**Tyranny 12.1**

**(Interlude)**

**Blood Bath**

*We won.*

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

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

*Twenty-one Battleships. Nine Battle-Barges. Two Grand Cruisers. Sixteen Battlecruisers. Three War Barques. One hundred and five Cruisers of all types. Twenty-one Strike Cruisers. One hundred and thirty-one Light Cruisers. One hundred and ninety-three Destroyers. Two hundred and four Frigates. Two hundred and twenty-six Corvettes. Five thousand three hundred and fifty-one Interceptors. And four thousand eight hundred and four Bombers.*

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

*It does not include that thousands of other warships have been battered into impotence, and will need years to repair, if they can be repaired at all.*

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

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

*It would have been a nightmare made reality.*

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

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

*Forty-nine million three hundred thousand of the guardsmen mustered for Operation Stalingrad have been killed, wounded so badly Bacta can only mitigate the damage, or been declared missing in the multiple battles we fought.*

*For the Skitarii, this number is just above fifty-four million, and most of them were killed in action, for they took an insane percentage of the fatalities for the Imperium at Mandragora and on all other battlefields where they confronted the Necron threat.*

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

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

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

*Over eighty Titans and two hundred and twenty Knights have been wiped out or crippled beyond repair.*

*We won.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*We haven't properly estimated the losses of the Orks and the Tyranids yet. They are in the billions, and where the former are concerned, they make the idea of counting the Necron losses positively sane by comparison.*

*We won.*

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

*They will be worth it.*

*And now I am going to sleep.*

*Return to the abyss, old horrors.*

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

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Sophano System**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

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

Thought for the day: Blood is the Key.

**Warlord** **Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

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

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

But they had committed a huge mistake.

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

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

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

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

It had been glorious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lotara didn't participate, though she savoured every drop of blood spilled in the arenas and corridors together with the *Conqueror*.

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

It was...impressive.

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

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

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

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

Since then, Lotara had already promoted him twice.

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

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

That was, admittedly, a very good question.

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

There was no significant pull from Khorne, but the urge in her heart was clear.

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

"Why," Lotara smiled, "we will land at the Spaceport, of course."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To this, Kossolax was forced to grunt and nod.

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

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

Thus yes, xenos had been expected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But no longer." Lotara stated simply. If they had continued to deny the will of the Blood God, they wouldn't be here and now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. As long as they remain in their proper place."

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

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

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

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

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

The planet's defilement grew more obvious rapidly after that. There were countless lakes, some of blood, some of pure darkness where great ships sailed. There were mountains, some of them from skulls alone, others from twisting and shivering masses of flesh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Salamanders aren't going to be very happy at this shameless imitation."

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

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

Spikes were falling by the thousands upon some dancing warriors. Monsters resembling giant monkeys were trying to rip apart the whip-armed 'Champions'.

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

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

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

Blood was flowing, and the strong survived and thrived.

They had no guide, but there was no need for one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last gates before them opened slowly.

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

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

She advanced. She was immediately forced to stop.

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

It was an immense pool of blood.

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

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

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

"Isn't it obvious?" The words arrived like a sublime music, yet one which was drowning in murderous pleasure, "this is my private bath."

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

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

The contrast could not be more vivid between this pearly white and the long red hair that seemed to have taken the very shade of blood it was bathed in.

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

She was a creature of white and red, standing knee-deep in a pool of blood.

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

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

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

"Where I come from, it is good to begin with introductions. I am Lotara Sarrin, captain of the *Conqueror*. Who are you?"

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

"I am Hekatii, the Blood Muse." The xenos presented herself while looking at her like she was deciding if she was a prey worthy of her attention. "Once High Priestess of Khaine, once Priestess of Slaanesh...now I am enslaved by the Blood God."

Lotara was not impressed.

"Oh yes, I have seen your Temple. How reluctant you are to serve the Skull Throne."

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

"I speak the truth, *Mon-keigh*."

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

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

"And yet I can give you orders."

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

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

"Warlord," Kossolax grunted. "Why aren't we getting rid of that-"

"Don't be foolish," Lotara cut him off in a conversational tone, knowing that the monster was going to hear everything, whisper or not, "this Muse of Blood is far more powerful than I am."

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

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

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

Only her head was still uncovered; this could be done at any moment, Lotara was sure of it.

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

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

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

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Malfi Warp Crown**

**Malfi System**

**Recondium**

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

**Warlord** **Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Everyone expected her to go back to Malfi.

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

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

But alas, the promises were lies.

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

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

Malicia needed critical information.

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

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

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

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

There was really a huge white snake slithering through the library gate...and the beast was half the height of a Knight.

The snake was albino, by the way, and its red pupils confirmed it. And it was used as a transport by the 'welcoming committee'.

That was...original.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The answers are yes, and yes, Majestryx."

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

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

"Then swear."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But you changed the name of your Caste."

"We had...visions. Before and after we were teleported onto this world." To note, the Low Gothic of the TauAmbassador was flawless.

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

"The Scribe Caste did. This Sept is now called Fe'saan."

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

"You can, Majestryx. We are at your service."

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

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

The list of 'requests' she had intended to give to the Prime Librarian flew into the Ambassador's hands.

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

Minutes later, after a lot of 'reassurances' that confirmed that yes, all the Tau were silver-tongued diplomats, Malicia was invited inside the One True Library...which had been considerably modified.

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

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

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

Sorcery was practised openly in the libraries. It was done for mundane tasks...and for vital ones. Some particularly ruthless Tau 'diplomats' were assassinating their rivals by slamming books of metal onto their skulls. Others were creating new generations of the 'Scribe Caste' by...some heavily modified eggs transformed by sorcery.

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

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

"The Por'la librarians have found what you seek. This way, Majestryx."

The Tau delegation was joined by other members who looked far more like taciturn librarians, and they rapidly descended the levels until they arrived in some sort of small basement.

Judging by how dusty the archives looked, the books stored there had been here for a while...and the Tau 'Scribe Caste' had certainly used some form of sorcery to find the correct section, for there was no archival system whatsoever in view.

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

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

There was one certainty, however.

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

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

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

The pages of the voluminous books on the stands were turning at a fantastical rate, and it seemed impossible for the old Tau librarian to be able to assimilate the information within the pages...yet somehow, Malicia was sure the blue-skinned alien was doing exactly that.

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

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

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

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

Terminally unpleasant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Merica**

**Mega-Hive Cajun**

**Secondary Headquarters of the Adeptus Almitas**

**0.646.310M35**

**Adept-Primus** **Joost Harpagon**

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

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

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

"Thank you, Sir!"

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

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

"Our dear Adept-Primus has attracted superb cooks to his service," agreed another Adept of the Adeptus Administratum.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Sanguinala," the other Adept correctly deduced.

"Indeed," Joost smiled. "And when-"

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

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

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

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

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

"The Living Saint. Weaver. The Arch-Arsonist of Commorragh."

"Yes, Lord Adept!"

"Please tell me that she didn't kill anyone among the Top One Hundred Bounties."

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

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

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

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

No, it was worse!

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**Inner Sanctum**

**The Renaissance Council Room**

**0.676.310M35**

**Chancellor** **of the Imperial Council Leonardo Melchior**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was...victory.

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

But they were not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Lord High Admiral cleared his throat a second later.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmm...the Holy Ordos is in favour of a Triumph."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But it is just a suggestion...my fellow Lords."

**Holy Terra**

**Europa**

**Fort Aquitania**

**0.681.310M35**

**Lord** **Militant Commander Paul von Oberstein**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Emperor," began Anubis Excelsor once the very curt courtesies were completed, "desires to know which rank you will be promoting Lady Taylor Hebert to."

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

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

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

Paul von Oberstein shrugged dramatically.

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

"And Lord Solar? Or in this case, Lady Solar?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And on this, the Custodes left his office.

Paul von Oberstein waited for several seconds before sighing.

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

**Terra**

**Old Muscovy**

**Hive Volgograd**

**The Rogue Trader Museum**

**0.684.310M35**

**Solar** **Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

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

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

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

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

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

Holy Terra had everything.

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

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

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

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

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

And they had never returned.

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

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

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

There was only one certainty.

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

"SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE!"

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

Maps were torn to shreds.

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

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

The destruction which followed was...quite impressive.

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

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

Nicephorus huffed, turned his head away, and waited.

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

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

"Unfortunately, Xerxes, *she*," Nicephorus wasn't going to utter her name, he wasn't that suicidal or masochistic, "has a gift for accomplishing the impossible every time she goes to war."

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

"You are going to tell me 'I told you so', aren't you?"

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

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

"But it was."

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

"Yes. Give me the bad news."

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

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

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

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

"And?"

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

"I was assured they didn't like *her*."

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

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

"The various accusations we pushed against her are returning to us like a crazy demolition engine," the Solar Guardian of Records reported grimly, "many of our solicitors were told bluntly they were lucky they didn't have enough evidence to try them as heretics. Most of the cases are dismissed, sometimes with the vellum they were penned on burned in front of them."

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

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

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

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

"Who stands with us?"

The answer was short.

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

"So far?"

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

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

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

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

"And what do you suggest, then?"

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

"Weren't you the one who complained that it was going to get too expensive?"

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

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

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Ardium**

**Hive Volubilis**

**2.779.310M35**

**Lady** **Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

Taylor was half-asleep in an enormous armchair in the colours of the Ultramarines when Dragon arrived.

"Someone had a very exhausting morning..."

And the Tinker received a large yawn in response.

"I didn't see you volunteer for a spar with the Queen of Blades, Dragon."

Dragon chuckled.

"I will admit, after certain rumours spread, a spar wasn't what came to mind."

The unimpressed sniff which came was very loud and royal.

"I am not going to sleep with her Dragon," the insect-mistress yawned again. "I already have a lot of difficulties adapting to the sensations which come with an Aeldari body. I am not going to go down that road...and anyway, I first want to speak to Wei in person before I invite anyone else into our bed."

"Gossip-mongers will be so disappointed," the Nyxian Minister of Industry smirked.

"Don't go further in that direction," the Lady General warned, "I have an active love life...unlike a few parahumans I could name."

"I am changing the order of the day immediately," Dragon promised, as an Adjutant-Spider arrived, preceding a small column of insects carrying a few sugary rations and refreshments.

"And what is this 'order of the day'?"

"The major projects we are going to have to fund in the coming years. The order of priority will have to be...modified."

"The NBP comes first. The NAPAP comes second." There was a third yawn. "I thought I sent Artemis to give you a list yesterday."

"Oh, I received it. And on the first two points, I completely agree. The New Battleship Program and the New Astartes Power Armour Program are vital, both for the Imperium and the Nyx Sector."

They were so important, in fact, that the preparations for them had begun before Operation Stalingrad officially began, though how critical they were had taken new levels of priority very recently.

And this was one of the reasons a large force of Magma Spiders Astartes and several Salamanders were going to immediately head to Nyx the moment this quarantine was formally over.

"We are going to have to allocate more funding to the research program of quantum cogitators, of course. With Admiral delivering you the STC template to build Argus hyper-auspexes, it is incredibly important we integrate this major advance into the prototype of NBP."

"Will Archmagos Sultan be able to modify the prototype with hyper-auspex and complete it in fourteen months? I seem to remember there were already some unique challenges."

"Based on the latest astropathic coded messages, I believe the Mistress of Ships has everything under control. She has already sent several of her subordinates to the Tau in the Ouralia System, by the way."

"How wonderful to have capable subordinates," Taylor murmured while abandoning her sleeping position and accepting a glass of water from her beetles. "I believe you are all a bit too optimistic, but if you can do everything in the timetable we agreed upon, I will not interfere."

"We can and we will," Dragon assured her, "don't forget that we have six months right after this deadline to convince all the representatives of the different Forge Worlds our Battleship design deserves to be built in significant numbers."

Taylor nodded, but remained sceptical. Dragon didn't tease her, for the NBP was a very big endeavour. The Imperial Navy had many Battleships to defend the Nyx Sector now, but none of them had been built this millennium in Nyxian or Wuhanese yards. All the yard crews had done was to make short or long-term maintenance upon these enormous warships.

Building a Battleship was more than a sign of prestige; it translated into a considerable amount of influence where all Adeptuses of the Imperium were concerned.

Moreover, the construction of Battleships was only the first step. If they wanted to build highly specialized designs like Astartes Battle-Barges, the New Battleship Program had to be a resounding success.

"You mentioned you didn't agree on some other points, Dragon."

"Yes." The Tinker shook her head. "Respectfully, Taylor, I think you are willing to invest in too few research programs."

To her relief, the Basileia of Nyx snorted.

"Twelve military and twelve civilian programs of Sapphire-class importance are not something I would call 'too few', Dragon. And besides, the limiting factor has many times been the number of Tech-Priests we can place on each program. Nyx has billions of red-robed enthusiasts, but the number of those who are both trustworthy and skilled enough to be considered for these programs is not a hundredth of that number."

"That was true fourteen years ago," the Tinker disagreed...respectfully. "It is less and less true these days. And the Magisterium supports me."

"They do?"

The scepticism in the insect-mistress' voice wasn't unwarranted; the Magisterium was by its very nature a conservative organisation.

"They do." Dragon gave a large data-slate to the Adjutant-Spider, who eagerly began to read it.

"Dragon," Taylor sighed, proving that for all her attempts to make it seem that she wasn't paying any attention to it, she was reading the same thing her arachnid servant was, "that is going to be incredibly expensive."

"Even after the bounties will be paid?"

The groan was very loud and very comical.

"Well, first, I have to...convince the Adeptus Almitas to pay the bounties. According to my sources, the Adept-Primus of that particular organisation is on his way to Pluto and considering life as a hermit."

Dragon giggled. This was incredibly funny...though apparently, Taylor didn't appear to appreciate the humour of the whole situation.

The Basileia of Nyx sighed.

"I am less than convinced we can find everyone we need to make those programs complete successes, Dragon. And funding them may require borrowing Throne Gelts from the Banking Houses for the first time since I became Basileia. And you know how I hate that."

"Yes," Dragon conceded in a more serious tone. "On the other hand, you really defanged them well before Operation Caribbean."

"And I am not eager to give them the tools to bite again."

The Adjutant-Spider gave her back the data-slate.

"I am going to consider the different programs you proposed," Taylor announced after five seconds of silence. "I will make the final decisions on an individual basis. I did note some of them won't have their principal research headquarters in the Nyx System."

"We can't hoard them, no matter how good it is from a draconic point of view," the Tinker replied virtuously. "And really, we need testing grounds where there aren't billions of potential witnesses."

"The latter sounds like a more reasonable argument."

"The former is twisting your long ears?"

The new groan was even more impressive than the previous one.

"Not you too...I already had several Harlequins commenting on my mistakes when I sparred with the Queen of Blades...and their jokes were horrible!"

"Well, speaking of jokes that have lasted for far too long, when are they going to escort Rogal Dorn and Jaghatai Khan here? Having them lost in the Webway for several more millennia is an extremely poor use of the sons of the Emperor's talents."

The insect-mistress grimaced.

"From what the clowns hinted, it is going to take...some time."

"Aren't they the servants of the Master of the Webway?"

"Yes, they are. And that's the problem. The Primarchs aren't in the Webway tunnels anymore."

"Isn't that good news? I mean, you gave Dorn a psy-beacon, and between the Space Marines and two Primarchs, they can fight their way out of most dangerous situations."

"Cegorach himself told me he expects the Primarch to rush back into the Webway once they admit defeat," the woman who had now won the Battles of Commorragh and Macragge revealed with a disabused smirk. "I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like good news to me..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Traxis Frontier Exploration Zone**

**Nectavus System**

**Nectavus VI**

**9.781.310M35**

**Primarch** **Rogal Dorn**

"Brother?"

"Yes, Jaghatai, I'm all ears."

Rogal knew that tone. It was the one Jaghatai used when he thought Rogal was doing something stupid.

"I'm sure you had a lot of fun killing that enormous reptile-"

"I didn't have 'a lot of fun'", the Primarch of the Imperial Fists protested energetically. "And for the trouble it caused me, I am going to eat it, even if it's the last thing I ever do."

The thing had scales harder than the armour of a Baneblade, and it had taken a lot of ingenuity and the judicious use of the local environment to slay it.

"Well, consider myself corrected," Jaghatai replied cheerfully, his terrible scars making his good humour all the more incomprehensible, "I just wanted to inform you there's a storm of iron shards coming this way."

"Again?"

The ground rumbled under their feet.

"A new earthquake? Really?"

"Well, it must have only been ten minutes since the last one-"

A tongue of fire rose north of their position. On any battlefield, Rogal would have guessed it was something having a very bad day.

On this cursed planet? It was the signal for something altogether worse.

"And now we have the super-eruption of the hour."

Then the ground shook extremely violently, proof the rumble had been a mere prelude for the new round of earthquakes.

The next minutes were spent surviving the shockwaves of the volcanic explosion and the hordes of super-predators on the hunt as thousands of animal species fled the lava, the toxic gases, and more lethal dangers.

"I'm not one to easily say it, Lord," one of the two Salamanders Space Marines with them exclaimed, "but it really feels like home!"

"Come on brother, the only moment the air is that toxic is during the Time of Trials!" The second Salamander chided. "Of course, the beasts are a bit too small and not dangerous enough to be considered equals to our magnificent Salamanders..."

Rogal shook his head. Of course the sons of Vulkan were going to say that. On the other hand, the fact they could compare their home of Nocturne and this fresh hell where they had emerged in from the Webway without exaggerating was hardly a source of relief.

The storms of iron, in particular, had to be endured to be believed.

"Jaghatai...are you sure?"

"Rogal, there is no way the devices we have will be able to be detected by any human ship visiting this system. The iron and the spores saturating the atmosphere are too thick. Our only chance to escape would be to find a permanent fortress of the Imperium on this world. Given how...amusing our progress, or lack of it, has been on this very world, I don't think the chances of meeting a beachhead of intrepid Rogue Traders on this Death World are particularly high."

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists nodded slowly.

Death World. How he hated those two words.

Yes, technically his homeworld of Inwit was one, but there were Death *Worlds* and then there were *Death* Worlds. Inwit, as long as you worked hard, could be a refuge for Mankind. This world they were trying to explore was anything but.

"You think our best chance is to go back to the Webway."

"I'm beginning to think it is our *only* chance of survival," Jaghatai replied with a slight chuckle. "Sooner or later, one of us will make a mistake...and even if we don't, the Space Marines by our side have accumulated injuries. We need a hideout where we aren't attacked every hour...and we won't find it on this planet."

Rogal Dorn gritted his teeth.

