sylvester noticed that the Lieutenant wasn’t excited; he was terrified. “Approximately four minutes and thirty seconds ago,” the young green-haired officer consulted his chronometer, “the monitoring stations surrounding Mandeville Point of High Beacon registered a massive Warp translation. There are over three hundred warships out there.”

“Preposterous!” Nyx could not have this kind of armada ready to launch so quickly. They had not...

“Governor, Admiral Suketaka and his staff have already identified over fifty ships supposed to be part of the Nyx naval detachments covering the Neptunia Reach. And that’s not the worst, my Lord.”

That was not the worst?

“They are led by a monstrous battleship, one we never saw in any order of battle. The Admiral presents his compliments, and respectfully demands your presence to the command centre. The security...”

But Sylvester Beagle IV wasn’t listening to the Lieutenant anymore. No, no, this had to be an error. He had been so careful, so prudent. There was no way the False-Saint could have guessed his plans. And as for this assertion she had a battleship they had never seen, this was plainly ridiculous, Nyx had nothing to build them...yes, yes it was incompetence and treason. There was nothing to worry about.

“Guards! Take away this liar and execute him for peddling blatant false information to me!”

“By your orders, Lord!”

“Ridiculous,” Archbishop Fountain nodded in approval. “Governor Menelaus could not muster a hundred warships with no warning, there is no way this False-Saint is able to send the triple of that with no clue what is going on in this stellar system...”

**Archmagos Thayer Sagami**

The Cawl-Pattern Nemesis-Hunter Cannon, Archmagos Thayer Sagami thought, was truly a frightening weapon. The Doppler Shells of a classic Mars-Pattern Nova Cannon were more powerful by something like ten percent. The Nova Cannon shells had also a larger area of impact, by something like fifty kilometres from the epicentre of the shot.

Against an Apocalypse-class Mechanicus-crewed battleship, the Nemesis-Hunter Cannon of the Enterprise was roughly equal in fire rate: approximately one shot per seven point two minutes.

But it had a recoil advantage of fifty-one percent over the Mars-Pattern Nova Cannon, and its targeting arrays were so efficient the precision was far above any Magos expected from the destruction wrought by a long-range bombardment.

The figures in his data-manifolds for the shot which had just been fired were nothing short of a miracle of the Omnissiah. An improvement in precision of one thousand four hundred and sixty-four percent was properly...mechanically wondrous.

“Targets destroyed, Lady Weaver.” He declared to the woman he had accepted to serve in the next ten years.

“Acknowledged, Archmagos. Excellent work.” The smile he received was extremely gratifying. Perhaps his exile was not going to be as unpleasant as he feared. “Please send a new demand of surrender to the Matapan forces. Now that their System Defence Fleet has been wiped out, maybe they will see sense and lay down their arms.”

Thayer bowed and relayed the orders, that a small army of Nyxians recruits and younger Tech-Priests diligently executed. He would never admit in public, but now that the corridors and the compartments of the Enterprise had something like a full crew, the battleship was not as unlikeable as he had first though. The ‘Cawl style of decoration’ was still unlikeable in the extreme, but Lady Weaver had promised this would be remedied once they returned to Nyx.

“Augury focus on Quadrant CX-11.”

The damage delivered to the Matapan System Defence Fleet was total. The traitor to the Omnissiah and the Emperor had bought and armed in secret more ships than what his planet was able to supply and maintain, violating countless edicts and rules of the Imperium.

All of this had been in vain, for a single shot of the Enterprise’s main cannon had devastated the defences of Matapan. Two out of the four Golem-class monitors could still technically qualify as wrecks, despite one being broken in half. The M33-built Chelsea-class destroyer, the five Lizard-class monitors and the eighty starfighters however had been so thoroughly destroyed there were just debris registering on the auspexes, the auguries, and the gravitic sensors of the battleship.

The heart of the fixed defences had been torn apart in the same ultra-precise bombardment.

Normally removing an entire defence fleet like this was thoroughly impossible, but Matapan had a very small SDF, and obviously its Admiral had never seen a Nova Cannon in action. And the *Enterprise* had not let the enemy the time to learn from its initial errors. The Nemesis-Hunter cannon had fired at over eight hundred thousand kilometres, far beyond any range they could possibly retaliate.

“Archmagos, our surrender demands receive no answer,” canted Magos Ypsial.

“Then they have chosen...poorly.” Thayer Sagami replied before turning back to face the Basileia of Nyx. “Lady Weaver, I fear a planetary invasion is going to be a necessary. Do you want to precede the landing of the troops by orbital strikes?

“I don’t think it will be necessary, Magos.”

“They still have something like ten nuclear silos,” he informed her.

“The squad of Brothers of the Red we have aboard has already volunteered to disable it.”

Ah so this was the reason they had in precipitation left the bridge ten minutes ago.

“In this case...I require humbly the authorisation to complete the annihilation of the last orbital defences of Matapan.”

“Granted, Archmagos,” and by the adamantium in her eyes, the Quayran Tech-Priest wondered how the mortals on this planet could have thought this was a good idea to rebel against this woman. By all tenets of the Omnissiah, it was illogical and irrational. And if they were lucky, they would die before he had the opportunity to transform them into servitors.

“Nemesis-Hunter Cannon primed and ready, Archmagos. The scans of Compartment Alpha report nominal temperatures.”

“Tests completed, ammunition loaded, and no casualties among the weapon’s crew.”

“Open fire.”

Five seconds later, the sun rose a third time today for the Matapan System.

**Colonel Perry Tereyev**

For a rebellion, it was a massive disappointment. The Fay 5th Armoured had left its garrison-city on Torch to come here, as their orders from High Command demanded, but for the moment there was not exactly a lot of fighting. There had been sporadic exchanges of laser throughout the morning, but all in all it was rather calm. There were no fatal casualties, only two men seriously wounded, and by the medical report he had been voxed, their days were not in danger.

No, this rebellion was not hard because of the fighting. The bigger obstacle on their way to the capital of Matapan, which was apparently called Sylvesteropolis for reasons which had plenty to do with the ego of the traitor Governor, was the number of prisoners they were taking.

The roads were crowded with them. It was a torrent of red and gold uniforms, larger than the big rivers they had recently swam in during the aftermath of the Torch campaign. The young faces looked completely in shock and lost, probably from the rapidity they had been defeated. The old ones glared with more hateful expressions, and he made sure the servo-skulls had good views on their visages and the names written on their uniforms. The former may be given an amnesty, but the latter were going to be meat fodder for the Penal Legions. At least this was his opinion, and so far anything he had heard from his superiors this was a possible outcome.