"I have a feeling I know now why that purple-gold clown was mocking us with quantities of ironic farewell gestures when we rushed out of the Webway Gate..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Ardium**

**Hive Emeritus**

**2.804.310M35**

**Primarch** **Roboute Guilliman**

Roboute did not rise from the massive *thing* he was forced to use to sit, but this wasn't a mark of disrespect...it was just that when it took around fifteen minutes to be encased into this medically-purposed structure, there was no way for him to get out in mere seconds.

Otherwise he would have stood up to welcome the woman who had been so vital in saving Macragge.

Irony of ironies, Lady Taylor Hebert had not come clad in her golden armour today, much like his brothers. This meant he was the only one in power armour...though at least he had the excuse of not being able to remove it.

"Can I offer my congratulations for your promotion?" The Lord of Ultramar decided he might as well begin, since neither Leman nor Corvus was willing to do so. "Lady General Militant is a just reward for all your military achievements."

"Thank you." A faint smile appeared on her lips. "Technically, I was already commanding multiple Battle Groups and Army Groups for all the duration of this campaign, but the promotion is nice...and will remove several problems and issues which regularly arrived on my desk."

"Ah yes, *those* problems," Leman didn't spit, but it was most likely because the marble floor had been rubbed and cleansed thoroughly before this audience.

"You will have to forgive my poor brother here," the Primarch of the Raven Guard interjected. "Our father didn't create him to integrate bureaucracy problems in his warfare methods."

"HA!"

"Now that the initial courtesies have been observed," the very young woman declared, adjusting her long robe in the colours of the Blood Angels to sit more easily, "I am regretful that I must first speak of a most unpleasant subject. The quarantine procedures are soon going to be completed, but the next major problem is already knocking at the door. The temperatures are continually dropping outside, and for all the efforts of my Ambulls and Ants to create nice underground shelters, it is not enough."

Roboute winced. He had not doubted that the last minutes of the devastating battle had changed Ardium's climate beyond recognition, but some part of him had hoped that by the time the quarantine procedures were over, the temperatures would rise again. He had not thought they would reach forty degrees Celsius again, but five or ten would have been adequate.

Apparently, this was not going to happen. Not this year, and likely not this decade.

"You are going to suggest evacuation."

"Yes." The golden wings were unfurled in all her majesty as the Lady General Militant nodded. "We can feed the population of Ardium, that's not the problem. The Agri World of Nova Thulium is intact, and I am very thankful for that, otherwise starvation would have been a very real prospect. But none of the Ardium Hives was designed to endure extremely low temperatures for long, and that was before the Tyranids came and caused a major refugee crisis, which is now compounded with an energy one."

"Surely many of the men of Ardium will love the snow!"

By common accord, everyone around the table chose to ignore the outburst of Leman Russ.

"I thought about it," sometimes Roboute was not happy his mind led him to conjure plans the moment he saw a problem, and this was one of those moments. "And I believe I have a solution."

On his command, Cawl activated remotely the hololith next to the table, revealing a map of the now defunct Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar.

South of Parmenio's blue dot, a golden icon began to shine.

"This is the Frontier World of Shiloh. When I fought my last battle in the thirty-first millennium, it was one of the planets which were still part of the Realm of Ultramar, as I had yet to give it to one of the Chapters of the Second Founding. I had intended to give it to a new Chapter, but...circumstances prevented it."

"And it has remained a Frontier World for the last four millennia?" Corvus Corax asked with interest.

Roboute shrugged.

"After I was placed into stasis, the system was more or less forgotten, condemned to remain a backwater. It is only a recent dispute between the Administratum and Ultramar which made it relevant again."

He was going to need to make some concessions, but it was the best solution...in a sea of very bad ones.

"The problem of course is the logistics," Roboute Guilliman continued. "Out of a population of seventy-five billion, my intelligence resources estimate that within a year, seventy billion men, women, and children will want to leave Ardium. And obviously, Ultramar has neither the ships to transport them without crippling some other vital parts of the Realm nor does it have the industrial capacity to build the basic necessities on Shiloh."

"But I do." Lady Taylor Hebert remarked calmly. "Or rather, the Adeptus Mechanicus does, when it comes to the industrial capacity. I have the ships to organise this...exodus."

"Indeed. I am-"

"It will be done."

Russ laughed like a mad man on his right, the traitor.

"You should have let him speak, girl! He was able to give you a splendid speech, promising you plenty of concessions, and fill our ears with some splendid Macraggian rhetoric!"

Roboute glared at the Lord of Fenris. Unfortunately, this only seemed to make his brother howl in laughter...and more loudly than before.

"Ahem...yes, maybe I intended to do that. Are you sure?"

"At the pace the Administratum or any other major organisation is moving, the population of Ardium will still be here in a decade, something that will result in billions of deaths once the infrastructure damaged by the invasion or overwhelmed by the refugees' needs inevitably fails. I am here. I have the contacts and the resources. I am not going to stay idle while tens of millions perish."

The golden-winged woman passed a hand through her black hair.

"Obviously, I will expect...compensations. Depending on the future main exports of Shiloh, some privileges to buy first before other potential customers or something like that."

"That sounds...reasonable."

"And Ardium itself?" Russ asked, having finally stopped howling like a lunatic. "It can't fulfil its duty as a Hive World anymore if the Hives are near-empty."

For the first time, the powerful woman who had tied herself to the sons of Sanguinius seemed very surprised.

"I thought it was agreed it would become the new homeworld of the Wolves? You know, with the different branches of the Adeptus Terra being very happy a certain Fenrisian Chapter is nowhere to be found in any of the major Segmentums...according to the rumours, the local Adepts are openly celebrating."

"It remains to be seen. Roboute is making things difficult." It had not taken long before he remembered why, all too often, he had wanted to strangle Leman Russ during the Great Crusade.

"I am not opposing it in principle. But there are proper procedures. And I have to take into the account the will of Ardium citizens. Some of them want to stay...and they object vociferously to being ruled by your larger-than-life Fenrisian saga-seekers."

This time, it was the turn of Lady Taylor Hebert to chuckle and place a hand in front of her mouth.

"I admit that it sounds like a...fascinating clash of cultures. I will leave you to your brotherly negotiations, then. Though will you be able to deal with it before Lord Russ here leaves for Terra? Per the Custodes' orders, the *Enterprise*'s Pylon has been transferred to their ship, and its departure is only a matter of days, not weeks."

If there was any truth to the rumour the Custodes had promised several more Pylons to the Lady General Militant so they could reach Terra faster, there was no sign of it to be found in Taylor Hebert's face.

"Probably not," Leman grunted.

"Almost certainly not," Corvus corrected.

Black eyes looked at each of them with amusement...before turning away, and deciding that whatever the problem, it was not something she was prepared to involve herself with.

"The next reason I invited you," Roboute continued after clearing his throat and receiving some pain for it, "is the Bacta issue. I have been informed of all the...problems and incidents some troublesome representatives created at the 'Nyxian Bacta Conference'."

"I had no doubt you would find out in time," was the polite reply.

And no more words were uttered, which meant the very theoretical and pessimistic scenario the Thirteenth Primarch had contemplated was very much the current reality.

Roboute was trying to think about the best approach when Russ, as usual, jumped in with armoured boots to attack the problem.

"Then we call a Second Bacta Conference and change the-"

"No." Power seemed to radiate from the winged body of the woman many considered a Saint. Not enough to impress a Primarch, since it was far weaker than their genitor's aura of power...but it was far from an insignificant display of power. "Absolutely not."

"You have the authority." Leman was stubborn, that had always been one of his best qualities...and one of the traits that got him in trouble on countless occasions.

"I have the authority to call for a Second Bacta Conference," Lady Taylor Hebert corrected. "But the Bacta Accord I signed with my blood is something I intend to respect. I gave my word to all the Chapters who negotiated with Nyx. I am not going to break that trust."

Corvus clapped his hands in approval...and Roboute couldn't pretend to be surprised. After all, Deliverance was a Bacta depot-fortress, much like Nyx, Chogoris, Terra, Nocturne, Baal, Talus IV, Mortikah IV, and Talasa Prime.

"My brother spoke poorly. I don't think it would be wise to break any agreement of that importance, no. But I'm sure that you understand our desire to...renegotiate for more favourable terms after what happened when some of my sons behaved like imbeciles."

"I understand." The ruler of the Nyx Sector winced. "I really do. And as I said, I can call up a new Bacta Conference. It is within my authority, and the victory I won in this very system has generated plenty of good will. But it is the different Chapters who negotiated in good faith the first time that you will have to convince. Because, while not giving specific details, I can tell you that a majority of the sons of Sanguinius, Vulkan, and Dorn are not in the mood to do you any favours in that regard. And even if the latter were willing, the High Lords of Terra have a copy of the agreement. They won't agree to decrease the percentage of stocks stored in the Sol System; they have the veto power, and they won't be afraid to use it."

Roboute looked at his raven-brother...who nodded with a grimace.

Wonderful, so that was a feeling shared by the Astartes who used Deliverance for the Bacta delivery too...

"To make matters even more problematic, one of the Bacta storage facilities is very close to Macragge, on the world of Talasa Prime." The commanding officer of Operation Stalingrad opened her hands in a placating gesture. "All the other storage facilities are quite distant from each other, a good thing given how big this galaxy is."

And reading between the lines, the creation of the Sigillite that had gone way beyond anything he might have imagined...the Inquisition was not willing to negotiate down its part of the Bacta deliveries, and was already finding good arguments to deny them.

"Couldn't production be increased outside of the Nyx Sector?" Roboute proposed. "I saw in the documents I was able to access that you only spoke of the Nyxian production-"

"I am not going to play with words when it comes to Astartes Chapters," the young woman immediately refused. "I do that quite often with other parties, and I already don't like it. Setting aside the matters of honour, the different gene-lines trusted me with the Bacta Conference, and I am not going to break that trust by exploiting loopholes. I can increase the production inside the Nyx Sector; that was already something planned when this campaign began. But since the deliveries per storage facilities are fixed in percent of the overall production, this won't help Macragge at all."

"We are running in circles," Russ complained and all the eyes turned towards him. "What if we change the stalemated situation? If we make Macragge indispensable so that the other Chapters have no choice but to accept this system will become the tenth storage facility for your Bacta?"

The eyes of Lady Taylor Hebert widened in surprise. Yes, one more soul who was surprised Leman Russ was far more than his appearance of 'Barbarian King of the cold' suggested at first glance.

"That would be...ideal." The female warrior who had done most of the work when it came to Lorgar's execution agreed. "But what could make Macragge so indispensable, Lord Russ? The shrine of a dead Primarch is not going to be enough..."

"I had the idea," their blonde-haired brother informed each and every one of this meeting's participants, "of extending the system you imagined with Bacta to one for the Armouries of Space Marines."

Roboute opened his mouth...and was left speechless for a couple of seconds.

"This...it could work. Brother?"

"It could." Corvus agreed.

"Yes...it is something that could convince some reluctant Chapters, especially those waging the majority of their campaigns in Ultima Segmentum," Taylor Hebert conceded, her wings being quite agitated by the 'solution' Russ proposed. "Of course, unlike the last time where I could resolve more or less every problem by sending the Red Bacta to the Throneworld, we will need a majority vote of the High Twelve. There's no way they would tolerate something so huge going on without their approval. Bacta? It is near-miraculous in its effects, but it only heals wounded Astartes. It is a decisive help, but it won't conjure the shells and armours to wage decades-long wars."

"I will deal with the High Lords." Take a guess which of the three Primarchs present was the one to speak the dramatic words. "Prepare the Second Bacta Conference in my absence."

**Edge of the Eye of Terror**

**The Fulda Gate**

**Lunar-class Cruiser *Limpopo Ocean***

**8.808.310M35**

**Captain** **Daniels Presley**

"I regret to announce we've lost the elusive Raider, Sir."

Daniels Presley tried to not smile at the disappointed face of the young Ensign who had just admitted his failure...if failure there was.

The veteran Captain of the Imperial Fleet was far less inclined than the young man to believe someone had screwed up.

"Ensign, this is the Fulda Gate. Locating something here is like finding the correct Munitorum data-slate in a vault some idiot has filled with hundreds of years of useless bureaucratic notes."

There was a reason the view on the bridge of the *Limpopo Ocean* was limited to grey, ugly walls of metal. Armaglass was all fine and good when you wanted to go sightseeing, but so close to the Eye of Terror, it was a one-way ticket to losing your mind...if you were lucky.

Daniels couldn't look outside, but he knew what was waiting less than ten million kilometres away: raging storms of energy, tides of empyrean horrors, and many more things that outright shouldn't exist.

The *Limpopo Ocean* and its crew were close, very close to the edge of this gigantic anomaly that everyone smart stayed well away from.

"That wasn't a Raider," his executive officer gently informed the too-young Ensign. "No Warp-capable ship with a tonnage less than a Destroyer can sail through the Fulda Gap."

Really, it was entirely possible that nothing less than a Battleship would be able to weather the apocalyptic maelstroms raging in this region at the edge of the Eye of Terror.

Permanent Gates that allowed the heretics and their pet monsters to launch raids outside the Eye were extremely rare. That was why the latest batch of Traitors had attacked the Cadian Gate and the Fortress Worlds barring the way. They simply had no other good option but ramming their heads against the Battlefleets and the millions of men waiting for them there.

There were lesser Gates all around the Eye, of course.

But few of them were stable, and the heretics' ships that tried to use them to evade Cadia's vigilance in general found out they may have been a little bit too confident in their ability to evade all attempts of the Eye to kill them.

Sometimes, the Imperial Navy found some debris to testify there had been a raid attempt. In even rarer cases, they found a sizeable wreck.

In the last year alone, the *Limpopo Ocean* had found three, all of them most likely belonging to Styx-class Heavy Cruisers that had been decommissioned centuries ago and were now used by the Traitors to wage their wars against the loyal officers of the God-Emperor.

Daniels Presley was thinking 'most likely', because none of the debris had been longer than a few hundred metres at most.

The Fulda Gate was a really stupid name, honestly. The Fulda Rift should be far more appropriate. But a long-dead Lord Admiral must have wanted to give his name to something, and 'Gate' must have sounded far better than the other options.

"There could have been something, you know," his chief of staff smiled as the poor Ensign returned to his daily duties, which included delivering the morning drinks of the *Limpopo Ocean's* bridge crew.

"Now? I doubt it." Daniels shook his head. "Some days after the heretics attacked Cadia? That would have made sense. A few ships could have sneaked away while everyone was busy holding Cadia and the Gate. Now? What the hell would Raiders achieve?"

"Trying to sneak away, I suppose." His chief of staff snorted before his incredulous expression. "Heretics aren't the most rational of beings."

"True."

"And they could think that with only the *Limpopo Ocean* watching the Fulda Gap, they might have a chance to sneak away."

"Yes. They would sneak away...until a squadron or two waiting some light-years behind us would charge in pursuit and hunt them down."

The reason the *Limpopo Ocean* was here in the first place was that it was old and expendable. Built in a second-rate shipyard in M32, the old Lunar had been rushed into service to combat some long-forgotten threat, and the result had been a warship that required way more maintenance and spare parts than the usual hulls of the class.

By all rights, it should have been decommissioned years ago, much like Daniels Presley ought to have retired a decade ago when it was clear he would need a second rejuvenation treatment that someone with his mediocre connections couldn't afford.

But the alarms of war, the preparations to counter the heretics' Black Crusade, had kept both the *Limpopo Ocean* and himself in the service of the Imperial Navy.

Assuming the latest war rumours were confirmed, this 'excuse' was soon going to disappear, meaning the end of his unremarkable career was in sight. Maybe not this year, Daniels was sure, but with the arrival of brand-new Cruisers next year to replenish the order of battle for all the Battlefleets...

"How is the hydroponics' section this morning?"

"As well as it could possibly be under the circumstances." His chief of staff replied stoically. "The cogboys are telling me they have found the problem and they have the pieces to repair it."

"Our recalcitrant fire control for the torpedo launchers?"

"We don't exactly have the best cogboy-in-chief...one problem at a time."

"That's fair. Did you tell them that-"

"ENEMY SHIPS DETECTED! ENEMY SHIPS COMING THROUGH THE FULDA GATE!"

Daniels stared in incomprehension...and a couple of seconds later, the hololithic screens began to report what was happening at the Eye of Terror's edge.

"Warships racing out of the Eye of Terror," his chief of staff grimly reported. "And we're too far away to intercept them."

This was not defeatism; merely realism. The *Limpopo Ocean* was an old and slow Cruiser, and it had just been caught by surprise with minimal acceleration and a ridiculously low speed.

"At least we detected them," and that meant their most important duty was going to be fulfilled, "there are seven of them. Do we have an estimation of the tonnage?"

"Not yet. We will in a few seconds."

"Those are big bastards." Daniels Presley grimaced. His previous words in company of a disappointed Ensign didn't seem that funny anymore. "Let us pray they aren't-"

"Sir! Tonnage estimates! All the enemy hulls are Battleships!"

"Madness...they have sent seven Battleships...through *that*?"

"The heretics seem to have some...err...sort of sorcery cloaking their ships!"

"And they are redlining their drives in their haste to sail through the Fulda Gate." His chief of staff's calm tone swept away the worried voices on the bridge. "This doesn't give us a pretty tactical vid, Sir."

"No, it doesn't." Daniels admitted. "Given the course these Traitors are following, it's clear they want to escape the Eye. If they wanted to fight us, they would be busy rushing in our direction, not taking a course that moves them so far away from the *Limpopo Ocean*."

The little problem with this was sneaking away, as his chief of staff had already mentioned, generally required there to be no witnesses so that the Admiralty wasn't warned of the enemy's moves.

The *Limpopo Ocean* might be obsolete and bound for the scrapyard, but its augurs and auspexes had done their job.

What made the heretics so sure the fast-reaction force from Battlefield Cadia wouldn't hunt them down like the vermin they were?

"Sir...we have a relatively high-confidence identification of one of the Battleships. It's...it's the *Terminus Est*."

The majority of the officers on the bridge froze.

Well, Daniels had his answer. The *Terminus Est*. An infamous vessel of disease and plague that was responsible for the death of billions during each raid it participated in. Its size easily made it a 'pocket Gloriana', the missing link between the Apocalypse Battleships and their larger 'cousins'.

"Emergency Astropathic message to all commands we can reach. The Plague Marines are at the Fulda Gate!"

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Panpacific Catacombs**

**0.810.310M35**

**Grand** **Master Hunter**

Hunter hadn't known he was in danger until the two aircars exploded.

For most Imperial citizens, it could have been a coincidence.

The Grand Master of the Ordo Assassinorum didn't believe in coincidences.

And in the unlikeliest case he did, Hunter would have recognised the smell anyway.

The explosives had a distinct odour to them. One of the components of it was made from a special chemical which was only fabricated on a very specific Agri World of Segmentum Solar, and the souls involved in its production sold only to the Assassinorum. And over a century ago, Hunter had accomplished his first mission with those explosives, one of the reasons he was so knowledgeable about this particular subject.

An Assassin never forgot the first mission which made him a true member of the Officio Assassinorum.

Those who had blown up the aircars knew it.

It was a not an assassination attempt.

It was a message.

Hunter's surprise visit to the Vanus Temple had been immediately cancelled.

Preparations had been made to return to the Imperial Palace immediately via one of the safest routes he knew of.

The second unsubtle warning had come in the form of explosive arrows and a molecular-cutting ammunition less than ten minutes later. This was a not-so-gentle reminder about his second mission.

A Heavy Bolter and a sociopath armed with mechadendrites had come right after. That was a sign his enemies knew about his fourth mission, but had enough reluctance to not use a copy of the third, for that one had been about neutralising an Exterminatus-level poison.

That left a disturbingly small number of possible choices when it came to the factions wanting to send him a message.

And so Hunter had fled into the Panpacific Catacombs.

One hour later, six minor thugs and four Death Cults' assassins eliminated, Hunter stopped and waited.

It didn't take long for him to arrive.

There wasn't a sound, and yet the black colossus with a violet crest above his helmet was there.

Dankanatoi.

A Chamber of the Adeptus Custodes that most people ignored the existence of.

They were dedicated to hunting down and eliminating traitors, wherever they could be found.

"I will not apologise."

"You know why I had to intervene, then."

A stone would have had more emotion than the words uttered by the Custodes.

"Taylor Hebert and Elena Kerrigan represent a clear and direct danger to the Imperium's stability."

The Guardian Spear didn't move, but a single golden spark burst into existence atop it.

"That is not for you to decide."

"And who will decide then?" Hunter asked defiantly. "The other High Lords? Most of them are ready to crawl and lick Weaver's feet if it means those two menaces are directed at the Traitor Legions and the other monsters. They will give them mountains of wealth, and still refuse to act when they will come to Terra. The Astartes? They will choose them, no matter what they do and-"

"That is not for you to decide."

"Yes, I freely admit, the order was given to put three Culexus into stasis and send them to Samarkand. What? Are you going to tell me again 'that is not for you to decide'?"

"No." The black-clad Custodes replied. "It is stupid. If you really think three Culexus Assassins stand a chance against the one the Emperor empowered with Sacrifice, your threat-evaluating skills are unworthy of a Grand Master."

The words hurt, Hunter admitted inwardly.

Losing a political debate, that would not have bothered him as much.

Having his skills dismissed as unworthy of a challenge...it was insulting...and the worst part was that his conscience told him the Custodes was right.

"What happens now?" The Grand Master kept a determined expression. If this was to be the end, he would not end his life on his knees. The Custodes knew too much about him, so the fight was likely so stacked against him it wasn't even funny, but Hunter had his pride.

"There will be a new Grand Master of Assassins at the next council of the High Twelve." The Custodes revealed ominously. "If you endorse your successor, you will be authorised to return to field duty. The Emperor has need of a man of your many talents in Pacificus."

"Who is to be my successor?"

"Callista de Sarcamore."

The Mistress of the Callidus Temple...it was not a surprise.

"Will she hand the High Seat to the Angel of Shadows?"

To his pleasure, the question was answered. Hunter had not expected the Custodes to.

"Think of it as a prelude to several reforms. The assassins are not destined to always remain in the shadows."

"I think I understand. Pacificus, then?"

"Pacificus. Remember: no foe is beyond His reach."

**Mars**

**Olympus Mons**

**0.812.310M35**

**Fabricator Locum Decimus Osmium-Five-1111**

"The political consequences aside, the recovery of those STCs are a fantastic victory," Decimus told his sole superior in the Martian hierarchy. "I'd heard rumours of the templates the Arch-Heretek had been bribed with, but I certainly never expected anyone to recover them."

"Correct," the Fabricator-General canted. "And the assumption was that if we recovered them, they would be too corrupted by the hereteks to be of any use. But apparently, Sota-Nul didn't trust the Warp that much, or she wanted some untainted STCs for her own purposes."

These were purposes which, as the message of the Arch-Heretic suggested, had been far from innocent and free of their own dangerous taint.

"And the STCs themselves?"

"The first template stolen from the Auretian Technocracy is an augmented power armour," Xaerophrys Esvikom immediately confirmed some of the wild rumours that had spread across Mars. "The Chosen of the Omnissiah decided to call it *Lorica*, due to the circumstances of its recovery."

"Fitting," Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 approved. "I suppose the holy knowledge is going to be used, after long purification protocols, in creating a new Mark of Astartes Power Armour."

"You suppose correctly. Given how Bacta leads to the survival of many Space Marines and purges a lot of the corruption which would make some gene-seed useless, many Space Marine Chapters are already voicing demands for this Mark X."

"The Magi who worked upon the Mark VIII are going to love this. Their armours are obsolete before even getting into mass production."

"We might modify them so they are a 'neo-Mark IX'. As the Chosen of the Omnissiah explained in length before launching the incredibly successful Operation Stalingrad, an imperfect Power Armour with Ion Shields is better than no Power Armour at all."

"I can't argue with that." Decimus replied before an unpleasant thought erupted in his cortex. "Will we be able to push Cawl aside while this future...Mark X is conceived?"

"I don't know," the Fabricator-General admitted darkly. "Apparently, 'our' Radical had some contacts with the Primarch Roboute Guilliman."

"Cog and sacred oils...that is...inconvenient."

"It is. On the other hand, the Avenging Son is unlikely to come to Sol for at least a decade."

"Meaning we might impose reasonable conditions for the fabrication of the first Mark X in the Nyx System, and then some production lines on Mars itself?"

"Yes."

"That...might work." Decimus acknowledged. "It all depends on the circumstances, of course. And the other STCs?"

"The second STC stolen by the Arch-Heretic and his heretekal minions was a template of a lightweight solar generator. It is a model of miniaturized technology capable of supplying the power to feed an Epsilon-5 forge complex."

"This is an extremely useful template." Decimus didn't hide his excitement. "I know many vehicles and Explorator-purposed installations which could use a holy STC like this one. And the third STC?"

"The third template did not come from the Auretian Technocracy at all. It was a data-repository from Mars...the entire schematics, plans, and set of instructions to build the Warmaster Titans."

"By the Omnissiah..." there was a reason why none of the Warmaster Titans, infamous for being the 'missing link' between the Imperator and the Warlord Titans, were built anymore. Mars had lost the Forges, the Archmagi, and the knowledge to do so.

"Though obviously, by the Chosen of the Omnissiah's will, those are Warmaster Titans no longer. We will discard this heretical title. In memory of the great victory won in the name of the Quest for Knowledge, when we build new Titans of that class, they will be known as *Pharsalus Titans*."

And to think the STCs were only a minuscule part of everything that had been recovered due to the actions of Operation Stalingrad.

"Obviously, there is going to be a price to pay." Xaerophrys Esvikom canted.

"Politics." All the hereteks involved in the betrayal that had led to the Schism of Mars were inside the Eye of Terror, or with Sota-Nul. None of the current members of the Parliament of Mars were involved in those odious machinations.

But the Imperium had to be sure the Forges of Mars were a reliable technological partner. Trust and loyalty were the keywords of the Terran-Martian Union.

"Politics," the Fabricator-General confirmed. "I am almost certain that I am going to have to return to my personal workshops as a mere Archmagos before too long. The numbers don't favour this year, but I will certainly have to officially relinquish my position of Fabricator-General."

And in this scenario, the natural successor was one Decimus Osmium-Five-1111.

"I would have hoped it would not come so soon." Decimus was ambitious, he wouldn't have reached the rank of Fabricator Locum otherwise, but he knew what the position above it entailed, and he doubted anyone could be too ready for it.

"I will make sure a few of our loudest troublemakers will resign with me," Xaerophrys Esvikom promised. "Though I unfortunately don't think this will apply to Cawl..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**High Orbit over Ardium**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.815.310M35**

**Clade-Primaris** **Xanaria Lythis**

Xanaria had not known what type of reception she would get when she arrived in presence of the Living Saint. After all, the...unofficial contacts between the Assassinorum and Weaver had not generally been a model to emulate if you wanted to establish long-term diplomacy.

One thing was sure, the Clade-Primaris' best guess had not been a huge spider berating a dozen small black felines in High Gothic.

"Furballs! Stop distracting the Webmistress from her holy task of Administration!"

The much tinier animals superbly ignored the arachnid, and one even used a nearby desk to jump on her back.

"Webmistress! I need assistance!"

The Living Saint chuckled before rushing to the rescue with a couple of Space Marines.

The kittens were promptly put into large baskets with pillows and musical toys, and then escorted out of the strategium by several guardsmen.

"An interesting parade of feline power," Xanaria tried not to sound too ironic...and the golden spider didn't like the insinuation.

"This is your fault!" The giant arachnid raised one of its legs in an accusatory move. "We already had the white furball, and now the jokes of your Apprentice mean I have to endure the assaults of the black-furred ones!"

"Err...yes?"

"Adjutant-Colonel," Weaver reassuringly intervened. "I'm sure the Clade-Primaris played no part in this joke. Can you go outside to resolve the problem we spoke about?"

"Yes, Webmistress! Post-quarantine exodus preparation phase, here we go!"

And the golden spider fled the strategium like all the Legions of the Warp were after her.

"Apologies for the spectacle." The Living Saint gave her a smile while throwing several data-slates to different red-armoured Astartes. "We have a lot of administrative tasks to care of, and the opportunities to relax are few and far between."

"Oh, I understand." Xanaria assured her. "I had...a lot of those moments recently."

Specifically, since the Custodes had informed her of everything Elena Kerrigan had been up to in the service of the God-Emperor since being teleported away to Fenris.

Shock and astonishment had been vast understatements to describe what she had felt.

"Good. Now...the Watchers of the Golden Throne informed me you were coming with a certain number of requests...requests that came with the full support of the Adeptus Custodes and the new Grand Mistress of the Officio Assassinorum. The only problem, of course, was that they didn't tell me what those requests are."

Thankfully, the radiant-winged Living Saint was in a cheerful mood.

"How awful," Xanaria replied with a curt nod as the strategium emptied in several seconds...something that didn't feel like a coincidence. And the advanced anti-spying devices which activated a second later meant she wouldn't have to ask for them. "To keep things simple, the Officio Assassinorum and the Adeptus Custodes wants you as a high-ranked partner for the reform program that will lead to the transformation of the Callidus Temples into the Umbra Sororitas."

"Oh," yes, the Watchers had not informed Weaver of what was intended. "I see. Why me, though? I will not deny Nyx has now gained sufficient industrial capacity to hide a few black projects, but we're hardly on Terra's doorstep, and there are far better candidates I can think of. Stygies VIII, for one. They have a lot of stealth-related templates we don't."

"Some Forge Worlds have been mentioned, before being discarded. The problem is that many Tech-Priests won't keep a secret between themselves, be it because of the Noosphere or some other doctrinal reason."

"I see."

"And though it was not said openly, I think His Most Holy Majesty wants you and Elena to keep close ties, your Celestial Highness...this will prevent you from being drifting too far apart."

"I doubt we will ever be friends," the black-haired woman commented with an amused chuckle.

"Maybe not, but at least the hope is to have a professional relationship that will work in the name of the Imperium."

"Light and Shadow working for the same purpose, is it?"

"We live in a galaxy where symbolism has power." The Clade-Primaris replied neutrally.

"Yes, we do." The Living Saint conceded. "How fast does this project need to be completed?"

"You will have several decades. Elena needs to gain experience first as an agent of the Officio, and her powers, from what I was given to understand, are only in their initial stage of development. In the meantime, there are reforms that need to be done."

"Several decades...I can work with that." Weaver confirmed with a frown. "Of course, it depends on what the projects are about. A Hive-sized project doesn't need the same funding a new pattern of Bolter requires."

Xanaria withdrew a chip from one of her fake nails and handed it to the Victor of Macragge.

"That...that looks like one of those submarines the Tech-Priests use when they want to explore an Ocean World. But...for the void?"

"Void submarine...not a bad description. It is the biggest sample of what is intended for Project Melinoë."

"Hmm...an extremely stealthy void ship...deployment by a modified stealth Thunderhawk like the Raven Guard...stealth Power Armour whose systems can merge with your Callidus Synskin...and here I was thinking Dragon wanted expensive toys for Sanguinala."

Eyes filled with stars looked at her thoughtfully. Xanaria didn't flinch.

"It isn't just Light and Shadow, is it? The...the Umbra Sororitas will act with the opposite methods the Templar Sororitas are beginning to use. Where one will go in a group of a dozen maximum, the others will go in a force of hundreds, maybe thousands. The Order of Silver Rose will have some crystals of Aethergold, but they will be able to use the Light of Sacrifice only in a few limited occasions. The ex-Callidus, however, will be able to use the Umbralshroud transformed Noctilith when Elena will be ready."

Suddenly, it was no wonder why the Custodes had been so reluctant to part with the critical information before the time was right...the Living Saint had been able to deduce a lot of the plan's foundations not five minutes after she read some essential data.

"Is there going to be a problem?"

"No." The golden-winged Champion of the God-Emperor shook her head. "I will need some details when the research for the projects will have sufficiently advanced, though. Black projects or not, some infrastructure will need to be built and expanded. And there remains an issue."

"The Frostlions or the Ecclesiarchy?"

"What Elena wants to do with her 'furballs', as my Adjutants are so prompt to call them, is her problem and no one else's. The same applies to the Ecclesiarchy. I already have enough on my plate with the religious affairs of the Nyx Sector and the rest of the Quadrant. I am not going to intervene in what promises to be an interesting moment of diplomacy between the Officio and Ophelia VII."

The Clade-Primaris was a bit amused...before realising just how much of a headache said 'diplomatic moment' promised to be. Yes, the Living Saint had good reasons to stay away from it.

"If it's not that, what is the issue we're supposed to speak about, your Celestial Highness?"

"Where you intend to base the Umbra Sororitas," ah yes, that issue... "I rule a Sector. I didn't have any problem finding the appropriate infrastructure for the Order of the Silver Rose. But even if Light and Shadow are not meant to be complete opposites, I doubt it is the intent of the Emperor to let Elena rule a Sector."

"You're right...it won't be a Sector." Xanaria took a deep breath. Here came the most...interesting part of her assignment. "The Grand Mistress, with the blessing of the Adeptus Custodes, has settled on a very specific planet."

"Oh, good."

"Not...exactly."

"The Custodes have that grox Vandire in range of their spears," the Living Saint was not shy confirming the rumours of her enmity with a particular High Lord was alive and well, "he will pretty much give them everything they want, and with the rewards Elena will claim the moment the Almitas release the Throne Gelts, the Assassinorum will be able to pay for it anyway."

"Agreed," the Clade-Primaris confirmed. "Were it an Imperial World."

The stars-filled eyes looked at her for several seconds...before a loud groan escaped the mouth of the Living Saint.

"Oh, great. Farseer Ulthran and High Priestess Malys are going to *love* that."

**Moonlight-class Battleship *Rebirth***

**2.818.310M35**

**High** **Priestess Aurelia Malys**

"Yes, it is a world under the protection of Craftworld Ulthwé. Of course, we don't call it...Kush like your Empire does. It the world of...in your human language, 'the Shadow Soul of the Forest' is as close as I can explain it." Aurelia grinned. "I am not surprised your Seer-Emperor thinks it is the perfect place to hide his shadow blades. At least they are going to be hidden, I assume?"

"I believe that is the plan, yes," her Empress replied. "I was not given all the information, but I think that the moment the plan proceeds, the equivalent of my 'Aethergold Pylons' will be deployed in the form of Umbralshroud, the shadow-empowered Noctilith of Elena Kerrigan. I don't know all the powers it will give the planet, but I'm pretty certain it will be able to obfuscate the sorcerers sworn to the different Ruinous Powers."

"That would be for the best," Aurelia agreed, placing one of the Empress' hands between hers. She considered it a true victory that Taylor Hebert didn't withdraw it immediately. "This is the kind of target the Primordial Annihilator will not hesitate to strike at the moment it becomes aware of its existence. And some of the goals are interesting. But there is a problem. A small colony of Asuryani already exists on this world that was blessed by Isha long ago. For them to accept a settlement of humans...many concessions will have to be made."

"You want more Noctilith, don't you?"

The High Priestess of Atharti gave a splendid smile to the new Empress of the Aeldari.

"We certainly wouldn't say no to more. You promised only one block per Craftworld or significant world which converted to the worship of my Goddess, after all."

Certainly not a small thing, not when each block could be converted into several altars of Symbiosis and Carnality.

"But in this case, it is not the black stone that I am worried about. It is the preservation of the planet. Forgive me for being imprudent, my Empress, but your Empire is not known for being kind to Maiden Worlds when they happen to settle upon them. I don't want the beautiful forests burned, the rivers turned into poison, and the earth wounded and carved apart so that its entrails are visible from a spaceship."

"I...I understand that you are worried." The human turned Muse looked at her with a very determined expression. "That said, this time no one among the different parties involved wants the mineral wealth or the wood of this planet. It is to be...a training ground and a spiritual centre of the women who will follow Elena Kerrigan. If there are weapons or ships to be forged, they will likely be far away from this world. The main strength of this shadowy world would be that no one should be able to find it without being approved by the Umbralshroud protections. And the Callidus women are not a large organisation by design. I would be very surprised if there are more than one hundred thousand at all times spread across the entire galaxy."

"Reassuring words," Aurelia considered them one by one, "but not sufficient by themselves. We will need more than that-"

"NO! EMPRESS! SAVE US! SHE IS GOING TO TORTURE US!"

This time Taylor Hebert laughed out loud, a sound that was truly beautiful in her Aeldari Aspect.

"I see the Queen of Blades is busy dragging Maea and Yvraine to her torture sessions...pardon, their 'long and arduous Apprenticeship'."

"Yes, she is. Better prepare yourself, my Empress. Once Aenaria Eldanesh is bored, she will likely return to the Arena of Blades for some sparring..."

"I will keep that in mind." The eyes filled with stars made clear enough that the return of the Queen of Blades could wait for another cycle. "What are the conditions this time? And please do not say it in rhymes, I had enough of that from Cegorach."

"That bad?" Aurelia really, really tried to not laugh at the pout of her Empress...she was ready to swear she tried.

"It was not too bad, honestly," the Victor of Commorragh and Macragge huffed. "His main goal was that I remove all my spiders from the Webway. That's why I sent several Adjutant-Spiders with the clowns the moment the quarantine was over."