“Far from me to criticise Lady Weaver,” his chief of staff told him after delivering him the news two more PDF regiments had surrendered, “but letting parahumans break the frontlines makes things too easy for us.”

“I quite agree, Nycos,” Perry Tereyev stopped looking for a few seconds at the prisoners, trusting his soldiers to watch with both eyes the now defenceless enemies. “But you have to admit that way, fewer of our men die, and seeing a fortress torn apart by what looked to be invisible blasts was incredibly satisfying.”

“Personally Colonel, I found more impressive how entire companies of enemies were caught in these sorts of chrono-weapons bubbles. It emphasized a lot the teachings of the *Tactica Imperialis* how speed is key on any battlefield.”

There were rumours Lady Nyx had paid a few millions in research and fees to the Mechanicus in order to find machines able to improve the powers of her Ministers. The rumours were not sounding that ridiculous now.

“A good point, I assume you have noted it for our after-action reports?” This was more for the record than anything else; his staff after five different battle-theatres was a well-oiled machine, as the Mechanicus said.

“I have, Colonel. But so many officers will mention it in theirs in addition to ours I’m not sure it will make a big difference. Besides, I’m not sure that even without Lady Weaver’s elite forces to open the way we would have taken more than a few hours to take all these positions. The fortresses are badly maintained, we caught them with their shields cold, half of them are armed with autoguns, not lasguns...it’s almost like they were caught by surprise that there was an insurrection...”

“I think some of the older veterans, the ones which were in the PDF for several years, were invited to listen to their Governor’s speeches about their right to secession and how it was disgusting that blue-blooded nobles could reap what they deserved.” The Colonel revealed his thoughts out loud. “The young ones, the Whiteshields, they maybe had less than a year in a uniform. At a guess, I would say the traitor Governor began his preparations one month or two after Lady Weaver was crowned Basileia.”

“He’s an idiot,” his young brown-haired subordinate spat. “What did he think was going to happen?”

“Of course he wasn’t thinking,” Tereyev sighed. From what he had seen, that was the problem with the aristocrats. They believed they were untouchable, except they weren’t. Plenty of people could remove them when they violated their oaths. “And now both he and his clique are going to pay the price. Secession is treason against the God-Emperor, and betraying His Holy Majesty is heresy...”

The torrent of prisoners had no end in the mean time. By the Saint, there must be something like one hundred thousand Matapan men in this Sector alone which had thrown down their autoguns.

“Contact the Nyx 2nd Line Infantry and tell them we are going to be delayed again...”

The Matapan Rebellion was twenty-eight standard hours long, and victory was everywhere in sight.

**Governor** **Sylvester Beagle IV**

“Traitors! I am surrounded by Traitors!”

Sylvester Beagle IV could not believe it. The Lion Line, the great northern series of strongholds and fortifications which were supposed to defend Sylvesteropolis had surrendered without firing a shot. And the General in charge the gall to inform him he didn’t want to fight because a little girl was opening trenches under the feet of his troops and some buffoon was stopping time in his headquarters!

What else could it be but treason?

First Admiral Suketaka’s men had failed to slow down by a single minute the warships orbiting around his planet. Then the nuclear silos, the divine thunder that was by right his to command, had failed to heed his instructions to launch and destroy the landing zones of the traitors’ invasion.

For this four of his Admirals and three Generals had been executed, an appropriate answer since obviously they didn’t command the loyalty of a single man after their men mutinied or died failing to oppose the invaders.

Sylvester seethed. This was not supposed to happen like this! If by a miracle the sacred soil of Matapan was invaded, the PDF army he had assembled sparing no expanse this last year was supposed to force the traitors to an ignominious defeat.

“What do we have left to defend the capital?”

It was Supreme Marshal-General of the Red Host Tiruyih Stone who answered. Unlike most of his Generals, his second cousin knew where his duty was. What a sad thing the ranks of his soldiers and magnificent guards were filled with traitors and political activists!

“We have the capital’s primary garrison and the reserve. It will give us...thirty regiments? No, thirty-one regiments to defend our chief city.”

“Good, it will give us an overwhelming numerical superiority!”

“Governor...each of our regiments, save for your Governor’s Own, is three thousand strong. The Nyx 2nd Line Infantry, which leads the northern assault, is mustering alone close to fifty thousand men.” One of the ungrateful Colonels had the gall to correct him. To correct him in his own command bunker! This was unacceptable!

“Imbecile! Imbecile and defeatist! Guards! Arrest...”

The council of war shattered in explosions and screams. He could not see anymore. There was too much smoke. There were more explosions and lasgun fire.

And then a gigantic silhouette came out of the smoke. His guards! Where were his guards?

And then the details of the blue and red giant became clearer. He was impossibly tall, taller than any human could be...

No! No! This wasn’t possible! The Angels of Death were supposed to slay the False-Saints, not help them.

“You...you are fighting on the wrong side...Lord Astartes.”

“Open your mouth once more Traitor,” the Space Marine replied. “And it will be without your arms and legs that you will be presented to Lady Weaver.”

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

Jeremiah could only feel disgust and anger at the worm which was brought before the Dawnbreaker Guard and the silent ranks of the Fay 20th Mechanised Infantry. This rebellion had killed a lot of people, close to six hundred thousand by the latest estimates and two-thirds of it in space or in the orbital slaughter, and it had been done by someone which should never had been considered to be a platoon commander or a lesser administrator.

The only thing positive Isley could say about Sylvester Beagle IV of Matapan was that he had enough wits to prostrate himself before Lady Weaver.

The Basileia of Nyx looked more radiant than ever clad the Angel’s Tear Armour. She was also extremely angry, if the manner she tightened her right fist around the hilt of the Nebula’s Shard was any indication.

“The Articles of Secession, my Lady,” Chaplain Sidonius of the Dawnbreaker Guard presented a large official scroll with a slight bow. “He kept them in his throne room, and a thousand signatures and names are on it.”

“You have done well, Chaplain. It will avoid us to spend hours and hours in long trials.”

“Lady Basileia...”

The blade of a beetle stopped mere millimetres away from the throat of Governor Sylvester Beagle IV.

“If you speak again without authorisation, I will crucify you in front of your palace. Understood?”

The highest noble of Matapan nodded, but it was with something like complete confusion in his eyes. At last, the traitor realised he was not someone important and his deeds had caught up with him.

“You gave shelter to Archbishop Walton Fountain, in clear defiance of Cardinal Prescott Lumen’s apostasy accusations. This alone would be sufficient to declare you a heretic. Unfortunately for you, we captured him as he tried to flee the capital bearing the seal reserved to your Primaris advisors.”

 While the Basileia spoke, more nobles and dignitaries of Matapan were dragged out of the palace.

“You violated the core rule of a System Defence Fleet. Without the authorisation of Nyx and the Lord Admiral of a Battlefleet, installing Warp Engines on monitors is treason. While in this case it made no difference, the survivors of your Navy provided sufficient evidence of your betrayal. You sent astropathic signals inciting rebellion and secession across the Sector. You refused to order your Navy to stand down when you were ordered to. You refused to heed my surrender offer a second time. You tried to obliterate thousands of soldiers in nuclear fire. You tried to kill the Guard regiments sent to stop your madness. In the name of the God-Emperor of Mankind, I believe I have enough evidence and substantiated proof to declare you *Excommunicate Traitoris*. You are a felon, a traitor, and a disgrace to your titles and your position of authority. Do you have anything to say before the sentence is said?”

“I was misled, oh great Basileia, by evil and jealous councillors! I realise my error and repent my actions!”

Jeremiah had the sudden urge to laugh. Seriously, could the idiot not try something a bit more original? The Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens was not impressed. And by her tone, the feeling was shared by Lady Taylor Hebert.

“You should have tried to make it more sincere and believable,” the Lady Nyx advised. “Under my own authority, you and all your descendants are stripped from the Governorship of Matapan. A Prefect is going to take your office under my authority, and if he does an acceptable job at rebuilding the damages your idiocy caused, he may become the new Governor of this planet. As for you, Sylvester Beagle, you are no longer a subject of His Most Holy Majesty, and there is an Inquisitor in orbit who wants to have a few words with you. If you survive the interrogation, the Mechanicus has requested you to be lobotomised and transformed into servitor, and I’m not exactly in the mood to refuse them right now. Your supporters, your relatives, your cousins, your clergy and every man and woman who in public declared his willingness to betray his or her oaths and rebel against my authority are going to be severely punished.”

The ‘redemption’ attitude of the Matapan Governor vanished like a lever had been activated.

“You believe you won! I sent my message, and soon False-Saint, the entire Nyx Sector will burn in rebellion against you! You are an abomination against the Will of the God-Emperor! I am the spark of the inferno...”

A powerful fist in his right cheek interrupted the violent diatribe.

“I amend my previous orders. Make sure his entire family, save the children under...twelve years of age, are delivered either into Inquisition or Mechanicus custody. For the others, the Penal Legions await.”

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*The Matapan Rebellion, as it was rapidly called by mid-290M35, was a short and easy victory for the Imperium. If the battleship Enterprise had not made its debut here, I doubt anyone would bother writing books on it.*

*It went without saying that the delusions of the Traitor Governor failed to materialise. One Matapan Guard Regiment rioted in the nearby Ifrit Sector three years later on the anniversary of Sylvesteropolis’ official surrender, but it is difficult to know if it was related to this minor insurgency.*

*The Matapan Rebellion lasted officially sixty-nine standard hours and caused approximately six hundred and seventy-five thousand deaths in battle. Less than one thousand loyal Guard and Skitarii died, and the system of Matapan was returned to the domain of His Most Holy Majesty...*

By retired General Tereyev, The Ocean of War, 510M35

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.370.290M35**

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

Vista had not believed an Astartes could love gardening, but the Gardens of Mediation on Floor 43 proved this was not the case. For a Devastator Space Marine, Battle-Brother Wald of the Crimson Legion had chosen an unusual hobby indeed. The blonde-haired giant was there in the distance, preparing roses and flowers, talking with a few Architects and Biologis Tech-Priests he had convinced to help him in his project.

It made this park strangely idyllic. There were a few suspended balcony-gardens, small bridges and ponds. There were thousands of flowers separated by small alleys of old stones. Sanguinary Priest Sterzing had added a few statues of its own, and though the Angel Resplendent had a weakness for the heroic bronzes and marbles, the effect was coexisting well with the floral combinations.

The light of the late afternoon added to the mystic. The silence was also a god-given gift, no pun intended. The Floor may be opened to more than twenty thousand people, but in this part of the gardens less than a thousand inhabitants of Hive Athena had the authorisation to thread, except in case of emergency and war.

And this was a relief, because Nyx for all its good sides was always plunged in a permanent tornado of noise. Several hours during the day Missy was forced to wear earplugs. It was the only solution to avoid deafness when she was free to return to her personal quarters.

“And so we introduced the foam and the reforms in Hive Corinth two days ago,” she informed the insect-mistress after finishing her cup of tea. “It’s too early to say if it will have the same effects as it did in our last areas of interests, but so far the first returns seems to be promising. I heard you were busy on the military side yourself.”

Usually, a Minister of Justice would have no business learning about military-classified information, but Taylor had named her Heiress should she dies unexpectedly, and as such she had the clearance to know a lot of interesting things.

“We officially created the first two Brigades which will participate in the Pavia Liberation,” the black and gold-haired parahuman admitted. “Per Munitorum and Militarum regulations, the regiments won’t train on the same planets, but the men and the women have been assembled. That way we will have something like five or six years to transform inexperienced boys and girls into real soldiers. It won’t replace battlefield experience, and a lot of the inter-regimental coordination will be very theoretical, but it’s the best I can do with all the measures tying my hands.”

“And it’s just six regiments,” or so the rumours had informed her.

“And it’s just six regiments,” the General of the Imperial Guard confirmed. “The Brigade Death Star – stop smirking I didn’t choose the name – will have the Fay 20th, the Andes 10th Artillery and the Patton 3rd Super-Heavy Armoured. Dragon and I plan that Colonel Cameron will have ten out of the twelve recently purchased Cataphracts, supported by over a hundred Russ and Khan tanks, with some specialised Hydras for the anti-air operations. The second Brigade will be...no, I won’t tell you the name. It will include the Nyx 2nd Line Infantry, the Polar 5th Reconnaissance, and Lionheart 42nd Anti-Air.”

“How many men does it make, ultimately?” the Shaker parahuman asked with curiosity. It was just one Guard division...

“Keeping in mind the Nyx 2nd Line Infantry has fifty thousand men, the total gives us something like seventy-seven thousand troops, before we add the staffs, the commandos, the engineer rear-units and all the support individuals a division can’t work without.”

It should have astonished her, but in the first days of their arrival at Nyx, Vista had learned there was something like four hundred-plus million PDF troops served the Sector Lady. Fifty thousand or seventy-seven thousand was a drop in the bucket, though the logistical challenges of transporting these numbers across the stars and keeping them in shape to fight certainly weren’t.

“That leaves you what, forty-six Brigades to muster and train?”