"The ones that are busy grumbling about 'furballs' lately?"

"Don't laugh too hard, High Priestess! These felines grow very big very quickly, and most of them seem to have decided to be treated as 'honoured deities' by the Angel of Shadows and the Callidus."

"You mean pets, surely?"

"No, I mean 'honoured deities'. Thousands of years ago, on Mankind's homeworld, cats were worshipped as divine creatures, and by all evidence, the Frostlions and their kittens seem to be in agreement this custom has been revived."

"In the eyes of Atharti...these beautiful creatures have really nice fur to caress, and I'm sure we can find a regimen of milk for the young ones..."

"You see? They have corrupted you too...or at least that's what my spiders will assume."

"Ah...that isn't entirely impossible. Setting that aside, one of the conditions to accept human settlement upon this jewel of tall forests and long shadows would be a place to create our own sanctum in the kingdom you rule over, so that we can create Slavhreenur from Noctilith."

"*Salvation* for your Noctilith imbued with the power of Symbiosis?"

"You don't like the name, my Empress?"

"No, no! It rings nice...I was just surprised." There was a moment of hesitation. "Much like the Goddess hides herself in the light of the Emperor, you want your Salvation's creation to be hidden in the Light of my Aethergold."

"That is one of the many meanings I have in mind, yes."

"Hmm...I don't see why not, but it is a big favour, and don't pretend the settlement of the Umbra groups upon a Maiden World would be enough to compensate. I will need a few things..."

Aurelia nodded and smiled. The real negotiations had just begun, praise Carnality and Symbiosis.

**Gloriana Battleship *Flamewrought***

**2.821.310M35**

**Rogue** **Trader Guts**

The *Flamewrought* was what everyone should dream of when one said 'warship'.

It had giant batteries. Its guns were simply enormous even compared to his *Dragonslayer*! And yes, he was comparing the weapons of the Gloriana to his entire Assault Cruiser!

"Casca, Guts is drooling again. Strike him."

"Ouch! I wasn't drooling!"

"You were."

Fortunately – there had to be some luck here and there – they passed through a last Salamander-decorated hall and arrived at a relatively...modest room, with only a rectangular table and some hololithic projections.

Well, the room was modest, but there was a Living Saint dominating everything.

Guts didn't think he was weak-willed, but for a second, it was really difficult to breathe correctly. And when he stared at her eyes...he turned away. It was just too much.

"Lord Solar Trevayne and the Band of the Hawk, your Celestial Highness!"

"So I see." A military salute followed. "Lord Solar."

"Lady General Militant."

"The exchanges with the High Lords are going well?"

"For now. I'm speaking a lot with High Lord von Oberstein, and the High Twelve seem to appreciate the arrangement. There are...a great deal of political upheavals on the Throneworld."

"I had the same impression."

Even Guts, who was, as everyone in the Band would agree, not the most political-minded Hawk, knew there was far more to this than the words spoken.

"But it can wait for another day. I see you brought the Rogue Traders of the Band of the Hawk."

"And we weren't told why," Guts added before receiving an elbow in his ribs, which hurt, since he wasn't wearing any armour today, "your Celestial Highness."

The Living Saint giggled.

"You are here, Rogue Lords and Ladies, because right at this moment, Lord Solar Trevayne's exact authority is...in a state of flux. You see, the authority of a Lord Solar is exactly equal to a Warmaster by tradition...as long as he commands or exerts his authority within the stellar limits of Segmentum Solar. Minus the Sol System, of course, for obvious reasons."

And they were in the Macragge System, tens of thousands of light-years away from it.

"Does this means that the payment promises we were given are null and void?" Griffith asked cautiously.

"No. It just means that I, as a loyal servant of the Emperor, am going to uphold said promises...unless you want to wait several years for Lord Solar Trevayne to be able to fulfil his end of your bargain, really."

"Years?" Guts muttered. "It might take centuries, with the bureaucratic morons..."

And needless to say, the *Dragonslayer* and all the Band's warships couldn't wait for centuries while the Adepts allocated the funds. They had been wrecked by the Battle of Fenris, and the clashes after that had aggravated the problem.

This time Casca didn't hit him. Maybe it was because it was the truth?

"Quite," and the black-clad Rogue Trader realised that despite his low tone, the woman who had slain Tyranids by the millions had heard him perfectly. "That's why I'm going to repair your ships with one of my Star Forge Galleons. It might need some time, I'm afraid I can allow only one of them to be diverted for your entire 'Band of the Hawk', and the warship classes you use are not common, even by Rogue Trader standards. But by the end of it, I promise in my name, your ships will have their combat capabilities fully restored. They will also be refuelled and their ammunition stocks refilled."

Even Griffith stared open-mouthed at the enormity of the proposal. This kind of 'generous' move was easily worth billions of whatever currency was in use in this part of the Imperium...which was the Macraggian Sesterces, no?

"That's...err...yes, it will be excellent. Any...err...conditions?"

"I would appreciate if there are no more ships named *Dragonslayer* in the near future," the Living Saint replied in a very amused voice. "My Minister of Industry and recently promoted Archmagos is called Dragon, you see, and she is really taking offense when someone calls a starship by that name."

Everyone's eyes naturally turned in his direction.

"First they denigrate my splendid Bellerophon Heavy Assault Cruiser, now this..." Guts bemoaned.

"I would be very interested to hear more about it." Oh, oh... "Especially since most of the ones who remain Ultima Segmentum are in a very secure mothball shipyard of Kar Duniash, and the other Segmentum Fortresses have similar procedures. You must have been quite ingenious, Lord Guts, to acquire one."

"Yes..." Casca hit him in the ribs again. Guts shut up.

"Of course, the same applies to the class of Indrajit Heavy Cruisers, so I'm not going to be too inquisitive."

This time it was Griffith's turn to try to look innocent.

"But we're not going to speak of those subjects today. Not when it is time for me to fulfil one of my promises. Artemis, music!"

"By your will, Webmistress!"

Dozens of musical instruments began to play at once, and all of them were quickly escorted to a monumental hall, where there were hundreds of Space Marines and senior officers of the Guard and Navy...and suddenly Guts realised why they had all been told to come in their best uniforms.

There was an altar at the other end of the hall.

There were Priests too.

White flowers were thrown on the Imperial red carpet, and the triumphant musical march got louder.

"Casca did you-"

Guts stopped, because a mere glance at the eyes of his lover told him that, yes, she had been informed.

This moment of distraction had been sufficient for the Living Saint to fly to the side of the Priests, by the way.

"My dear children!" An ageing Priest declared with a large smile. "Let us be thankful to the God-Emperor, for we are all gathered here on this blessed day to celebrate the union of a man and a woman..."

**Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado***

**2.827.310M35**

**Archmagos** **Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

"Chosen of the Omnissiah, thank you for granting me this private audience so promptly."

"You are the senior Archmagos of Operation Stalingrad, Archmagos. If I wasn't here to hear you, I think that would lead to a great deal of questions throughout the fleet assembled here. Now let us skip the courtesies and all the prayers for now. We have multiple conferences to attend together, and a great number of Tech-Priests to reward for their exemplary service. I presume you have many concerns about the Tau?"

"You presume correctly, Chosen of the Omnissiah." Gastaph replied grimly. "Their...alien nature is problematic, but the few Astropathic conversations coming from Ouralia are very concerning, indeed. I realise why there are many reasons you don't want to burn them for their tech-heresies, but their behaviour when it comes to Abominable Intelligences is unacceptable."

"Personally, there are a lot of things I found more worrying, Archmagos."

That...didn't reassure the Martian Tech-Priest at all.

"Such as?"

"Such as the reality the Tau elite scientists of the Earth Caste were trying to replicate a Warp Engine, and evidently didn't know it had to be used in conjunction with Gellar Fields."

"This is a poor attempt to amuse me, Chosen of the Omnissiah..." Then Gastaph realised how serious the Lady of Nyx was. "This is not an attempt to amuse me."

"No, it is not. And to be painfully honest with you, that is only the most obvious case my Adjutants found while I fought the so-called 'Master of Shadows'. There are many other cases I was able to discern thanks to the tech-expertise I gained from having many Tech-Priests explaining their works to me in the last decades."

"By the Great Cog," Gastaph Hediatrix swore, "how is it possible that these xenos didn't blow up their whole civilisation the moment they discovered how to build nuclear power plants?"

"If I had to guess, I would say it's because the Ethereals were forcing what we would call 'tyrannical unity' among the four different Castes. And to be fair, it has some positives. As long as their little Empire was alone, their pace of technological development offered many advantages. Dangerous experiments could be done on asteroid belts far away from anything valuable, and since they had not lost a single scrap of knowledge, a few failures were hardly problematic."

"Ah. Yes, that would explain things. The problem would begin once they started...pulling a Cawl, so to speak, and tried to copy the work of other races. Incomplete understanding is more dangerous than no understanding at all."

"Indeed, Archmagos. And there's another factor to take into account. The power of the Ethereals was such that it reduced the risk of Abominable Intelligences turning against their masters. When their drones went rogue, they weren't going to turn their guns against the soldiers of the Tau Empire. They often disappeared and no one asked the right questions."

"That still relies on a colossal amount of luck. Sooner or later, it ends." Mankind had learned that the very hard way when the Cybernetic Rebellion began and survival became the new imperative.

"Yes. Which is why I ordered Archmagos Lankovar to personally go to Tau and explain exactly why many actions of the Earth Caste are completely suicidal in the long-term...assuming they don't kill them in the short-term, of course."

"A good start, though I will suggest some Magi under my authority too, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

"By all means," the new Lady General Militant nodded. "A few more precautions can't hurt. Many achievements of the Tau Empire are noteworthy in their own right. They have developed a lot of technology which gives their population a high standard of living. In military fields, they have produced Plasma, Ion, and Railgun-type weapons, both for ground-based and space-based use. But before I even consider putting a small Tau gun into an infantryman's hands, I want to make sure the whole affair has no chance to blow up in our faces...literally."

This reassured Gastaph a lot, and he was sure the majority of the Tech-Priests present in the Nyx Sector and those who participated in this campaign would approve wholeheartedly. They would verify and re-verify, test and re-test, and make countless checks with Aethergold...and for the Tau, maybe some Bacta too.

"The same conditions apply to the *Spirit of Eternity*?"

"In a certain manner...I would insist you focus on the data the AI released into my hands. With an Aethergold-protected casing, Warp corruption isn't an issue, and as long as the crew and their silicate-made companion respect their part of the accord, I will respect mine."

"I will select more Tech-Priests to make sure the vigilance of the Mechanicus is at an all-times high." The Archmagos Prime promised. "And that leads me to another subject that reminds me of Commorragh. Many Forge World representatives are asking when we will create copies for the holy STCs templates you have in your custody, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

"I'm so glad to hear that the Battle of Macragge and fighting so many horrors hasn't changed the priorities of many Tech-Priests, Archmagos..."

**The Eye of Terror**

**Skavenblight**

**Academy of Sublime Treachery**

**Temporal Anomaly – Total Anarchy – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Daemon-Primarch** **Omegon**

There were things that should be impossible even in the Eye of Terror. A planet stopped from colliding with another by a slim pillar of green crystals should be one of said things.

What he was sensing and perceiving with his elevated senses proved that it wasn't.

**This was always part of my plan. Do not doubt me!**

**Fenris was supposed to be disintegrated!**

**We had to stop it before sending it to crash against Medrengard!**

**The crystals are the wrong colour!**

If there was one thing Omegon truly missed since he had been torn apart and remodelled to serve as the Daemon Primarch of the utterly insane deity calling itself Malal, it was silence.

There wasn't a single heartbeat when he was free within what vaguely could be considered his 'mind'.

The Primarch really missed it.

And it was gone forever.

There were Gods that left their slaves more or less in peace as long as they accomplished their will, but the Horned Beast wouldn't give him that pleasure.

It *couldn't* give him that pleasure.

Malal was Anarchy.

Giving him several heartbeats or whatever short moment of peace a living species would recognise...it would imply that the countless voices of the Beast would agree on *something*.

**The planet was stopped too close to Skavenblight!**

**The ritual was adequate for my purposes!**

**It is far too distant to give my loyal vermin a proper sense of awe!**

That was what Omegon was dealing with every second.

The Twentieth Primarch wasn't going to deny it had its advantages. The prime example of this was his name. Anarchy had wanted to change it back to 'Alpharius' at first. Some other Aspects had proposed other names, some which made his essence shudder in horror.

But in the end, Malal had not been able to decide which course was the best. The 'debate' – more like a vociferous quarrel arbitrated by thousands of Skaven 'philosophers' – was continuing and showing no sign of ever reaching an outcome.

So he was still Omegon.

**I still say Rumpelstiltskin is a fine name.**

**No! We must call him Alpharius!**

**Why not Verminus Primarch? It is his function!**

In many other ways, he hadn't been so lucky. Yes, he wasn't crippled or enduring agonising pain because of the Phosphex Guilliman had deployed against him at Eskrador, but it was a very meagre consolation.

Omegon had to watch powerlessly as more and more Legionnaires of the Twentieth fell to Anarchy. It didn't matter if it was in the Eye of Terror or elsewhere; each time one of his sons succumbed to the relentless pressure of Malal, the Beast made sure he saw it as if he were a spectator...and then got the overwhelming sensation of *pleasure*.

The Alpha Legion was no more. The Anarchy Legion was on the rise, and many Harrowmasters had already rallied to other Traitor Legions before Malal could use its baleful...its holy influence to drag them into its clawed embrace.

The worst part of it was that it was less and less disturbing for him personally.

Omegon knew that meant Anarchy was changing whatever remained of him.

Or maybe it was that never having a moment of silence was going to turn him insane one step at a time.

The possibilities weren't encouraging.

**A Skaven Crusade must be launched immediately! I will-will it!**

**No! Summon the Council! We must kill at least five of them for grotesque heresy and trumped-up charges!**

**The priority is to humiliate Weaver, yes-yes!**

**We must-must** **deal with Guilliman!**

**Death to Corax! He offended me-me greatly!**

At times like this, Omegon knew it was easy to see why his father had thought a plan to let Anarchy become the Fourth Power instead of Slaanesh was good.

Unlike the former Goddess of Excess, there was not a single thought of long-term planning with the Beast...or if there was, it was drowned out by a monumental cacophony of discordant voices.

It was **Anarchy**.

Now if only his appearance didn't reflect that...

His essence was fundamentally unable to take a stable form.

He had thought Magnus and other servants of Tzeentch had it bad, but even the God of Change was usually content with nearly imperceptible changes where his slaves were concerned. Slightly altering the colour of the eyes, for example, or adding a finger here and there.

Omegon did not get that chance. In the time it took him to walk four steps, he had grown four tails, lost one, then two more grew, before all of them fell down.

No wonder the Astartes of the new Anarchy Legion, half-insane or not, stayed well clear of him.

At the best of times, he was a white-black armoured colossus with a rat head and multiple appendages serving no purpose, spitting acidic venom, spreading a torrent of corruption wherever he went.

It required an effort of will to be that 'orderly'. When he didn't bother, Omegon's outer essence did not differ greatly from a Chaos Spawn.

He stopped thinking about it after a while.

His thoughts returned to the world which had been called Fenris.

The desperate combination of rituals, monstrously weird weapons, plus some things even his anarchic mind had not yet managed to fully process had stopped the planetary collision.

For how long...the Beast of Anarchy had not given him an answer to that question.

The two planets were now tied by a gigantic pillar of black-green crystals. It was not Warpstone, but Omegon was sure the Skaven and other races having succumbed to Anarchy would find uses for it.

If for the moment no one had been stupid enough to use explosives against the pillar itself, Fenris itself standing above Skavenblight was covered in it, a 'cocoon' that seemed to radiate with the sheer power of Anarchy itself.

Naturally, several wars were already raging everywhere.

As the cowardly rats had quickly discovered, the best efforts of Russ and Corax to exterminate all life on Fenris had not been completely successful.

Some Tyranid lifeforms had survived.

All of them were feral now, but that hardly made them inoffensive, and a Carnifex could butcher and eat thousands of Skavens per day.

This didn't bother the voices raging inside his essence.

The Skavens' numbers were uncountable, and many ragtag starships had already catapulted towards other planets of the Eye.

Anarchy couldn't be killed by a single decapitation strike anymore.

And as his current seventeen eyes fell upon a white-furred Skaven, the voices grew more strident.

**Something must be done about this vermin. He failed to heed our orders in the Galactic Core.**

**His efforts to please Anarchy are amusing.**

**His time is past. We have much greater and better servants now.**

**Give-give him another chance, yes-yes! More-more Anarchy!**

As usual, Anarchy was undecided.

And that left the Skaven sorcerer prostrating itself.

The white-furred Skaven which was more responsible for stopping Fenris above their heads than anyone else, though it was in reality an attempt to usurp the Council and eleven great conspiracies gone wrong at the same time.

"Mighty Great One! Your valiant-humble servant Thanquol is here-here!" The voices continued to bicker...and Omegon decided that he might as well have his fun with this. The galaxy had forsaken him. His father had warned him, and he had chosen to disregard the advice.

There was nothing left but **Anarchy...**and **Chaos**.

"**Proud and dedicated anarchists of Skavenblight**!" Omegon's voice thundered across the mess of ruins and incredibly fragile spires erected since the Word Bearers abandoned the planet. "**We have our Champion!"**

Billions of eyes instantly turned towards them...or more accurately, they stared hatefully at Thanquol.

The white-furred Skaven squirmed, and his fear...his fear was delicious.

"Give me-me your orders, Mighty Great One! I will obey, yes-yes ! Praise Anarchy!"

"**You will lead the hordes of Anarchy to the Calyx Hell Stars!"**

And after this sentence, Omegon suddenly realised the voices had fallen silent. Whether it was from shock at him taking initiative or for another reason, the Daemon Primarch didn't know...nor did he care.

"Yes, Mighty Great One!"

"**You will spread Anarchy**!"

"Yes, Mighty Great One!"

"**And you will kill the King in Yellow, or I will eat your tail myself**!"

"Wh-what? I mean, yes-yes, Mighty Great One!"

"**Do not disappoint me, Champion of Skavenblight**!"

Omegon was teleported away before he could say more.

But before he was spirited away, he could hear the voices again.

And they were all laughing and screeching in approval.

**The Warp**

**Custodes Battlecruiser *Vigilance***

**Primarch** **Magnus the Red**

The name of the ship was *Vigilance*, and it belonged to the Custodes.

Somehow, Magnus very much doubted it had begun its career with the golden-clad Watchers.

It was way too comfortable, for one. The Custodes didn't reject everything when it came to decoration and furniture, but compared to Space Marines, their lifestyle definitely tended in the direction of austerity and frugality.