“The final Army Group will probably have that many formations, yes,” her interlocutor agreed. “I will in all likelihood have to provide more regiments than anyone else in the Sector, but at least I will have a hammer and a precedent to keep the nobles in line.”

“The Matapan idiot received no support from the nobles outside his powerbase,” Missy argued.

“He was as you say, an idiot,” the Basileia spoke with a large smile. “I’m sure even the most narrow-minded Duke of Atlas was ready to strangle him when he proclaimed his ‘Totally Loyal Act of Secession’.” The smile mutated in a more concerned expression. “I have a lot of spies over the Atlas Sub-Sector, and many are reporting they were certain aristocrats...testing the waters. They may have pushed Beagle and his friends to rebel in order to test me.”

“I want to say it’s ignoble and cruel, but these are nobles,” and in her persona of Minister of Justice, she had seen plenty of deranging things the nobility considered normal. According to the Arbites, the sooner they get rid of these bastards, the better for humanity as a whole. “Is Matapan doing better?”

“It is doing better,” Taylor Hebert grimaced. “It is still a long, long way from anything I can call ‘good’. Prefect Marx is doing a fantastic job, but the amount of work he has on his hands is titanic.”

“We did some fair damage to the orbital structures and the cities in our haste to get rid of the head-traitor.”

But the insect-mistress shook her head negatively.

“No, most of this damage, at least on the planet, has already been repaired by the ten thousand Tech-Priests I sent there. The big problem - and I can’t believe I say this - is the fact Menelaus probably treated his workers more humanly than Beagle did. Most of the population we saw living in slums and miserable conditions wasn’t the exception, it was the rule. The agricultural quotas the Administratum demanded for its tithes aren’t that high, but at some point in the past a Beagle angered the Mechanicus, and naturally instead of eating crow and begging the emissaries of Mars to give him another chance, the Governor decided the men and women in the rice fields could very well do without any sort of machinery at all.”

This was completely stupid. It was also unfortunately...typical for the idiocy she was meeting in several high-profile investigations. The question wasn’t if the aristocrats were guilty; it was to determine the degree of guilt of every person in the room.

“You’re doing some efforts to change this,” she said in a supportive tone.

“Yes, but it’s going to take years. Ten thousand Tech-Priests, as many Skitarii, a couple of Guard Regiments and thirty-five thousand colonists are for the moment all I sent to help. I will be able to send more next year, and we have already sent plenty of machinery to help in the rice plantations, but it’s going to take a few decades minimum for Matapan to gain a third of the productivity Ruby Harvest administrators take for granted.”

“Let’s see the positive side,” Missy Byron teased the older girl. “You won’t have any problem of loyalty, they’re already worshipping you...”

The Basileia groaned.

“If I had known before how much nonsense this whole ‘Saint business’ was going to take, I would have stopped it in the cradle.”

“You would have tried you mean,” the young Shaker told in a sympathetic voice. “Hey, I spoke with Architect Cyrene Versailles yesterday, and she confirmed once we were in private the Emperor never managed to stop the cults worshipping him, and I think he was more threatening and vocal on the subject.”

“True,” the Lady of Nyx said in a half-dejected tone. “I will not support financially or otherwise the miniature churches done in my name. They will be subjected to the same rules as any religious site in the diocese. It’s all I can do, in the end.”

Seeing how the topic put the girl who had once been called Skitter not happy, Missy changed the subject.

“The flow of Tech-Priests ships arriving and leaving the system has intensified. I take it the STC negotiations are almost over?”

“They are. This phase has finally ended, though I suppose it’s more the future deadline of big authority figures arriving which told them to accelerate their arrangements and negotiate properly.”

“I take it, without surprise, that we are going to receive more Tech-Priests and Skitarii in the next months.”

“Dragon believes she will be able to promote a new red robe trimmed with gold as a symbol for the Mechanicus enclaves we build everywhere in the Nyx stellar system.”

The Tinker had to be in Tinker-shop heavens most of the time, these days. Each negotiation brought her more knowledge, more minor templates, more technological base to play with. Nyx had been badly behind what a Forge World considered acceptable, but give it a century, and Vista was sure Dragon was going to turn Nyx into something no one here at the beginning would recognise.

“I might write an edict to confirm that before 300M35. The end of these negotiations means we are able to differentiate between the Tech-Priests who are serious about staying and considering Nyx their new home and safe harbour, and all the others.”

“And the negotiations by themselves?” The insect-mistress caressed one of her big spiders and raised an eyebrow. Yes, she was curious. Was it that much of a flaw?

“All right...the Moonlight Argentamite template was very profitable. Metalica, Accatran, Dynax Primus, beta Cornix, Morvane, Ironhelm, and Bakka were the winners. We were able to purchase close to two million Tech-Priests, and as many Skitarii and military cyborgs. Dragon obtained plenty of machine-tools and fundamental data to improve Nyx technological base. In space, we are going to own ten Mining ships and five Forge ships, thus making the mega-farms and the solar collectors affordable in two decades or three. Morvane has promised a support of its Legio, though it will probably consist in a few Scout Titans and Knights, not the most powerful units.”

Vista filled their cups of tea and they waited for their drinks to turn to a more reasonable temperature.

“Since we are about to drink it...the automated tea-making machine was not that popular with our Mechanicus public. The only Forge World which bought it was Hypnos. On the other hand, it was interesting for the Imperial Guard, the Adeptus Administratum, the Imperial Navy, the Adeptus Arbites, the Astra Telepathica and the Navis Nobilite. As a result, we got ‘only’ ten thousand Tech-Priests and ten thousand Skitarii, but the advantages were more diverse. I got numerous economic boons, and I will have more authority where Chartist Captains are involved in the Sector. I have gained some prerogatives over the Wuhan shipyards, buying certain parts of their Cartels. House Orion of the Navis Nobilite has promised not to increase its fees and renewed its contracts for the next two centuries.”

The Fay Bolt Pistol was next, but she was aware of the basics already, since the Adeptus Arbites had successfully completed the negotiations on this one twenty-plus days ago. What she wasn’t aware of was that Voss Prime, Graia, Phaeton, Vanaheim, Accatran and Ophelia IV had been the Forge Worlds chosen for this template. Five hundred thousand Tech-Priests, a Legion worth of Skitarii specialised in defending critical worlds, Primaris-grade defence lasers, orbital torpedo launchers, minor templates for the manufactorums and the industry in general...it was both amazing and scary how much a Standard Template Construct template was worth. And it was for a pistol. A very nice bolt gun, she had received two gold-painted models for herself, but guns nonetheless.

The Biodome had contributed to enlarge ‘Lady Weaver’s fortune’ by several billions Throne Gelts. By some complicated financial mechanisms she wasn’t sure to understand, the Estate Imperium had bribed most of the other delegates and offered a lot of colonisation rights and land grants they owned in several Sectors and Nyx itself. One million more Tech-Priests and tens of thousands machines would also be included the bargain, of course. The Imperial Navy, the Adeptus Administratum, Columnus, Gantz, Voss Prime and Arcetri had template-copies now, after the Estate Imperium got its share.

The Masamune Katana had been exceptional in the sense the Blood Angels had bought it by the intermediary of the Brothers of the Red. There were the only Space Marines to participate in the negotiations in any way, and they had done it by declaring the Nyx Sector as one of the Sectors the Imperium they had to protect at all costs. Should the Nyx Sector comes under attack, the descendants of the Ninth Legion would detach all available forces to crush the enemy. Kar Duniash had made the same promise, though in their case it was probably one of their reserve fleets which would be sent, not the might of the Ultima Segmentum. Byrrus Alpha, Antax, Graia, Estaban VII and the Imperial Guard had purchased the last templates. The details were more templates on power weapons, hundreds of thousands Tech-Priests, Skitarii, hundreds of battle-automata and the ‘classic’ machinery.

“That leaves the Arsenal-class Star-Forge Galleon. Very valuable, no matter which faction you negotiate with.”

“That’s the theory,” the Basileia replied, and by her frown Missy could tell she was displeased. “In practise, it is so valuable that certain shipyards *must* have it, not *should* have it.”

“So bad?”

“It’s...less than what I wanted. Don’t get me wrong, between the different Segmentum headquarters, I will have in fifty years a brand new fleet of two hundred monitors to defend Nyx. And yes, I’m flattered the buyers were Jupiter, Bakka, Kar Duniash and Cypra Mundi...”

“Not Hydraphur?” This was the Navy’s greatest base in Pacificus.

“No, Hydraphur remains loyal against the secessionists of Nova-Terra, but with most of Pacificus in insurrection, no one around the tables wanted to give them this template.”

“Who got the other templates?”

“Classified,” replied tersely the spider-mistress.

“Oh, come on...”

“I’m completely serious. I have not the clearance to tell to anyone I trust who purchased two out of the three remaining templates. All I can say is that they did it by the intermediary of the Forge World of Deimos in the Sol System itself...and that Deimos for its part gave me the schematics of every Astartes Power Armours in existence to have the Arsenal Star-Forge Galleon template. The rest you have not the clearance. And honestly, I have not it either. It’s just that I was the one who discovered the STC.”

This was raising worrying questions. Taylor, by virtue of being the Basileia, had a sapphire-ultima clearance, while her own was sapphire-black. Above it, Segmentum-wide, it was the priority military codes and the Vermilion of the Inquisitors...

“This is a big galaxy, and I really don’t like the powers working behind the scenes...”

“Don’t worry!” Taylor said after they drank their tea. “I am willing to wait a century or two before beginning to try amendments to the edicts of the High Lords of Terra...”

**Tech-Priest T-11001100-Zeta**

When T-11001100-Zeta had almost killed Magos Eureka-Eta-Junior by forgetting two binary cants in the forge-blessing of a new plasma gun, the Graia-born loyal servant of the Omnissiah had thought he was going to receive a harsh punishment, but one which would be ultimately rescinded. His future promotions were in the odds ranging from 0.1% to 0.01% but there were successes in the Forges which could overturn unpleasant comments from a predecessor.

Blessed Machine, he had been wrong. Oh by the Holy Cog, he canted ten times per day how wrong he had been.

T-11001100-Zeta had not just lost one of his precious mechadendrites for punishment. He had also been exiled twelve standard hours later from the manufactorum of Hive Euboea where he had been assigned, and transported to the orbital facilities.

Four standard hours later, the Tech-Priest was told he was assigned to the station Zeta-Nu-Zeta-000111000 for the next standard year. Should he survive the experience, the two Magi he was promised all the sins he had committed in the cause of the Omnissiah would be absolved.

Like a grox led to the slaughterhouse, T-11001100-Zeta had accepted. He had not known station Zeta-Nu-Zeta-000111000 was most commonly named *Danger-Prototype-Central*.

Omnissiah forgive him, he had not known what sort of heretek-born madness was waiting on this station for him!

BOOM! BOOM!

The explosions vaporised plenty of...very replaceable materials, and the lab he had just left began to burn.

“ALERT. ALERT. COMPARTMENT F-6 IS IN FLAMES AND A TERTIARY-LEVEL DANGER. THE RAILGUN-THOR ROBOT IS OUT OF CONTROL. ALL SERVANTS OF THE OMNISSIAH ABLE TO LEAVE THE COMPARTMENT MUST DO SO IN THE NEXT STANDARD MINUTE. THIS IS NOT AN EXERCISE. ALERT. ALERT...”

T-11001100-Zeta ran as soon he heard the ‘out of control’ words. *Danger-Prototype-Central* was not just a research station. It was the lair of the ‘Leet parahuman threat’, a being that should have been terminated long ago by the Adeptus Mechanicus if the Great Chosen of the Omnissiah didn’t protect him for illogical reasons.

BOOM!

He had to get out of here. He didn’t want to die here. The supra-conductors beginning to sing some heretical song had been bad enough, but it was the explosions which were the real danger. For this was rule number one, two and three in this location forsaken by the Motive Force.

BOOM!

Everything which was built by the heretek named Leet exploded. And the statistics were formal: it exploded at the most inconvenient times, when it was going to ruin the greatest number of experiments and kill dozens of Tech-Priests like him.

 BOOM!

For the fifth time in as many standard days, T-11001100-Zeta successfully saved his mechadendrites and his life. Two Enginseers in Compartment F-6 were not that fast and were unconscious when the compartment’s airlocks were opened and everything was vented into the void, where it would be later collected with infinite precautions and then thrown into the heart of a star.

“Suggestions?”

“We need to kill this parahuman before he kills us...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.456.290M35**

**Sister-Confessor Yuma Irene**

“I will...wait...Colonel...my...Emperor...victory.”

These were the last words of Sergeant Juliev Darien of the Fay 20th Mechanised Infantry 3rd Company. The black-haired guardsman eyes were opened, but he was no longer speaking and the movements of his rib cage slowed down dramatically.

One by one the devices and the machines monitoring his health went from yellow, orange or red to black.

A melody was sung by more than fifty mouths of the 3rd Company veterans, most of them who had one point or another been saved by the man currently dying in front of them.

There was an alarm and a soul departed a mortal shell.