So when the Battlecruiser had things like couches, a large library, and other very comfortable furnishings, the logical assumption was that it had been some pet project of an Imperial Admiral who had ended up on the wrong side of a Guardian Spear which had then been 'requisitioned' by a faction inside the Adeptus Custodes.

This was all the better. It was still a prison; the right to leave the compartment was denied to him. But it was something that made the travel a very tolerable affair, and gave him other things to ponder than endlessly worrying about what fate awaited him at the end of the journey.

Of course, there were far less pleasant things stocked up in the compartment too. Some of them could be ignored.

The lifeless body of Fulgrim, contained within a casket surrounded by multiple stasis fields – and incidentally guarded by two Custodes and two Sisters of Silence – was not within his mental fortitude to forget.

"It is difficult to remember he was considered one of the best of us," Magnus began conversationally when he heard the loud footsteps of his brother.

"Was he?"

That was...really a complicated question.

"I think he was, yes. We should have told him to tone down the 'perfection', but hindsight is always so formidable after the tragedy..."

"He should have spoken to us."

"He did not have that many close friends." Magnus pointed out soberly.

"Ferrus-"

"Ferrus understood him...at least in some aspects. But he had no one among his Legion to confide in, Leman. Name me five artists or famous officers Fulgrim confided with."

Not a single name came for seconds.

"I think Fulgrim doubted himself a lot. Much like Sanguinius did." The Fifteenth Primarch continued. "But he was alone. He was inaccessible, atop his pillar of perfection, and there was no one to tell him the path he had chosen was going to end in catastrophe."

"The Third Legion had many Loyalists in its ranks. The number the traitors had to purge at Isstvan from the Third Legion may be proportionally higher than the Sixteenth."

"I won't disagree with that." Magnus grimaced. "But I fear the reason for their existence was that, ultimately, every Captain was in love with the idea of the Perfect Primarch, and of course perfection can't throw itself into treachery and betrayal."

This was alas, not something he could fully confirm. Leman had confirmed Rylanor had been recovered, but for obvious reasons, Magnus had not been allowed to speak with him.

"He looks completely dead." Yes, this was a far safer subject.

"When it comes to soul-severance, I would argue that there is not much difference. Even the techno-arcane secrets of Terra are unable to restore something as complex as the bond between a soul and a body. As in many things, it's easier to destroy than to create anew."

"Could Father restore it?"

Magnus chuckled.

"Of course," there were advantages to being one of the most powerful psykers to have ever walked this galaxy. "Weaver could do it too, I suspect, with a proper sacrifice. The problem is the soul. It has to be recovered first...and I'm afraid I don't know where it is right now. Decay tried to seal it away, but I find it all too likely the events which happened on Fenris destroyed or at least led to a serious disturbance of the ritual."

Tzeentch had counted on it; that at least Magnus remembered. Even in defeat, the Power of Chaos Change had tried to keep its feathers open for more opportunities.

"Is there some hope?"

Magnus shrugged.

"That depends on how much sanity is left in our brother's soul. Speaking as someone who has experience in the matter, I would argue that yes, there's some hope. Alas, I am not at all versed in the horror of having a Keeper of Secrets expel you from your own body."

It would have been traumatic at the best of times. The fact that the final part of the 'severance' had been caused by the murder of Ferrus on the black sands of Isstvan V made the trauma far, far worse than Magnus could really imagine...and he had an excellent imagination, courtesy of having been witness to horrors beyond reckoning.

"He was not the best of us. Sanguinius was." The civil war had made that clear, at least. "But he should have been there, on the walls of the Imperial Palace, inspiring the defenders of Terra."

"Like you."

Magnus snorted.

"If I had been on Terra and in position to defend the Imperial Palace, brother, I would have been replacing our father on the Golden Throne, assuming I was powerful enough to endure the strain of it. That way, the hordes outside would have had to fight *him*."

"I would have paid a lot to see that," Leman Russ snorted in turn.

"It would have been quite an experience, I'm sure."

Save Horus, who had been empowered by the Four, there was really no one to stand against the Emperor. Imperator Titans, millions of cultists, Ordinatus batteries, tens of thousands of Astartes Legionnaires, including the siege-breakers of the Iron Warriors...all of them together would have died in front of the Imperial Palace without making a single breach in the walls.

"Much like I don't doubt you had an *interesting experience* attacking Fenris some millennia ago." Russ growled.

Magnus would lie if he claimed he had hoped this conversation wouldn't come before they reached Terra.

"What were you trying to achieve when you attacked *the Fang* the first time, *brother*?"

The arrival of half a dozen Custodes in the compartment a moment later was a curious *coincidence*, of course...

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Malfi Warp Crown**

**Malfi System**

**Malfi**

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

**Warlord** **Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

The day certainly hadn't been boring.

There had been nine hundred and ninety-nine major assassination attempts upon her person alone.

Ax'senaea had not been forgotten, with close to three hundred lethal attacks directed against her.

Nearly everyone who had survived the Tyrant Star had faced a monster, a trap, or some unpleasant sorcerous stratagem. Dozens had already perished.

Tzeentchian cultists' greatest trait was too often their ambition. Alas, their greatest sin was also their ambition.

And it made them blind.

Yes, she had suffered a defeat in the war against the King in Yellow. But most of the covens and conspiracies which had decided to strike had absolutely no idea of the *why* or the *how*.

They had practised with daemons, heard the word defeat, and concluded she wasn't a leader worth following.

On the one hand, it was a relief. Such idiots rarely made valuable warriors, servants, or any important role among her forces. It was better to purge them before they were elevated to a position where their incompetence would do *real* damage.

On the other hand, the number of conspirators who had been caught red-handed was still incredibly concerning. Malfi had billions of Tzeentchian worshippers, so the approximately nine thousand cabals eager to kill her were a small minority. But many of them had been mid-ranked sorcerers, not the failures that were so common in a sorcery-dominated society. Real powerhouses had supported these attempts with reagents, lore, and souls. They had not been willing to test the waters in person, but at least a few dozen Magisters of Q'Sal must have been involved.

Malicia had waited until she retired to her private quarters and cast several protection spells before her features showed her apprehension.

The Tyrant Star had been a defeat, that much couldn't be denied, but it had been a tactical one. The only ship whose loss would have really hurt was her flagship, and it had survived intact. Of the ground forces, the only things the blue-eyed sorceress couldn't replace were Ax'senaea, the Space Marines, and of course her own life.

The rest? Many of the cults selected for the 'honour' had been chosen to be sacrificed in the first place. The King in Yellow's forces had just accelerated their demise.

That the most powerful sorcerers and influential souls of Malfi knew this for sure and yet were already starting to turn on her was not promising.

Many plans would have to be modified.

"But let's begin with things I can change in the next several days," the platinum-haired parahuman whispered. "Assassins and the so-called reinforcements we received will wait for another round of conspiracies and betrayals."

The successive victories the Imperium had won over Lorgar and all the forces of the Black Crusade had had very unpleasant effects for all the servants of the Gods who had launched their insurrection as the Grand Armada had sailed past Cadia.

Be they corrupted Medicae in service of the Grandfather, genocidal butchers of the Blood God, or ambitious nobles serving Tzeentch, there were many billions of humans and non-humans rebelling against the adamantium fist of Terra.

A large majority had expected help to come, if not from the Seventeenth Legion, at least from some warbands able to provide orbital support and heavy weapons.

This support, needless to say, had never materialised.

And now, they were all fleeing the vengeful retribution of the Imperium. As the defences of Cadia and the nearby Fortress Worlds included an impressive number of Battlefleets and pirate-hunting Squadrons, the Calyx Hell Stars were looking more and more like a nice alternative to the Eye of Terror.

The next years were certainly going to be interesting in that regard...provided she survived them.

"The loss of all the Rubricae was a particularly painful blow," the sorceress acknowledged to herself as she stripped out of her blue armour, "I can't trust them to be my bodyguards...and most of them were part of the coup which was prepared in the seventy-seventh plot."

The ex-Rubricae had been given a chance to leave, but few of them had taken her up on her offer. Well, they really should have done so, because Malicia wasn't in the habit of giving second chances, and the Thousand Sons would not be an exception.

"At least I was able to gain valuable insight."

The blue-eyed parahuman sang a spell of nine syllables, and a secret passage was revealed.

Seconds later, the Tzeentchian female warlord entered one of her own magical ateliers.

Unavoidably, a not-insignificant amount of time was spent checking no one had been able to access the room.

A rival or an assassin having found his – or its – way here could have booby trapped this atelier in dozens of ways, and all of them could result in a titanic explosion of power that would kill her instantly.

But to her relief, there had been no intrusion.

"Now the list of the 'ingredients'...first, one empty Power Armour of the pattern used by an arrogant Thousand Son Astartes."

To be honest, it had taken more time to clean up the armour than to kill the Astartes and make an example out of him. Do you have any idea how many places blood could go when you slaughtered someone with a barbed blade?

"The second critical part is the Eye of Transmutational Changestone, with the nine psyker souls bound to it."

Obviously, it was far bigger than a human eye. It was as big as one of the Necron 'Orbs' Malicia had stolen from the Ymga Monolith. Incidentally, the Tzeentchian-changed Noctilith had been acquired from the same location.

"Nine wards crystallised and poured into the symbols of lapis lazuli and gold."

Those had been far more time-intensive to create than shaping Changestone into an orb.

"An arcano-engine in the form of a heart."

This one was truly a marvel of sorcerous inventiveness...and it was the only thing the young sorceress hadn't been able to fabricate with her own magic and hands.

It had required the expensive services of a Q'Sal Magister...and though it was a question of survival, and no fault had been found in the work...Malicia didn't like owing anything to anyone.

The heart was blue, and pulsating like a true heart.

"And last but not least...the tablet the Sons of Change dug through many ruins to find."

It had been divided in many parts, and the Astartes and many warbands had to travel and fight across the entirety of the Calyx Hell Stars to find them all.

To an inexperienced eye, it seemed hardly worth the effort.

The stone used was seemingly very ordinary, a light shade of grey, and many lesser glyphs had been erased by the ravages of time.

But there was a word which remained carved in the stone.

A single word.

In High or Low Gothic, or any language used by Mankind since the third millennium, this would have been a historical curiosity, nothing more.

But what was on this tablet?

It was as much a tool as a weapon.

It was *Enuncia*, and its origins may have been linked to the mythical Tower of Babel, though even with the support of several Greater Daemons, Malicia hadn't been able to acquire the evidence to support her theory.

"Now," the Destiny Unwritten steeled herself, "the creation of the Majestryx Golem can begin."

\*\*\*\*

**7th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**TYPHUS THE TRAVELLER**

**FORMERLY CALAS TYPHON**

'**HERALD OF CONTAGION'**

'**THE HIVE OF THE DESTROYER'**

'**ARCHITECT OF A THOUSAND PLAGUES'**

**FIRST CAPTAIN OF THE TRAITOR FOURTEENTH LEGION**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CONTAGION THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PSYCHIC THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-BETA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA MORAL THREAT**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT ASTARTES CHAPTER SUPPORT**

**IF MILITARY HELP DOES NOT INCLUDE VOID-SEALED ARMOURS, ENGAGE WITH INCENDIARY AMMUNITION: CONTAGION MUST BE PREVENTED AT ALL COSTS**

**ALPHA-PRIMUS INFORMATION: THIS TRAITOR IS SO CONTAGIOUS THAT HIS ARRIVAL ON A PLANET IS A DEATH SENTENCE IS IN ITS OWN RIGHT. RECOMMENDED METHOD IS TO INCINERATE HIM FROM ORBIT.**

**WARNING: THE FLAGSHIP OF THE ACCURSED TRAITOR IS SUFFICIENT TO BE A MATCH FOR AN ENTIRE BATTLEFLEET. DO NOT ENGAGE IT WITHOUT ADEQUATE SUPPORT, AND FOR THE LOVE OF THE GOD-EMPEROR, DO NOT TRY TO BOARD IT.**

**REWARDS: 10 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'AVENGER OF THE DROP SITE MASSACRE', OVATION OF SEGMENTUM OBSCURUS AUTHORITIES, SINGLE-USE MEDICAE TRIBUTE, 100 HOSPITAL SHIPS, MEDICAE TRADE PRIVILEGE RIGHTS GRANTED, ETC...**

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**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Tanstar System**

**88 Tanstar**

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

**Typhus** **the Traveller**

"BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!"

"The leader of the Khornate forces is the priority. I want him alive." Typhus would not waste his dignity trying to out-shout a small army of bloodthirsty madmen screaming as if it was a question of life or death for them.

"And these strange corrupted tech-savants, Herald?" gurgled one of his more recent conversions into a Plague Marine.

"Kill them and quickly," the being who hosted the Destroyer Hive inside himself replied. "We will wonder how many the new favourite of the Skull Throne rallied to her banners later."

"By the will of the Grandfather."

"Decay will reign supreme. We are in position, First Captain."

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!"

The Khornate horde nearly tripled in size as Bloodletters and other red-skinned servants of Khorne poured into reality.

It was a respectable force, but Typhus had expected nothing else.

The Tanstar System was one of the 'Gates' of the Calyx Hell Stars, one of the rare nodes even a Nurglite fleet like his was forced to go through if it wanted to enter the warzone with intact Battleships.

Years ago, Lotara Sarrin had punched through its defences and captured it, profiting from a severely unprepared of the Tzeentchian garrison. The new conquerors had then transformed it into a massive slaughterhouse.

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR**-"

*Manreaper* struck, and the first marauder had his two arms removed.

The roar of defiance swiftly died, as the Death Guard Marines struck their mortal opponents relentlessly, and the Khornate warriors quickly realised they weren't bleeding.

*Manreaper* struck twice more before the next predictable battle-cry was screamed.

"**KHORNE DOES NOT CARE**-"

"Yes, your God does not care from where the blood flows." Typhus loudly interrupted with a twinge of sarcasm. "That's why all the Power Scythes of the Grandfather's Chosen have been blessed by an absolutely delectable substance which cauterises your wounds, ensuring not a single drop of your blood will irrigate this wasteland."

*Manreaper* struck yet again.

The Death Guard advanced.

"**BLASPHEMY**!"

"No," Typhus countered, "I use my strengths to win a battle. And I try to deny my enemies theirs."

The rest of the battle devolved into a one-sided massacre.

There had been only seven hundred and seventy-seven Space Marines to take the field today, with each of the Seven Great Companies represented, by the will of the Grandfather.

The Khornate army had been, of course, deploying far greater numbers, but not a single Astartes.

It was an excellent sign that the Blood God's Champions had not anticipated their arrival. There were arrogant warlords serving the *Conqueror*'s Mistress, but none were sufficiently stupid to believe their mortal Bolter-fodder could stop an assault by hundreds of Death Guard veterans.

"BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!"

This was a good harvest, and Typhus grunted in satisfaction as more and more Bloodletters were disappearing without a fight, all the while the Death Guard's artillery began the long-ranged bombardment of highly contagious diseases it was famed for.

The lack of blood on the battlefield was a disaster for the Khornate army, and as Typhus took step after step, Warp-spawned flies began to answer his act of devotion. The grandfather was watching, and he was finding his work *good*.

Typhus felt the power pouring into his two hearts, but he didn't release the Destroyer Hive or the Winds of Chaos. There was a plan, and it didn't involve showing off his power to these weaklings.

Besides, what would be the point? The battle was over, and the servants of the Blood God had lost.

"Herald," a Captain of the 2nd Great Company gurgled joyously. "We have him! Intact and protected from our Blight, as per your wishes!"

"Excellent!" Typhus complimented the other officer. "My word is the Grandfather's. The blessing will be yours. Bring him to me. I am approaching the Convergence Site."

The Herald of Nurgle had never doubted victory would belong to the Grandfather today. Seven Battleships against a tiny flotilla? No one could really lose with an advantage that massive. And on the ground, while the world had been in the grasp of the Blood God, it had not been fully converted into a realm of the Gods.

And, of course, the World Eaters weren't here.

"The Bloodthirsters will make a mountain of your skulls! The Axes of Murder will play with your entrails! The-"

The eyes of the Khornate leader, a tattooed brute almost the height of a small Astartes, flinched as he saw Typhus for the first time. And his imprecations ceased immediately, which was somehow satisfying.

"You are the Traveller."

"So you've heard of me. I would say I am flattered...but you are too insignificant for that emotion to reach my rotten hearts."

The last servant of the Blood God to remain alive spat. Being completely at his mercy, it wasn't like he could do anything else...but Typhus made sure nonetheless the blood that was spat ended on *Manreaper* rather than on the ground.

"You took Tanstar today, but you will never keep it. The *Conqueror* will learn of your presence. It will come. And it will devour you all. No one escapes from the *Conqueror*."

Typhus didn't bother wasting words with the prisoner. Instead, he merely nodded to the Captain that had been given the holiest duty of the battle.

The Legionnaire immediately knelt, before opening a small reliquary – formerly one made by the worshippers of the False Emperor, it had been desecrated for centuries before playing its key role today.

The moment it was done, the Grandfather's miasma came into existence. It was the same pleasant colour as the shade of the potion brewing in the Grandfather's cauldron.

Naturally, the ground around the reliquary began to transform into a swamp.

Such was the power of what he had been given to accomplish his God's purposes.

"What heresy is this?"

"Heresy? Be polite, mortal. The warlords of this region have used Changestone and Haematia for their childish purposes. You should have known it was only a matter of time before we would use our own blessed Noctilith in our rituals."

By the way the servant of Blood God paled, it didn't seem to have crossed his mind. But then, this warrior had clearly not been chosen for his brains.

"With the blessed contagion of **Jaderot**," Typhus proclaimed so that mortal, Astartes, and Gods alike heard him. "I claim this planet in the name of the Grandfather! And I rename it 77 Cholera...a far better name than this Tanstar nonsense."

The Herald turned his eyes again to stare at the prisoner.

"Prepare the final ritual, brothers."

**Calyx** **Hell Stars**

**Morwen System**

**Morwen VI**

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

**Magister** **Immaterial Nouakchott**

The world of Morwen VI was dead.

It had not always been that way. The fossils of long dead lifeforms were easy to discover as long as you bothered to search for them. There were considerable deposits of fuel and natural gas, that many of his disciples were busy harvesting, so that they would eventually be sold to various parties on Malfi.

But while life had once existed on Morwen VI, it had clearly been very long ago.

The estimates of the Magister Immaterial, founded on several pacts with his patrons and long archaeological researches, were that thirty thousand or so years ago, an unknown cataclysm had wiped out all life on Morwen VI.