“Wait for us by the Emperor’s side, Juliev,” his Captain murmured. Like every member of the 3rd Company, Yuma had seen Feodor Khabarov and his comrade-in-arms visit every day, praying for his recovery. But in the end, the wounds caused by the perfidious xenos and the Arch-Enemy had caused too much damage for any recovery to be possible.

There were several minutes of silence after the demise of this Hero of the Imperium. Hushed whispers were heard everywhere and dozens of prayers echoed in the halls of the hospitals.

A few minutes it was the Saint who spoke, her two Space Marines staying behind at the entrance of the hospital room.

“Juliev Darien was a model of courage, perseverance, loyalty, and duty. The regiment will miss him terribly.” The Basileia took a great breath in. “I had hoped it wouldn’t be in these circumstances...on my own authority, I promote Sergeant Juliev Darien to the rank of Senior Lieutenant posthumously, and give him the medals of the Eagle Ordinary and the Knight of Nyx. You were the last one, but we did not forget you. Ave Imperator.”

The sign of the Aquila was repeated several thousand of times, and one by one the soldiers who were not of the 3rd Company saluted and left the room. The funeral vigil had begun, and Yuma rapidly imitated them. Besides, there was one thing she felt she had to do...

“Lady Basileia-Saint, I have a plea...”

The golden-armoured holy woman returned her back with sorrow and determination.

“Yes, Sister...Yuma? I thank you for the services you and your sisters have given to my wounded. Those who recovered are speaking well of your physical and spiritual devotion.”

“We are overjoyed by your gratitude, your Holiness...it’s just...I heard many confessions during this year...and...I know the words of your soldiers have not much in common with the stories spreading in the Hives of Nyx. With your permission I wish to tell the real story of the Fay 20th, seen by its humble heroes.”

The Heroine of the Imperium, blessed by the God-Emperor, did not reject her words immediately. In fact, she seemed...thoughtful.

“There are so few of us left now...” she was not sure the sentence had come from the Saint’s lips.

There were long moments of silence, and the gigantic armoured figures of the Astartes waited a dozen feet on the right and left, vigilant protectors.

“If it is your wish, who am I to deny it? Just write the truth, Sister. I don’t want any embellishment or praises for my actions repeated on hundreds of pages like thousands of books already do. Just the truth...and the memories of those who gave their lives to defend the Imperium.”

Yuma bowed.

“You will be done.”

“Farewell Sister. And I will forgive you if you do not complete your book. We were victorious, but our story had its fair share of horrors.”

There was much to do in the days which followed, but she didn’t forget. Once the funeral was over and her main religious duties discharged, Yuma Irene successfully located an old man of the 4th who was serving as a liaison for the Mechanicus, his augmetics authorising him little else.

It was a few hours after this meeting she decided on the title, once she was back on the simple habitat which was assigned to her by virtue of her Confessor status.

*Liber Sanctus*

Yuma Irene re-read her notes, and began to write.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.456.290M35**

**Seneschal-Consort Wei Cao**

“I think the red needs to be a bit brighter for this illustration.”

Wei rose from her seat for a few seconds to give this advice, before marching to the end of the room and pouring tea in two cups. This was something she did without servants, and she didn’t miss it. The silence and the companionship of the young woman nearby more than made up for it.

For several minutes, the Wuhanese-born woman watched as Taylor worked on the large book in front of her. It had all begun with a joke from Dennis Peters that her girlfriend really needed a hobby if they weren’t to consummate their relationship this year. Hours later, Wei had suggested to the insect-mistress to give some chance to artistic pursuits. She understood why playing a musical instrument was something of a sore point: a former friend breaking your mother’s prized possession was something hurtful and cruel. So she had suggested writing a book.

Honestly, Wei Cao had already many compiled hundreds of pages for a future book on the adventures of the Fay 20th the previous year.

But then, it was Taylor Hebert, Basileia of Nyx, and Exterminator of Sector threats who was the subject of this conversation.

She was going to write a book...just not a book on her. By some sixth sense which surely had to do with her insects, the young woman must have been informed books treating of Space Marines were quite rare, and three days later the Defeater of the Angel’s Bane was beginning the preliminary work on the new *Apocrypha of Dawn*. The principle was simple if not easy: two pages for the description of a Space Marine Chapter having pledged its honour and its strength to the Dawnbreaker Guard, followed by two other pages on the specific battle-brother who had joined after the Battle of the Death Star. As they were thirty-five Astartes warriors in the current Space Marine Chapters and Taylor was pretty much a perfectionist where illustrations and details were concerned, the Apocrypha was a succession of artworks, miniature badges, detailed transhuman power armours, and heraldry. Page twenty was about to be finished in a few minutes, out of one hundred and forty possible. This was a hobby which was going to keep her girlfriend busy for the next few years.

When the red pencil was laid down and it looked the writing and decoration effort was going to stop here for today, Wei handed Taylor the first cup of tea before massaging her shoulders. To her satisfaction, there were no more protests, freezing or demonstrations of discomfort. Months after months, her girlfriend was becoming more...appreciative of her efforts. The black-gold-haired General was also beginning to look at her with different looks.

It was reassuring, assuredly...presenting a facade of perfection every hour they were in public did not allow a lot to act on your feelings and your interests.

Wei had learned it the hard way...and the life of a daughter of House Cao was far less exposed than the one her current superior-girlfriend led. Yes, Wei had officially relinquished her military rank to avoid accusations of going against regulations by introducing love in the chain of command and become officially Seneschal-Consort – a polite way to say she was doing everything she had been doing before making their relationship official and standing in robes to the left of the Basileia. But even in her new duties, the weight of duties and responsibilities was far lighter than the one reserved Taylor Hebert, and they had cut down protocol and idiotic laws to the bone in order to have some free time for themselves.

A deep kiss ended the massage session, and for the next quarter of an hour they stayed against each other, holding each other’s hands, and watching the sun disappear on the horizon like a gigantic fire pressed by yellow, orange and brown shrouds.

“We could take your *Enterprise*, and sail to a Pleasure World, you know...”

Taylor giggled.

“I think we would give one or two heart strokes to the Tech-Priests, as they would try to ‘rationalise’ our behaviour while watching from orbit our undutiful activities.” Taylor sighed. “And it reminds me that if we want to anywhere, we need a good Navigator for the *Enterprise*. The three-eyed specialist the Fabricator of Quayran sent to us is on his last legs, and every jump from now has a non-negligible of killing him. I don’t want to kill myself, not to mention the tens of thousands personnel aboard, because our pilot in the Warp was too old.”

 “It’s a bit more complicated than that, I think,” Wei tempered her girlfriend while keeping her hands in hers. “Archmagos Sagami and Archmagos Sultan are convinced the...systems the creator of the *Enterprise* used to boost the Navigator’s power were a factor in increasing the precision of the warp-jumps, but at the cost of the Navigator’s life. I’m told the defaults are corrected as we speak, but...”