Nouakchott still didn't know much about it. All he could say for certain was that no human was responsible, and that it had happened in a very short of amount of time, a couple of years by the longest estimate.

The post-apocalyptic effects were easy to study however. The entire atmosphere of the planet had become nitrogen.

Fortunately, it was rather easy for a Magister of his seniority to deal with this. The Great Mutator's boons had proven once again without equal; the warband he had led to Morwen VI saw their lungs and bodies modified until they could breathe nitrogen effortlessly.

Where the pathetic slaves of the False Emperor would have been unable to make a first survey without cumbersome protection, Nouakchott had been able to build a true fortress and underground facilities in record time.

This was necessary, for while many of his slaves were utterly disposable, the rest of his warband wasn't, and a lot of them needed food and water.

Thus large food production facilities were being expanded right now even as Nouakchott admired the mystery he had come to study and claim in the name of the Great Mutator.

Morwen VI was dead.

But its ruins had survived the ravages of cataclysm and entropy.

Though to call what he could observe with his improved eyes 'ruins' was almost an insult, really.

The two-tiered ziggurats of Morwen VI were intact.

Whatever cosmic disaster or super-weapon had annihilated all life, it had had no effect whatsoever on the structures.

It was...impressive.

Yes, the ziggurats were made of thick plates of metal. But that shouldn't have been sufficient if the equivalent of an Exterminatus was performed.

There wasn't a single scratch on any of the nine ziggurats that composed his main 'archaeological study site'.

No alloy known to the slaves of the False Emperor or those bathing in the knowledgeable light of Tzeentch was capable of that.

And Magister Immaterial Nouakchott had already verified; no, they weren’t Necron structures.

Even more surprising was that the first studies had revealed that while the ziggurats had no entrances, the structures were actually hollow, and regular electronic pulses were generated within.

But with the strange metallic alloy impenetrable to the tech-sorcery of Q'Sal for now, the mystery was not going to be easy to solve.

It didn't really bother Nouakchott.

The favour of the Great Mutator was not something to dismiss, ever, but the Magister Immaterial had not come to Morwen VI because he thought there were secrets here that after a year or two would instantly elevate him above his peers in the treacherous sorcery courts of Malfi.

No, Morwen VI was always to be intended to be a long-term project.

"Lord Magister! There is a major problem!"

"The ziggurats? The food reserves?" Nouakchott asked, his instincts of self-preservation on the move again.

"No, Lord Magister. It is...some kind of Cruiser has come out of the Warp incredibly close to the fourth planet of the system. And well..."

"What? Get on with it?"

"They have sent a single message. They claim to be here by the will of the King in Yellow...and they want our surrender. Otherwise...they say our deaths will be proportional to the seconds we forced them to waste."

Magister Nouakchott sneered. Well, the enemy had style, if nothing else.

"Alert Malfi we have a slight skeleton problem here. We do not officially request reinforcements," given how predatory his peers could be, that would be the equivalent of slashing his own throat, "but inform our colleagues the Usurper has for the first time deployed a warship deep into the Morwen System."

"Yes, Lord Magister! But...we don't even know what the enemy is after..."

"Don't try to make yourself sound dumber than you already are," Nouakchott answered. "The only thing that is worth the presence of a military force here are these ziggurats. And they won't have their secrets. Morwen VI belongs to the Great Mutator! Activate all the defences, and muster the warband! In the name of **Tzeentch**, we will be victorious!"

**The Eye of Terror**

**Urum**

**Consortium Primary Headquarters**

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

**Lord** **Commander Primus Eidolon**

Eidolon didn't believe he had ever hated a single being like he now hated Fabius Bile.

It was a maelstrom of negative emotions powering him. It was an ocean of violence he was dreaming to unleash against his tormentor every second of his existence.

It was pure hatred.

And he couldn't lift a single finger to accomplish it, despite being clad in his immaculate Power Armour and his arms being present in their scabbards and holsters.

"I am the Lord Commander Primus."

"Yes, what a lovely weather we have today, my dear." Bile didn't even turn his head away from the alien he was vivisecting. "The thing that pretends to be a weather wizard told me we will have acid rains before the day is over.”

"I am the Lord Commander Primus!"

"I know, no large field test for your forces today. I hope you will survive the disappointment!"

Eidolon went silent and glared. That wasn't what he wanted to say, and the eternally-cursed 'Clonelord' knew it!

But there was no way he could shout it out loud.

When he had risen once again alive from the surgeon’s table, Eidolon had realised all the horror of what Fabius Bile had done to him.

The only words he was physically capable of saying were 'I am the Lord Commander Primus.' He could change the tone. He could change the accent. He could change the pace. But no matter what he thought he was saying, the end result was always the same.

Bile had rewired his brain and deliberately limited it in many ways. His body obeyed Bile's commands immediately now. Sometimes he couldn't even breathe as long as Bile didn't give him permission!

And most frustrating above all, his obvious hatred was nothing to the Lord of the Consortium.

The treacherous ex-Chief Apothecary of the Emperor's Children continued his work, torturing aliens, examining the organs of his 'patients' while they screamed in agony or were frozen by strange toxins.

There was nothing to do but wait, and think about all the ways Eidolon could make the insane madman scream when one day he was free again.

After several hours of long and boring vigil, a four-armed mutant entered the lair of Fabius Bile, prostrating himself the moment he was past the vats containing various misbegotten green-shining organs.

"Master," the male mutant croaked. "A Dark Apostle begs for a moment of your time."

"A Dark Apostle, really?" Fabius abandoned the corpse of what may have long ago been a human, but now had grown a chitinous carapace and at least ten eyes on each arm.

Eidolon too began to feel a slight interest. Most rumours which had begun to spread told how the sons of Lorgar had been exterminated to the last at Macragge, along with their idiotic Primarch.

If there was a Word Bearer here, clearly the rumours may have been just that, rumours...

"He wears the armour of the Seventeenth, Master."

"Very well," one could easily recognise when the eyes of Bile shone with curiosity, "bring him here."

"Yes, Master."

The wait was rather long. For all the fact this very citadel was the primary headquarters of the Consortium, no one was really safe here if your name wasn't Bile. The mutants and other breeds of 'new humans' – or whatever name the Clonelord gave them – would never act against their creator, but the Marines who weren't able to enjoy the favour of the 'Primogenitor' would rapidly discover Urum could be really, really dangerous for newcomers.

At last, the four-armed 'guide' was back, preceding a Word Bearer.

For all his own pathetic situation of lab rat and bodyguard, Eidolon felt his lips twitch.

The son of Lorgar had been punished by the Gods. A lot. Horns had grown upon his head, but while they could have been a sign of favour, here it was clearly not the case.

The horns were enormous, so large that even with the extra-large door, the Dark Apostle had to be wary of not slamming them against anything.

It didn't stop there. Part of the left arm had clearly been turned into black crystal. The right leg had a mass of purple tentacles covering it.

These were not the worst mutations Eidolon had ever seen – that honour belonged to a few Chaos Spawns – but they were not good at all. And it was sure as the Warp painful; black ichor was dripping on the ground now that the Word Bearer had stopped walking, and the ugly teeth were constantly grinding in pain until there was an attempt to speak.

"Lord Bile. Thank you for granting me an audience so promptly."

"I was curious," the former Chief Apothecary admitted quite candidly for once. "I had heard Weaver had exterminated your entire Legion at Macragge...your presence here tells me quite clearly the news I received wasn’t completely accurate."

As a professional when it came to hatred, Eidolon didn't miss the emotion which dominated everything in the Word Bearer's eyes when 'Weaver' was uttered.

"Her armies came quite close to finishing us off," the son of Lorgar confessed after an ugly grimace. "Guilliman killed our gene-sire after she toyed with him. And the armies deployed on Macragge inflicted on us a severe defeat. We had already lost a majority of our forces, but we lost close to thirty thousand Legionnaires between the battles for Macragge City and Pharsalus. The Gods saved a few of us at the end. That's how I stand in front of you today."

Eidolon was used to considerable butcher bills. Yet here, he could only stare aghast. Huge losses like that one had not been reported since the Siege of Terra. Yes, the Emperor's Children had perished recently, but that had been because Slaanesh was dead, not a military campaign.

"I heard the Naga and our dear Lucius went with you." Bile pressed on.

"I don't know what happened to them," the Dark Apostle replied. "The Naga went missing on Fenris. Lucius sided with Erebus, trying to use a Webway Gate somewhere on Laphis. We know Erebus perished. His screams are heard everywhere in the realm of the Blood God."

"That's very good news." Fabius grinned. "I'm thinking I will throw a party for the occasion. The Vile One getting what he so richly deserved is worth a good celebration, I think."

The son of Lorgar stayed silent as Bile turned to examine some of his experiments, humming a tune Eidolon didn't recognise.

It didn't take a lot of imagination to know the Priest of the Dark gods was seething, though. Not because of Erebus – the Vile One was hated by everyone, his death a reason to celebrate across all Legions – but because of how little the former Chief Apothecary visibly cared that the Seventeenth Legion was on the edge of extinction.

It wasn't a surprise for Eidolon; the Lord Commander had seen firsthand Bile was absolutely not concerned that the Third Legion had been wiped out. And since Bile didn't care about his own Legion, why would he be concerned if the Word Bearers ceased to exist?

"Weaver is an existential threat. You need to-"

Fabius Bile raised a single finger in admonishment.

"I'm not a military specialist, dear, but I think Weaver taught you quite a lesson. If you don't want her to finish the job, I would advise staying at least ten thousand light-years away from her at all times. But that's just a modest suggestion, I am just a humble scientist with little knowledge of military matters."

Eidolon silently scoffed at the enormity of the lies...humble scientist...no knowledge of military matters...really, was Fabius going to insist next he was just the lab janitor?

"We want to rebuild the Seventeenth Legion."

"And I want an authentic coffee before I begin my arduous day of work," Bile sarcastically retorted. "The true coffee we transported at ruinous logistical costs from Terra during the Great Crusade, not this abomination of 'recaff' everyone seems content to mix with Martian oil."

"I am not joking, Clonelord!"

"Son of Lorgar, I am not joking either. Your desires are absolutely not my first, second, or third priority. In fact, I think they don't figure *anywhere* in my list of priorities. Eidolon! Please escort our guest out! Preferably through an alley that doesn't hinder his...formidable horns that someone gave him!"

As always, Eidolon tried to resist. Once again, he failed. The Lord Commander felt like a puppet on strings as he walked towards the son of Lorgar.

"Wait! We can make a bargain!"

"You have no expertise whatsoever in the art of genetic experimentation," Fabius proclaimed with his annoying voice of 'I am so great, why anyone can't understand it?'. "But all right, I will humour you. Bargain, Apostle. And if I don't find it interesting, you're my next experimental test subject for today. The Lord Commander Primus can confirm it is not an enjoyable position. Please talk, my dear."

"I am the Lord Commander Primus."

The Word Bearer's horror at what Eidolon had suffered was...something. The Emperor's Children officer didn't really know how he should take that.

But at least the son of Lorgar realised how perilous his situation was.

Immediately a little vial was revealed from a cache hidden by the cape of flayed skin he wore.

The little armaglass container was clearly near-empty.

"The Blue Bacta I was able to obtain at Macragge," the Dark Apostle explained, "we had to kill twenty Space Marines to reach the Apothecary, and even then, the guardian tried his best to deny it to us."

"Melusine."

As if she had always been there and reality only registered it now, the daemoness-looking 'daughter' of the Clonelord appeared.

"Father?"

"Is he speaking the truth?"

There was a...Eidolon didn't know how to explain it. It was if the entire lab froze for an instant.

"Yes. Yes, there is Blue Bacta in this flask. I advise...extreme caution in wielding it. Even diluted, it would be quite lethal for you, Father."

"Duly noted, my dear." Bile' eyes returned to the Word Bearer's emissary. "Very well, Apostle of the Seventeenth Legion. It seems I made a mistake. You do have something of value to bargain with. Here are the terms I willing to offer..."

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Civitas**

**2.850.310M35**

**Legate Galatea Dumas**

Galatea has seen the vid-picts showing what Macragge City looked like after the last heretic was killed.

It had not been a pretty sight. A large part of the city had been spared the house-to-house fighting, but even there, tanks and Knights had barrelled forwards, giving little thought to the marvels built to commemorate the holy victories of the Great Crusade.

And wherever the battle had been truly fought...the Legate winced at the memory. Heavy artillery and Space Marine assaults had torn apart the blue marble and columns the homeworld of the Ultramarines was so renowned for.

Today? It was difficult to say it was the same city which had endured the worst the heretics could throw at it.

Crowds were everywhere, cheering and applauding, as the military parade entered its third hour of celebrations. The traces of the carnage had all been removed, be it debris, corpses, or the explosives the Imperial Guard had used.

It went without saying that Macragge had not been rebuilt. One of the reasons there were vast locations where over one thousand men, women, and children could assemble with ease was that many buildings had been declared unsalvageable and razed shortly after.

Galatea had thought it would be impossible. After all, while Macragge City was not declared a Shrine City by the Ecclesiarchy, there had been a lot of voices speaking out against it.

"To be honest, your Celestial Highness, I'm a bit surprised the Primarch let you dismantle so much of his city."

The black-haired Living Saint chuckled.

"I think that the number of hours I promised that my ants could demolish the ruined buildings in played a large part. Well, that and the Inquisitors wanted Lisa to illuminate everything with no stone left unturned. The corruption of the Traitor Seventeenth is no small matter, after all."

An enormous mouth opened next to them...along with a pitiful sound that would have been quite comical if it wasn't so loud.

Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, Chosen of the God-Emperor, sighed theatrically...before grabbing a large strawberry that had arrived this morning from the Agri-World of Nova Thulium, and throwing it into the mouth of the avid fruit-eater.

"My Adjutant-Spiders have a honey addiction, and you, you have a strawberry one, Lisa," Her Celestial Highness chided her Titan-Moth. "You're quite lucky Nova Thulium is cultivating strawberries. They are using them to make high-quality strawberry jam, you know."

The rumbling sound of the immense insect could have been interpreted as a 'please tell me more, Mistress'.

The real translation in Moth-speak must not be far from it, for the Lady Nyx snorted immediately after.

"You are incorrigible. Now give me some light, you need to amaze the children."

The presentation of several huge strawberries – seriously, who cultivated these things, they had to be the size of an Amazonian watermelon – was all the 'convincing' Lisa required, and soon large orbs of pure light materialised, delighting the crowd...and did a last verification that everyone that passed the purification rituals was indeed true in his or her soul.

"That will do wonders for morale."

Galatea coughed.

"Even a certain Dreadnought and his abnormally large hat?" The Legate of the Templar Sororitas inquired politely as the Macraggian population sang the name of Lisa.

"Even him...have you seen how many decorations and pelts the Space Wolves buried poor Rylanor under?"

"The Fenrisians are overcompensating?"

"Or more likely, they gave him the garb of Bjorn the Fell-Handed, who refused to parade and preferred to keep an eye on his Primarch. This wasn't announced officially, but the old Dreadnought stormed the Custodes ship before the Lord of Wolves could find a semi-adequate excuse."

Seen like that, the red-clad officer had to admit it was a really, really plausible theory.

"I see." Galatea watched the crowd...and the 'guards' forming a wall of ceramite and Power Armours between the spectators and the regiments advancing and saluting Her Celestial Highness, before turning towards the Ultima Avenue. "This still feels surreal. Even after Commorragh, there weren't this many Space Marines in a single location."

"It is surreal, and in more ways than one. I didn't expect to heal Guilliman, you know. Certainly not this year, and there was a strong likelihood it wouldn't be done this century at all."

"And yet you did it...your Celestial Highness."

"Cawl deserves some of the credit too," the commanding officer of Operation Stalingrad saluted the Indigan and Catachan guardsmen parading next to the high platform installed for Lisa. "But yes, I did it. And now we have a large assembly of every Successor Chapter the Thirteenth Legion founded since M31."

The Living Saint didn't need to say it was a spectacular sight. It was obvious.

Some of the Space Marines were from Chapters whose Companies had bled and paid an enormous price during the war many were already calling the Cataclysm of Macragge: Iron Hounds, Genesis Chapter, and Brazen Consuls to name just a few.

But there were entire Companies which had arrived since the Tyranids were annihilated. The Nemesis Chapter alone had arrived this morning with two full Companies and a Battle-Barge. Two days ago, it had been a Company each of Black Consuls and Novamarines.

Aurora Chapter, Mortifactors, Scythes of the Emperor, Inceptors, and Tome Keepers were just a few of the names that had just transformed from names on sacred vellum to a reality of Bolters, Power Armours, and Land Raiders.

"Perhaps I'm a Sororitas who knows how to hold a grudge, your Celestial Highness, but I can't help but think the campaign would have been far easier if we had all these Astartes with us when we fought the Ymga Monolith and the other horrors. I trust the Chapters of the Blood, but here I see as many Ultramarine Successors as there were Astartes present mustered in the Nyx Sector."

"A bit of an exaggeration, that," the Macragge heroine replied while distractedly petting Lisa, who swallowed strawberry after strawberry. "We had a lot of Space Marines, even if most were not deployed alongside Battle Group Volga. And many paid the price."

Galatea nodded with a grimace. The operations against Necron redoubts had been conducted in an exemplary manner; the Howling Griffons alone had won many splendid victories to add to their rolls of honour. But when it had turned badly...the Space Marines were good. But too often, when an entire Necron Tomb-World awakened, 'good' was not enough.

The Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes had been key when it came to winning new legendary battles with Lady Weaver. But it was going to take decades before they recovered their full strength, for many of their veterans had died killing Necrons, Daemons, Traitor Marines, and Tyranids.

"I won't deny it would have been nice to have had them, though the key thing that would really have helped considerably would have been a logistical hub on the doorstep of all our operations. Tigrus and the other Forge Worlds were more than adequate for the first phase, but the moment the fighting moved towards Damocles, more or less everything relied upon our supply fleets."

The Living Saint smiled serenely.

"But if anything, their numbers here today prove that while their prestige is not what it was, the Ultramarine's Successors form an essential part of the Adeptus Astartes' effectives, and that isn't likely to change...not with their Primarch returned."

Galatea would be lying a lot if she claimed she had not considered some of the implications. Roboute Guilliman, Leman Russ, Corvus Corax. As many gene-lines of Space Marines that suddenly had the opportunity to create new Astartes...though in the Ultramarines' case, they might have to wait for a bit, given that their Primarch was imbedded in his regeneration-armour-device.

"Let's cheer for everyone, most particularly the children," Lady Taylor Hebert continued softly, throwing one more strawberry to the Titan-Moth, who made a sound of absolute joy. "We won this war, and tomorrow will come soon enough with all its headaches..."

**Brigadier-General** **Tanya Sevrev**

War was a brutal affair, and when the Traitor forces had tried to storm Macragge, they hadn't made a difference between the administration buildings and the places where the citizens of Macragge spent their evenings drinking.

This had demanded a great deal of improvisation when the guns went silent, though guardsmen were nothing if not adaptable.

Of course, since the Fay 20th had been on Laphis, the best accommodations had already been taken when they returned from Ardium.

That was a minor inconvenience, really. A commercial centre had been promptly turned into a respectable tavern after its owner was convinced by a sizeable number of Throne Gelts, and when the Lady General Militant and Lord Commissar Zuhev turned a blind eye to some requisitions of beer and other drinks among the supply fleet, everything was possible.

"And we pushed the barrels! For this was a matter of honour! There may be ten times our weight in this ugly steel no proper Smith would accept, but we pushed! This was the Royal's Fair, and the honour of Ur-Tabriz was at stake! My back ached, my beard was telling me to stop, but I pushed the barrel...and I won!"

The story of the Slayer – not Borek, the troublemaker had disappeared somewhere with Leet – finished his story under thunderous applause.

"BOY!" The Squat roared, generating more hilarity, for the 'boy' was a Catachan guardsman who had the muscles of a small Ogryn. "BRING ME ANOTHER BARREL! THIS STORY IS MAKING ME THIRSTY!"

"Splendid oration skills," someone whispered, and Tanya jumped to her feet...before realising the identity of exactly who had sneaked up on her.

"Lord Corax," the Brigadier-General saluted in a hurry, "forgive me I was-"

"You were having a good time, it's me who has to apologise."

"Err...yes..." What did you say when on the little alcove on the third floor of the commercial centre-turned-tavern, you had to converse with a Primarch. I love your raven feathers? You are perhaps the first man in my life I find somewhat attractive?

"You...you aren't with Lady Weaver?"

"No, and neither I am with my sons," the Primarch of the Raven Guard answered with a melancholic expression. "Their joy of seeing me, speaking with me...I wonder if I am worthy of it."

"But Lord, you are..."

"A Primarch? That much isn't in doubt." Shadows swirled around the Ravenlord's hands, and a cup filled with some Macraggian drink materialised in each. "But is it something to be proud of? In this day and age, we aren't part of the Imperium you live in every day."

"AH, MY BARREL! The Squat roared in pleasure, before beginning to empty it at a speed that was frankly either admirable or incredibly worrying. Pick your choice. "Where was I?"

"The third round of the Royal Fair!"

"The Royal Fair is simple, boys!" The Slayer managed to explain between two cups. "The Judges give a barrel to each of the Champions! You drink it! You demand another! When you're the last Champion to ask for another barrel...when the other little drinkers are having nice dreams and are snoring loud enough to imitate a grox...YOU WIN!"

At least it provided a nice change of topic, and for a second or two Tanya almost forgot there was a Primarch next to her. Almost.

"They have changed the name, I think." The Primarch noted, for once a smile appearing on his pale face. "Father told me a few stories about it once. I think they called it the High King's Fair millennia ago."

Tanya blinked.

"The...the Emperor Himself was among the spectators of a Duardin Fair?"

Corvus Corax scratched his raven-coloured hair.

"The way he told us the tale, I think he wasn't the Emperor when it happened. And he wasn't among the spectators. He was one of the participants."

This definitely caught Tanya aback...but only for a few seconds.

"Well..." the Fay guardswoman said weakly, "I suppose the first two trials aren't impossible...they were trials of strength, after all...and he's the Emperor. The third, however...err...I have seen Duardin drink, and...err..."

The Primarch chuckled.

"I believe my father said it was excellent training to challenge Russ and Vulkan in drinking contests. Especially Russ. My dear brother has a talent none of us ever managed to equal in that domain. We joked several times during the party after the Ullanor Triumph he should have been made the Ale-master or the Tavern-master."

That was...well, it was good to know.

"BOY! I AM STILL THIRSTY! WHERE IS THE NEXT BARREL?"

**Esquiline** **Senatorial Forum**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

Roboute Guilliman had changed.

Some of the changes, Aeonid thought, were quite obvious and his father was undoubtedly aware of them.

Some were not and may only be noticeable to someone like him.

Of course, when you came so close to death only to come back millennia later, the changes were not so surprising.

Still, it was quite something for his father to ask for a drink before the meeting had even begun.

As handling a bottle was beyond the ability of someone forced to stay in a Power Armour, Primarch or not, it was Aeonid who filled the glasses.

"Did you know, my sons, that the sons of Russ have continued making that horrible liquid that makes you puke and devours your entrails?"

"I do, father," Falco Tullius admitted while sipping his wine, which was not Fenrisian, but one of the finest bottles of Macraggian wine. "I had the misfortune to fight side by side with some...it had to be around a century ago. I had the courage to drink one mug of it. I always wondered what sort of acid they incorporated into that ignoble recipe."

"A discovery like none other," Roboute Guilliman nodded. "It was the first time my stomach urged me to vomit something out. It was worse than a poison."

The Avenging Son looked at the city celebrating around them. Or rather, the crowds celebrating in the buildings that were left, which was still a considerable number, as well as the temporary barrack-taverns and the enormous shelters built in haste by an army of massive Catachan Ants and Ambulls.

And though Roboute Guilliman had a smile on his lips, he seemed lost in his thoughts.

"I don't think, father, you decided to invite us away from the hundreds of thousands of Macragge citizens that wish to meet you just to complain about Russ' personal insult to wine."

"No," Roboute Guilliman didn't move; the assemblage of devices surrounding him would have made that extremely difficult anyway, with the sole exception of his arms. "I invited all of you here because you are the surviving officers of the Chapter...and I am far from pleased by the tactical actions, strategic decisions, and political-operational issues that the Ultramarines have been involved in."

"Theoretical," Aulus Tiberius, Captain of the Fourth Company, predictably protested, "the entire Chapter was not sufficient to hold the Seventeenth Traitor Legion on its own."

"Practical," the Thirteenth Primarch replied implacably, "the Ultramarines as a Chapter should never have had to be in a position to hold the bastard sons of Lorgar here. I asked Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, and she confirmed that if Aethergold or a Titan-Moth had been placed as part of a supply fleet in this very system, it would have been extremely difficult to open the kind of horrific maelstrom the Traitor Seventeenth bungled up. At the very least, they would have been forced to open it much further away than they did, which would have forced them to first engage the defences of Mortendar, instead of bypassing them entirely."

Aulus immediately went quiet. Which was...not surprising, really. Of all the Ultramarine Captains, the Captain of the Fourth Company was the only senior officer who had been extremely supportive of Captain Cassius Bacurius to survive in perfect health...something that had to do with the fact the Fourth was too far away to do more than take part in the clean-up and purge actions of the post-Cataclysm.

"I will not search for culprits. I am not going to purge anyone." Roboute Guilliman continued gently but with a gaze filled with determination. "But the state of affairs that existed before the Word Bearers tried to kill us all can't be allowed to continue. The worlds of Ultramar can't be allowed a resumption of the disastrous 'splendid isolation' policy. Otherwise the next battle, be it against the Tyranids, the Traitors, the Orks, or any threat that might rear its ugly head...it will be our end, my sons."

"Will it include...revisions of the Codex?" Aulus Tiberius asked with great hesitancy.

"It will." The next words of the Primarch were not so surprising. "Though in the short-term, the revisions will be minor. The greatest change will be for all of you to not trust my words like they are gospel! It is bad enough I have to witness the religious fervour of a cult we did our best to ban in the Great Crusade. I would very much prefer not to sleep another four thousand years and return to my sons worshipping my books."

Falco Tullius and Fabius Decius seemed to take it rather well, all things considered. Naturally, Aulus Tiberius was the big problem, but that it was their father delivering the message was a nice point in the...revisions' favour.

"I understand Captain Antillar and the Fifth Company will be here within the week."

"Yes, father,' Falco replied in their name, "the Wardens of the Eastern Fringe have already reported their last war against the Orks was a success...which unfortunately was not achieved without losses. They are down to eighty-two battle-brothers."

Two out of the four Captains present grimaced. Eighteen Space Marines lost was not a big number for the kind of long campaigns the Fifth specialised in, but never in the last millennium had the Ultramarines been brought so close to annihilation.

"Thank you for the confirmation, my son. What I have in mind is to take several of the veterans of the Fifth and Ninth Companies, and to merge them so that we have a special training cadre of skilled Astartes who will be charged with devising tactics and strategies to defeat the Tyranids. A force of twenty-four should be adequate, I think. And I think," the smile his father gave him was very ironic, "they may as well be identified by painting their helmets red for the time being."

The Red Mark that had been a mark of shame, then a badge of honour, was going to take on a new life, it seemed. Yes, Aeonid could taste the irony.

"At the same time," their father was clearly far from finished, "we need another training cadre to train and prepare for large-scale battles against other Astartes. The battles fought between Illyrium and this city proved that a lot of battle-lore was lost when it comes to fighting the Traitors. This mustn't be allowed to continue. Elements of the First, Third, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth, in addition to the Fifth, will form an adaptable specialist force who will prepare the Ultramarines to mercilessly hunt down the oath-breakers. I am very hopeful that the bastard sons of Lorgar have suffered a blow they won't recover from, but even if they are out of consideration, the other Traitors are still out there."

"But father," Aulus interjected, consternation clear on his face, "the Chapter is heavily understrength. If we pull off the cadres of these Companies, where are we going to find the training cadres to expand the ranks of the Neophytes?"

"A fair question," Guilliman acquiesced with a nod. "Some of the training cadres will come from veteran instructors from the Ultramarine's Successors. I have spoken with them today, and many have plenty of good things to teach the new generation of Ultramarines. The rest of the training cadres will be provided by Ultramarines themselves. Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert promised me a full Company of Ultramarines...though she was evasive about the how. There was only a mention about extracting concessions from a thief. Aeonid?"

"Trazyn," the veteran of the Horus Heresy cursed. He was forced to elaborate since the name evidently meant nothing to his father or his fellow Captains. "He is a Necron thief who has been around for the last sixty million years and seems to delight in stealing everything that meets his notion of 'art', which includes Astartes and artworks alike, and placing them in his time-preserved collections."

"Is there a precedent?" Aulus asked, clearly unconvinced. "Because if there isn't-"

Aeonid felt like burying his face in his hands. Someone had evidently not read a single page of the after-action report of Commorragh he had written.

"After Lady Weaver destroyed the Dark City of the Webway, there were several important negotiations with various Necron parties. I wasn't personally involved in any of them, but I saw with my own eyes the return of one hundred and ninety-four Salamander battle-brothers who had been thought lost in the thirty-third millennium. Something called the Klovian Disaster, if I remember correctly. This is one of the reasons among multiple that the Magma Spiders based in the Nyx Sector were founded so quickly."

The other being that after the golden-winged General had recovered several Artefacts of Vulkan, the sons of Vulkan would have followed her anywhere in great numbers...

"That's...quite promising." Captain Fabius Decius agreed, looking relieved...hardly surprising, when he was the Master of Recruits in charge of the largest Chapter rebuilding in living memory. "Any idea which era our lost battle-brothers will be from?"

"Not a single one," Aeonid Thiel shrugged, "as I said before, Trazyn has been around for millions of years. The battle-brothers whose return Lady Weaver negotiated could be from any period between the moment the Legion took the name of Ultramarines and today."

"No point in making a lot of theoreticals, then," Falco seemed to take it in good humour, at least. "Is there another major point you wanted to wanted to speak of, father?"

"Yes, there is one more." Roboute Guilliman cleared his throat. "With the true sacrifice of Chapter Master Cato Valens and Captain Gaius Pompeius likely unable to return to duty due to the extreme gravity of his injuries, the Ultramarines Chapter has lost its two highest officers."

Honestly, it was already miraculous enough Gaius had survived at all. Trying to kill a Primarch in close combat and living to tell the tale was not something many Astartes could boast...thank Bacta for keeping him alive.

"I need a new Chapter Master."

And his eyes fell upon Aeonid.

The Captain of the Eighth shook his head, looked at the three other Captains...and winced internally as they all looked at him in approval.

"This isn't something you're going to allow to me to refuse, father..."

"Indeed not. Congratulations, Chapter Master Thiel."

**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Solemnace World Engine**

**9.858.310M35**

**Somatek** **the Patient**

There were days when everything was boring and slow.

"This will be the jewel of my new Macragge Collection. No, it will be the jewel of ALL my Collections!"

And there were days when you regretted an exasperation mode had not been included in your engrams during biotransference.

"With the greatest respect I have for you, Overlord," Somatek began, "the last fifteen times you returned, you spoke the same words."

And by all the C'Tan, the next fifteen 'acquisitions' would result in the same words or very similar ones being uttered in his presence yet again.

After millions of years, Somatek had long since given up on expecting something new from his Master.

"No, no, and no, Somatek! Look at this fabulous subject! A Primarch! Lorgar of the Word Bearers is honouring Solemnace of his presence!"

Somatek looked at it. He wasn't impressed. Once you had seen the Krorks and some of the other enormous things that had been stolen during the War in Heaven, it was hard to feel in awe of anything.

"Congratulations, Overlord," he answered, "you have acquired a big...very big specimen of the 'transhumans'." He made a pause to assess the new body which had almost certainly been stolen. "And I note it is in two parts."

Someone had neatly decapitated the member of this young species. Professional work, that.

"I told my good friend that our mutual good friend in blue could have been a little more delicate with poor Lorgar! Also to be noted is that someone seems to have extracted a heart before I happened to visit the morgue of the Fortress of Hera. Anyway, the Primarch of the Word Bearers is going to be the golden goose of my new collection, as the humans say."

Well, the humans were still beings of flesh and irrational...and Somatek wasn't going to trust his Overlord when it came to the knowledge of other species' language.

"Somatek, loyal servant, place our dear guest and Primarch in a large and highly visible Prismatic Gallery along with the one hundred and thirty-three Word bearers that were collected in my name."

Somatek really couldn't wait for the boring part of his duties to return. At least, the Necron of Solemnace acknowledged, these specimens were quite dead. Basic security measures and anti-Warp precautions should be enough.

There was only one significant problem.

"Overlord, I regret to inform you that all the Galleries of the size required are already filled to the brim. There is no space there anymore..."

"Not to worry! My good friend Weaver has purchased some specimens. You know, the big ones in blue."

"The Ultramarvins? Blue paint, white symbols?"

"Those are the ones!" Trazyn confirmed before making a grand theatrical pose with his purple cape and his long sceptre. "We still have them?"

"We still have them," Somatek confirmed after briefly checking the interminable list of specimens contained in the Galleries mentioned previously. "Yes. You gave it the name the 'Calth Gallery', for some reason that escapes me. I notice there are already a non-insignificant number of 'Word Bearer' specimens there..."

"Excellent!" Trazyn declared. "Remove the blue specimens, make sure they are alive and in good condition, and we send them back to my good friend Weaver! We will place all the new Word Bearers and Lorgar here! The 'Calth Gallery' will become the 'Tragedy of Primarch Lorgar the Decapitated'."

"That is a ridiculous name, Overlord."

"Well, find a suitable one!" The Chief Archaeovist peevishly retorted. "This great collection deserves only the best!"

Somatek was tempted to tell his Master that in his opinion, placing specimens of different periods in the same collection was not a mark of great historical accuracy...but only tempted, for Trazyn would nod and then forget about it seconds later.

And besides, the solution found by the Overlord of Solemnace was a solution which wasn't going to force him to open other galleries elsewhere.

"I am going to transfer the one hundred and two or so of specimens to your 'good friend'," Somatek also promised himself to check other galleries in the vicinity. His engrams remembered plenty of 'Ultramarvins' in blue armour in different collections. Not in extraordinary numbers, but it would allow him to make some space in very crowded Galleries. And the Overlord would likely congratulate him when he returned from his latest thievery campaign.

"Good! Now I leave you, I have to plan my next travel! A new artistic opportunity has arisen for the Solemnace Galleries!"

Somatek thanked the stars that there was only one Trazyn in this poor and unfortunate Galaxy, and went to work.

**Macragge System**

**High Orbit over Macragge**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.861.310M35**

**Chapter** **Master Jeremiah Isley**

"Did I tell you how pleased I am you recovered this Replicator Forge, Isley?"

"Frequently," the Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens replied with a genuine smile before chuckling. "Twenty times in the last three days alone, my Lady. But who's counting?"

"Who's counting indeed..."

The golden-winged ruler of Nyx chuckled in turn. The exhaustion which had been so overwhelming when the Tyranids were completely annihilated had finally begun to disappear from her face.

A sign that things were settling down, aside from the great parade in the streets of Macragge City, the *Angel's Tear* Power Armour was in the hands of several Archmagi and Magi aboard this very Battleship. That would ensure it could be correctly repaired and several new technological improvements added to it.

"Were the advantages really that huge?" the former Harrowmaster inquired as several Adjutant-Spiders fussed up about the beautiful red cloak and dress of their 'Webmistress'. "I don't think the negotiations lasted that long."

"Oh, the negotiations haven't really begun." The Basileia of Nyx corrected as they left her private quarters. "Aside from the boons I wanted to gain from Trazyn, and that Neferten endorsed after a few long debates, we just got done with the preliminaries."

"No mention about the state the Replicator Forge was in when it was delivered into their metallic hands?"

"To be honest, Isley, I think the Necrons were impressed you managed to steal it from the Szarekhan Dynasty at all, especially when the opposition included the famous Overlord-now-Phaeron Zahndrekh. From their revelations, he's not an enemy you manage to often get away from with your lives, never mind some spoils of war."

"From my own experience, I can say that I would rather avoid a second round with Zahndrekh, my Lady. Crazy or not crazy, my long military career tells me Zahndrekh is the kind of commander who is capable of learning very quickly from his mistakes or defeats."

"Well, he's sworn to the Nerushlatset Dynasty now, so unless there's a massive problem in the future, I don't foresee a war against him."

"And the gains from Trazyn, my Lady?" The Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens asked as they entered one of the hangar bays in the *Enterprise* that had been emptied of Landers and other types of orbital and void-faring craft.

The reason for this absence was a Necron-made structure that looked very much like a portal shining with green energy...and as a Necron stepped through it, the purpose of the structure was indeed confirmed.

"I hope to recover certain relics of STC origin from our thief," the Victor of Commorragh and Macragge revealed to him as the Dawnbreaker Guard took position. "But it is Phaerakh Neferten who insists on speaking in my name for these...necessary recoveries. My part in this affair is limited to the sending of 'gifts' to Solemnace."

"Thus the reason why so many Word Bearer corpses were released into Necron hands?"