“But we still need to search for another Navigator, one good enough to...face the horrors unhappy with me in the Sea of Souls without flinching.”

“Wolfgang Bach and Dragon have some ideas on the subject,” Wei spoke neutrally.

“Dragon always has ideas, no matter what the subject is,” the Basileia complained dramatically. “I wonder if she has taken a single day of rest since our first landing on the Nyxian soil. If the answer is yes, I will be honestly astonished.”

This was entirely correct. Of course, Tech-Priests, minus a few exceptions here and there, were more metal, cogitators, mechadendrites and augmetics than flesh and bones. They didn’t need rest in the same sense the humans they were born as did. But even by the standards of Mechanicus Magi and Archmagi, Dragon Richter was extremely energetic, involved in dozens of projects, and more importantly respected by her colleagues of the different Forge Worlds.

“You were saying you had ideas?”

“Yes, by the astropathic communiqués we received in the last months, there are many scions of the Navis Nobilite in the warships and transports we will soon receive in orbit around Nyx.”

“I will remind you that while I have deep pockets, the price the Magisterial Houses of Terra demand for a single Navigator is likely to indebt me for decades to come.”

“Not if you bargain Hebe rejuvenation treatments and choose a House experiencing financial difficulties at the moment. I know you already fixed the prices with House Orion for the ships of Battlefleet Nyx and the Cartels using the same technique.”

“That’s true. On the other hand, if I decide to place a Navigator of a renowned House on the *Enterprise*, there’s going to be influence struggles before the decade is out.”

This was a weak protest, and they both knew it.

“Taylor, the monopoly House Orion established is going to be broken no matter what you try to protect them. At the end of the day, they’re a Nomadic House, and they simply don’t have enough Navigators to give us if the merchant trade increase one-third of the projections the Master of Logistics gave you yesterday.”

The parahuman heroine closed her eyes for an instant, before reopening them with new determination in them.

“I support my so-diligent staff has briefed you on the possible candidates. Which House is the leading contender?”

“The Magisterial House of Achelieux,” Wei answered. “They are close to perfect for our purposes. They have Navigators which combine both high power and exceptional skill, and their numbers are such that they’re unlikely to be troubled by the demand of one elite Navigator. It’s apparently known to the Mechanicus as a whole that their wealth and their prospects are on the decline. They have lost dozens of contracts in the last century, including their historical bond-gift to Battlefleet Pluto, to their rivals of House Belisarius and House Ferraci.”

“And the reason why we shouldn’t try with the Houses you just mentioned instead?” Her girlfriend asked with a serious expression.

“Well, first they’re Magisterial Houses a few steps away from the eyes of the High Lords of Terra. So their prices, as you noted yourself, are quite likely going to be ruinous for the Sector as a whole. And Gamaliel himself is against the idea.”

Something that had surprised her when she had heard the angelic Herald vehemently spoke against the idea.

“Gamaliel spoke against the idea? Gamaliel?” Taylor inquired in a semi-amused, semi-incredulous tone. “Did he give you a reason?”

“House Belisarius has adamantium-strong ties to another Chapter of a standing equal to the Blood Angels. And yes, by adamantium-strong ties, I mean they are granted an Honour Guard of Space Marines like the one you have, though no one here at Nyx knows the exact terms of their treaty. They are called the Space Wolves, and apparently there’s some bad history with them and the Sons of Sanguinius. They didn’t tell the regiment why, and I didn’t press. As for House Ferraci, they have a depressing frequency to birth psychopaths and serial killers. There are rumours their thirst of power and ambition makes them excellent Navigators, but the Blood Angels don’t want them around their warships.”

“I may ask Gamaliel for precisions and his knowledge of Navigators soon...”

They kissed twice more and discussed merrily the new decoration of the Enterprise – the Mechanicus Archmagi were amazing builders but their tastes in decoration sucked and were almost deserving of heretical judgement – before standing out from their seats.

“You’re still willing to go ahead with it?” she asked at last. If she had known the Catachan yellow ant could be so dangerous to her girlfriend, she would never have proposed it.

But now...there were consequences.

“I’m not going to do it tomorrow or in three days. The Magi are going to fill the vaults of the *Star Machine* with millions of insects, including ones having the habit to rule their communities in hive-like structures.”

The woman nearly everyone – except her, naturally – considered a Saint in the Hives of Nyx tightened her fists, and there was something in her eyes which was amazing, beautiful...and terrible.

“I defeated Lung, twice. I sent a gigantic red-skinned demon back to its infernal dimension. I am not going to stay on a stalemate with some overgrown ants and their dark mentor! I don’t care if there commercial or medical benefits at stake. This damn Catachan predator resisted me, and I will teach it why it was a bad idea.”

When she was like this, Wei was sure the enemy was going to very much regret having pissed her off.

“Hail the Queen of the Swarm...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**7.739.290M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard had a lot to say about the noble Sons of Russ that the Imperium at large called the Space Wolves.

Not a single word was a compliment.

“They smell like wet dogs.” Kratos had begun as they boarded the Thunderhawk. “And aside from their disgusting notions of hygiene, they are massive hypocrites.”

“They are undisciplined and feral, a shame for all Space Marines,” judged Zuriel of the Crimson Scions.

“They criticise Librarians like us and shout to everyone we should be removed from the ranks of our Chapter, and then like the bunch of hypocrites they are, they insist their Rune Priests are not psykers!” Epistolary Aslan spat.

“We are sometimes forced to improvise and regretfully set aside the Codex Astartes for a battle or two, but we respect its size, companies and logistical edicts. It was written by Lord Guilliman, and his brothers approved. And yes, we change certain names or certain traditions. But we conform to the spirit of the Codex, because we know that as Chapters, we must avoid the errors which caused some Legions to fall. The Wolves trample every second of their life the Codex and its rulings.” Veteran Sergeant Alfonso of the Disciples of Blood explained his left fist on his chainsword, like he was going to decapitate any Space Wolf passing by.

For the last five minutes of travel, her Astartes Honour Guard had plenty of anecdotes and remarks like the previous ones to share with her. A lot of it was...not good to hear. Really, Taylor had heard what the Black Templars did. The sons of Sigismund were very much Emperor-worshipping swordsmen unafraid of collateral damage.

But the Black Templars were loyal, and their...way of thinking was simple and elegant. Don’t want any Librarian in your ranks? There will be no Librarians among the battle-brothers. Don’t want to stay in fortresses and assume defensive warfare? There will be an Eternal Crusade waged until all enemies of humanity are vanquished. They did not respect the Codex, but they had never made any secret of that, and they were replacing it by their unbreakable faith to the God-Emperor.

The Space Wolves...they seemed more like massive hypocrites, wolf-style. And they caused as much collateral damage as the Flesh Tearer Companies when caught in episodes of the Red Thirst and the Black Rage.

This was bad...and then there was the rumour they were sometimes emptying Hives and cities of worlds they had conquered to release them on their homeworld...an ice-covered planet which was a Death World.

Taylor was not going to judge before she saw battle-brothers of this Chapter in action before her, but this reputation was giving her bad vibes.

Their landing on the *Star Machine* terminated this fascinating series of grievances, though. They were rapidly greeted by two hundred Skitarii and escorted to Magos Tyranos 0011000-Nu-Ryza-Techno. The control room had changed a lot since her previous visit. Several psykers of the different organisations of the Imperium were present, in addition to the two Librarians of her Guard. Dozens, maybe hundreds of devices supposed to prevent psyker powers from being used were covering the walls. It wasn’t exactly a good sign, she thought, that the golden sparkles surrounding her body did not seem affected in the least.

On the other hand, she had taken control over more than a million insects of all sizes since she had set a foot on the Light Cruiser. And these were just the more obvious procedures.

“We can begin,” she told the commanding officer and senior figure of the Mechanicus.

“By your command, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

The power of the stasis field slowed down before being cut off entirely, and unfortunately, despite the protections, Taylor felt her power pushing against the Catachan ant. However the resistance felt weaker than the first time.

“I felt her, and the Queen-ant is still connected to many other ants,” the parahuman informed the rest of the room. “I’m going to try to fight her. The darkness of the Hive Tyrant is not there.”

Just as the words left her mouth, the pressure intensified. Plenty of Catachan Queens must have felt like she did about the stalemate of last time, because today they went all out in a couple of breaths.

But this time, Weaver was ready. Her power and her will were ready. And she struck at them mercilessly.

Taylor didn’t know how it worked. It was a maelstrom of chitin, will and swarms. But the swarm was specialty, and suddenly the opposition had enough. Across the mental battlefield, she knew instinctively the Queens had decided their own Hives were more important than the prisoner of the Star Machine. Suddenly there was only one ant left where there had been hundreds of thousands if not millions...

In her fury she pushed and forced inch by inch the last of the ant resistance to explode.

It was...unpleasant. Unlike every other insect, the ant was not unintelligent. It was sentient, of this she had no doubts about.

She could taste the anger of the ant at the red robes which had captured her, the concern for the colony she had left on Catachan, the resignation at having met something more powerful than her...

It was terribly addictive, and suddenly the insect-mistress was very glad she had not the power to control humans the same way she did bugs. Because a power like that...no, better to forget it entirely.

The sensations changed. The effect was like she was bathed in a cold substance, and suddenly the entire universe was filled with gold. It was refreshing...and it stopped abruptly.

When it dissipated, all resistance from the ant was...inexistent. In fact, she was feeling something very much like adoration from the Catachan ant. As her powers were not busy anymore fighting millions of enemies she was also watching the screens of the Mechanicus control room. For a second, she didn’t know why most people were gaping, Astartes included.

Then she realised that the insect she had fought twice to subdue had changed. Oh, it was still very much a common predator of one of the most dangerous Death Worlds in the galaxy.

But it sure as hell hadn’t been a bright gold when the Magos and his Tech-Priests assistants had deactivated the stasis machinery.

Yes, bright gold.

It was like the ant had been thrown in a pool of gold paint for a few minutes before being told to let it dry.

“This is a success,” suddenly she felt...not exhausted, but disoriented and angry at having something she didn’t understand pushed towards her.

“Yes, a success...” Gavreel Forcas began to laugh somewhat hysterically, and by the way most of the Tech-Priests and the Astartes followed, she wondered if reality had suddenly gone mad in the last seconds.

Imbedded in the ant’s mind as she was, Taylor could now feel every ant on the Light Cruiser answering to her commands. The Catachan ant may have been interesting for some of her fluid regeneration abilities, but it was obviously boosting the range of her insect-controlling abilities...

And then the alarms began to scream.

“What is it now?” Weaver managed to keep her exasperation somewhat controllable. She had tamed – though she didn’t know how – a massive ant and painted it in gold. That should give her a respite, right?

“There are hundreds of Warp translations around one the Mandeville Points, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” blurted one of the Tech-Priests.

It took several minutes, but at long last the identification codes were transmitted and the powerful long-range auspexes gave visuals and there was no room for error.

“The great fleet of Blessed Mars has arrived.”

“Their celerity has beaten our earliest prediction models by two dozen standard days...”

**Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix**

“It is confirmed, Archmagos. The Omnissiah be praised, we are exactly in the system we are supposed to be. The data is 99.999999% conclusive. This is the Nyx System, capital of the Nyx Sector, Samarkand Quadrant, Ultima Segmentum.”

Gastaph Hediatrix gave a quick but powerful cant-prayer to the Omnissiah.

“Praise the Cog, the Motive Force and the Holy Machine,” the Archmagos commanding Twelfth Fleet voiced before returning to more material issues. “Is every warship present and accounted for?”

“Yes Archmagos, though the destroyer *Soul of Plasteel* has suffered major damage and will need extensive repairs.”

“Acceptable,” Explorator Primus Camus-Nero Storm replied three metres on his right. “It seems we will have no need to execute our Navigators and our Astropaths in the end, Archmagos.”

“Indeed, Explorator Primus.”

When the near-totality of their psykers aboard had announced they were following a ‘light beacon’ which had blinded them before vanishing seconds later, Gastaph Hediatrix had to be advised by his senior Magi not to kill these unbelievers immediately. The appearance of the same beacon a few minutes later seemed to have vindicated them, and they had emerged from the Warp with very minor casualties.

There were still going to be a lot of interrogations until he was sure they would never do the same thing in their lives. Otherwise servitorhood was going to sound like a pleasant fate in comparison to the torments he would inflict to them.

“Contact the servants of the Omnissiah in this system. Announce the purpose of our arrival. Proclaim the majesty of the Quest for Knowledge.”

It was for the Noosphere records. The stations and patrols of this system may be far below Sol in term of capabilities, but the Martian Archmagos knew it was impossible to have missed them. Four Ark Mechanicus, twelve Battleships, twenty-four Cruisers, and hundreds of escorts and starships which had joined them at every jump were not something the naval garrison could miss.

Then something made him frown.

“Cog and sacred oils...there’s a Cawlite battleship in orbit around the third planet of this system!”