"Trazyn already stole Lorgar's corpse," the black-haired insect-mistress revealed with unhidden amusement, and Jeremiah Isley stopped breathing...and realised that no, it wasn't a joke.

"Isn't that a bit...err...risky? My Lady?"

"How is it risky, Isley? I made sure Lorgar won't be coming back. His soul is gone, and though Trazyn will undoubtedly use some stasis technology for his private museum, I don't think he can do more than stick the Necron equivalent of glue to Lorgar's neck."

"Ah...you're right, my Lady. Forgive me, I was speaking...too hastily. And yes, I can see how Lorgar's corpse would be useless. I think a lot of high-ranked people would object rather loudly if someone created new Astartes with his genetic patrimony."

"They would do more than argue, and you know...ah, our first guests have arrived."

Indeed, the Necron Gate which had remained open for several seconds was now letting visitors arrive inside the hangar bay of the *Enterprise*.

And these 'visitors' were Space Marines.

Isley saw the confusion on their faces as the moment they were welcomed by their battle-brothers, they quickly removed their helmets in a hurry to breathe for the first time in decades, maybe centuries or longer.

Astonishment got even greater as their first words were met with answers, and stupefaction was too small a word to describe their next expressions.

Thankfully, all of them had been disarmed and many were outright trying to get out of their Power Armours as fast as they could.

One thing was sure, however: those Space Marines were all of the line of Guilliman, Ultramarines in legacy and colours.

But some markings...

"My Lady," Isley hesitated before going ahead, "judging by the crests some have on their helmets and the non-Codex markings of several armours, plus the functional Mark IV Power Armours, my guess is that several dozens of the Ultramarines that were sent back are from the late great Crusade-era. They are from the Ultramarines *Legion*, not the Ultramarines Chapter."

"Your guess is most likely right." Taylor Hebert snorted. "For once, I won't hold it against Trazyn...I don't even think he's aware of the noticeable differences. And Ultramarines are Ultramarines, in the end."

"Indeed. And the promise of 'one Company' seems to have been respected." Isley added as the Necron-made gate flickered out, and the Crypteks around it began to disassemble it. The Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens noted that after the Great Crusade-era Marines, there had been no true coherence with the markings of the Ultramarines...there was everything from Mark V to Mark VII, and the last two Astartes...they had been in the black of the Deathwatch.

Then the music, some kind of martial symphony composed for Macraggian ceremonies, began to resound.

The Space Marines chosen for the honour of welcoming those long-thought-lost Space Marines saluted with their fists striking their armours.

And then Roboute Guilliman revealed himself.

For today, the medical devices had been temporarily removed, thus the Primarch appeared very much like a true Demigod of War.

"My sons. Welcome home."

The first tears began to fall mere seconds later, and the Ultramarines nearly shattered every part of their 'dignity-above-all' reputation in the next few minutes.

**The Webway**

**Shaa-Dom**

**Manticore Palace of Tyranny**

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

**Tyrant** **Kharsaq El'Uriaq**

Unlike his peers of Commorragh, Kharsaq had never believed his lineage and the artefacts he had taken by force were sufficient to guarantee that his hold upon his realm would last an eternity.

The Aeldari Empire had fallen into rampant hedonism and eventually been destroyed by Slaanesh. If the oldest and most powerful Empire to have ever existed could crumble from the inside, then the line of El'Uriaq could fall too.

That was why instead of hiring quantities of mercenaries and useless pieces of filth, Kharsaq had established a professional army to defend his interests well before *Maelsha'eil Dannan* triggered the events which saw countless billions of Drukhari die along with She-Who-Thirsts.

The course of events had proven it was the right decision.

An army of one million superbly trained warriors might seem absurdly expensive at first glance for a single Webway City's treasury, and one also had to account for the Executioners, the other military faction specifically recruited to sniff out internal dissent to his rule and permanently neutralise it before it caused any trouble.

The destruction of Commorragh and every pocket realm nearby had only accelerated his military preparations.

Xelian, Yllithian, and all their fellow haughtier-than-thou idiots had believed they were safe in their Commorragh palaces, and look at how that particular delusion had turned out for them.

Shaa-Dom's defences had to be increased, both in potency and numbers.

Many Webway Gates had been sealed, not because they were linked to some realm too close to Commorragh's former location – though thousands had already been closed during and after the Second Fall – but because *Maelsha'eil Dannan* had taught him the hard way that leaving a potential enemy too many avenues of attack was sheer stupidity.

It was, of course, just the beginning.

Shaa-Dom had to change if it was to survive, and so Kharsaq El'Uriaq had ordered for it to change. It helped that with the blessings of Addaioth, his subjects were more inclined to work than to torture frenetically for the majority of each cycle.

It had not been easy, and a lot of blood had been shed to force everyone to...cooperate.

But Shaa-Dom had begun to transform into a black orb – his black jewel, a supremely-fortified citadel where hundreds of millions of Drukhari fled to, attracted by the promises of security from the Helspiders and the vengeful purges of the Harlequins.

There were only fourteen gigantic Webway Gates to allow someone to enter Shaa-Dom. Each of them led to a well-fortified Port, stuck in a pocket dimension. That way, should *Maelsha'eil Dannan* or one of her lieutenants try to repeat her victory at Commorragh, Kharsaq would activate his first contingencies and destroy the Port after sealing the Gates. And it could be done in mere heartbeats.

Behind the Gates and the Ports, the level of defences increased, not decreased. The Manticore Fleet, a strong force including a third of the Shaa-Dom Battleships was patrolling the space around his back orb, ready to slaughter those who tried to break his laws.

The only alternative was to use one of the great Bridges of Shaa-Dom, of which there were fourteen. Many temples of the defunct Aeldari Empire had been dug up and spirit stones tortured to discover their secrets.

The Bridges had been built, dark lines suspended above the abyss to tie the Ports of Shaa-Dom and his City.

They too were well fortified, and just in case...they could be blown up as well.

Kharsaq had been confident that once the first phase of this colossal fortification effort was complete, Shaa-Dom would not suffer the same fate Commorragh had been on the receiving end of.

Even *Maelsha'eil Dannan* was likely to abandon a siege when the cost in lives became too much to bear.

Unfortunately, the Gods laughed at the plans of mortals, and Kharsaq had met the new Empress of the Aeldari personally...and the fight had not been in the realm of Shaa-Dom per the conditions he had imagined.

She had cursed him. She had defeated him like he was one of her tiniest insects.

Kharsaq loathed the very memory of this defeat.

The Tyrant of Shaa-Dom would never forget this humiliation.

But there were problems more urgent to resolve.

For the battle of Shaa-Dom had already begun when he returned to his Palace, and the forces of *Maelsha'eil Dannan* were not part of the opposition.

No, the enemies today were a far more familiar foe.

"Did you really think the Army and the Executioners were going to be loyal to you, my son?" Kharsaq asked with mild disappointment, fending off the pathetic assault of several weaklings. "I thought I taught you better than that."

"YOU LIED TO US!" Kharsaq had always thought Pythilliach had a flare for the dramatic, and in this regard, his eldest son did not disappoint. "YOU TOLD US TO WORSHIP THE WRONG GOD!"

Kharsaq sneered...before grabbing an abandoned Klaive and using it to dispatch the last opponents one by one with a single strike each.

At last, Pythilliach was alone...alone on the throne he had tried to usurp.

"My son. I am a Tyrant. I can tolerate many things. Long tirades about my cruelty, for example. But if there is one thing I profess myself disgusted by, it is hypocrisy."

"YOU LIED TO US!"

"And yet, your guards and the few fools you mustered in a vain attempt to overthrow me...I didn't see a single red, green, or blue skin among them. At best, they had embraced the curse sufficiently to be dark grey...at worst they were black. And let's not speak of their eyes. You say I lied to you. Yes, I did. But you all chose Addaioth above the parvenu Goddess *Maelsha'eil Dannan* forged in her hubris. Don't pretend you didn't. I heard her. I listened to her weak attempt of unconvincing seduction to make me renounce Addaioth. If I did, then all of you have."

His other children began to stream into the throne room. Naturally, all of them bore his colours. The majority had the good sense to come with blades covered in traitor blood.

"You didn't revolt, my son, because I was unable to stop *Maelsha'eil Dannan* from killing Khaine or cursing us with these darkening skins. You attempted usurpation because you were furious the power of the High Priest of Addaioth wasn't granted to you. You wanted to become the Manticore Emperor...and though Addaioth was impressed by your ambition, your skills have proven definitively lacking."

"I won't listen to your moralising voice anymore! Duel me, Liar!"

"As you wish."

Kharsaq charged his son, who jumped from the throne, screaming his fury. Five heartbeats later, it was all over.

The battle would not have been fair before he gained the power of a Muse, and now, it was even less so.

Kharsaq turned to look at his children, his nobles, and his Generals.

There was no need to say a single word.

All kneeled.

"My beautiful Shaa-Dom is infested with traitors, it seems. This state of affairs will not be allowed to continue. Many Ports have tried to declare secession. Many Bridges are in rebellion. I give you a Black Sun's cycle to resolve the situation. Otherwise I will enforce the justice of Shaa-Dom personally. Restore my Tyranny. This I order. Obey or suffer the consequences."

The small army who was present in the throne room stormed out, eager to prove its loyalty.

Soon enough, there was only the Manticore Guard, elite of the Shaa-Dom Army, and his most fanatically devoted servants.

No, that wasn't completely accurate.

There was another being.

It was a huge black-armoured Mon-keigh, and Kharsaq had been forced to bring it back with him to Shaa-Dom.

And naturally, this...this 'emissary' was not shy giving his opinion, alas.

"Now you see why the Warmaster suggested his Plan."

"I heard the...suggestion, Emissary." Unleashing his fury on the primate would be easy. Kharsaq could easily kill him with one hand tied behind his back. "But I assure you, the situation is under control. A few malcontents are not enough to threaten my rule even temporarily. The traitors who rallied to my son's banner will all be put to the sword before another cycle ends. The four billion Drukhari of Shaa-Dom present within the realm of Shaa-Dom will accept my tyrannical rule."

"You are the Emperor of the Manticore and the High Priest and Muse of Addaioth," the primate that called himself a 'Black Legionnaire' stated courteously.

The words 'for now' did not leave his mouth, but Kharsaq heard them nonetheless.

"Escort the Emissary to the quarters which have been prepared for him." The Tyrant proclaimed after silently making sure that no one was to touch him.

The irony of his son's words was particularly cutting at that moment. There was no longer any possibility to hide Addaioth, and no real need to anyway. The Drukhari would worship their true God, or they would not. But the exact nature of the relationship forged with the Black Legion...it was better to hide it. Let his followers imagine he was humouring the Warmaster while mercilessly exploiting military opportunities behind his back.

"Lord Tyrant?" One of his Generals rushed. "The Basilisk Port has fallen."

"A point I was aware of, thank you," Kharsaq snarked. "That was why I ordered you to send your troops there. Is there some confusion within your head? Or have the number of traitors who flocked to support my son's claims diminished your courage?"

"No, Lord Tyrant! It's just...the traitors who fell for your son's lies...it is them who lost the Basilisk Port! Several Masques of Harlequin have seized the opportunity to launch a sneak attack while...while the defenders were distracted."

Cegorach. It had to be Cegorach who had personally ordered the attack.

It was too precise, too surgical.

The coup was too recent, and Addaioth's power should have protected his realm from the Farseers of Ulthwé's scrying attempts.

"Muster the Iron Manticore battalions." This was a lot of his reserves, but they should be able to stop the Harlequin assault cold before the enemy reached the Basilisk Bridge.

The General hesitated.

"What?" The Tyrant of Shaa-Dom hissed in anger.

"There are more Harlequins than I've ever seen, Lord Tyrant. And...they are led by a Phoenix Lord."

The worst part...was that it made all sense.

A new Empress had been chosen. And as an Empire soared...the old must disappear. And there were not a more old and useless symbol than the Phoenix Lords.

"Which one?"

**Outer defences of the Realm of Shaa-Dom**

**Basilisk Port**

**Phoenix** **Lord Asurmen**

"The first steps of the dance were a success, oh First and Last of the Avengers. We are starting our next act. Are you ready to make your grand entrance?"

Asurmen had never liked the Masque of the Dance Without End. Yes, they violently defended the Webway from all intruders, but their deeds had no logic whatsoever, and if someone had managed to ever decipher the true meaning of what they spoke, Asurmen had yet to meet him or her.

Yet today they had done exactly what they had promised. They had fulfilled their oath.

And thus it was time to fulfil his.

"I am." When Asurmen spoke again, it was not for the Harlequin, who had already vanished in the shadows. "IN THE MEMORY OF ASURYAN! WE ARE THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS! WE ARE THE JUSTICE LONG DENIED! WE ARE LIBERTY RISING AGAINST TYRANNY!"

The *Sword of Asur* was drawn once more, and the chains of the slaves of the Basilisk Port broke.

Immediately, Asurmen felt more confident, more clarity of purpose. Khaine was dead, but the first of the Phoenix Lords knew that his mission was *good*.

"TAKE UP YOUR ARMS! FIGHT AGAINST TYRANNY! HELP IS ON THE WAY!"

They looked at him with brilliant eyes. Some were young dwellers of Shaa-Dom who had chosen Atharti and been dragged in chains by their neighbours or their own families. Others were Asuryani who had been captured in raids across the Webway. The majority, though, were not part of any Aeldari civilisation...Humans, Sslyth, and many other races were used by the Shaa-Dom slave-masters.

While cruelty for cruelty's sake appeared to have neatly diminished, the City which dreamed to be the New Commorragh had great need of slaves to keep its odious machines functioning, lest they be forced to send Drukhari to take their place.

"Death to the Tyrant!" A male human was the first to shout the words. The unfortunate captive had been mutilated: his nose and one of his eyes were gone, and everywhere ugly scars that needed no explanation were clearly visible.

A Harlequin Trouper materialised next to him, and the former prisoner flinched...only to receive a Lasgun in his arms.

"Justice has been delayed," Asuryan explained. "But no longer! Fight and you will be led out of the Webway!"

The souls enslaved by the masters of Shaa-Dom needed no more encouragement. They had suffered for many cycles, but now suddenly, the whispers of Commorragh's destruction resurfaced.

"LIBERTY! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

The Asuryani ex-prisoners were not long before shouting their own battle-cry.

"FOR ATHARTI! WE WILL BE FREE!"

More and more voices were raised in defiance, and each slave pen of the Port was stormed more easily than the previous one.

The fact the different Masques were delivering human-made lasguns by the thousands, along with the necessary ammunition, made sure that the losses of the freed souls remained minimal.

Asurmen wondered while decapitating several sword masters hurling insults at him where the followers of Cegorach had found such a stock of weapons...before deciding there were more important things to worry about.

Like the fact there were more figures in black armour strongly reminding him of Incubi rushing from the opening where the City of Shaa-Dom awaited.

"KILL THE PHOENIX LORD!"

"THE LIGHT AND LIBERTY!"

The sword containing the soul of his brother and himself were one now.

They danced, and all around them the foot soldiers of the Tyrant died.

"BETRAYER! YOU BETRAY YOUR OWN RACE!"

"I am the protector of the weak." Asurmen corrected. "And I should have done long ago what I am doing now. My shame is already great enough that the new Empress was the one to burn Commorragh."

Many times the first of the Phoenix Lords had found himself making excuses not to deal with that pit of evil. That many other Lords would not help him. That he alone stood no chance against the different noble Houses of Commorragh. That slaying so many children of Isha would make him a pariah.

In the end, those had been just pathetic excuses.

Asurmen should have acted against these evil-doers. That was what being the Hand of Asuryan was supposed to be.

The *Bloody Twins* fired, their shuriken ammunition proving devastatingly effective as the worshippers of Addaioth thinking remaining out of reach of his sword would be their salvation were mowed down.

It was not to be.

And when it was, thousands of lasers were here to illuminate the darkness. Human and Aeldari souls, along dozens of other races, were liberating the Basilisk Port.

"NO MORE SLAVERY!"

"DOWN WITH THE TYRANT!"

"FREEDOM!"

"DEATH TO SHAA-DOM!"

Asurmen watched several hundred Harlequins help the most injured ex-prisoners flee into the Webway for several seconds before resuming his bloody work, which mainly consisted of cutting a swathe through Shaa-Dom's warriors.

They were arrogant and young, these Drukhari. Many of them were too young to have been born before the Second Fall, meaning many Haemonculi had survived the destruction of Commorragh to continue their fell arts here.

This meant the plan of the Harlequins had worked. The assault had been launched at the perfect time, when the fourteen Ports were defended by inexperienced 'Truebloods' with little to no experience of warfare, the fleets of Shaa-Dom were paralysed by indecision or internal strife, and the real standing army was nowhere in sight.

And so Asurmen attacked and attacked again.

Few slaves followed him as the Phoenix Lord ran towards the gigantic Basilisk Gate, but the Hand of Asuryan didn't feel resentment.

They had helped his mission considerably; now it was time for him to prove his worth.

The *Sword of Asur* became a hurricane of death, and he heard the scream of fury of something that aspired to become a God.

The Drukhari died by his blade. Batteries armed with viscous things were detonated as they faced the wrong direction.

As more and more souls emerged to run towards safety, Asurmen advanced and destroyed defences that were left completely unmanned.

He almost reached the Basilisk Gate when the tumult of an advancing army reached his ears.

The *Bloody Twins* fired at every mechanism he could see, and several Harlequin Skyweavers arrived to support him.

But the Basilisk Gate began to open in a thunderous series of shrieking voices...until it stopped.

It stopped, but there was enough space for a Drukhari Noble and his bodyguards to pass through.

Asurmen knew who his opponent was, of course.

Even if for some reason he had missed recent events, the sheer aura of fire and darkness which surrounded this Drukhari could not possibly be missed.

"Asurmen...it seems like you lacked the decency to die with Khaine."

"Tyrant Kharsaq El'Uriaq," the Phoenix Lord replied. "My apologies for the slight disorder reigning in your Port. I'm afraid it was necessary, alas. You see, I wanted to get your attention."

"Consider yourself having my undivided attention," the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom hissed, "and that it will be the last mistake of the gestalt you call your 'soul'. I am going to drag you to the altar in the heart of my city, and I will sacrifice you to **Addaioth**!"

The word hurt. Asurmen tried to stay still like a statue, but he was sure the Tyrant had been able to perceive his shiver.

"Not if I kill you first."

Kharsaq El'Uriaq laughed, and the sound was withering.

In his black armour whose joints were burning with orange flame, the Tyrant was exactly everything Asurmen had sworn to fight against.

"Kill me? I am the Chosen of Addaioth, while you serve...who do you serve, really, featherless Phoenix? Khaine? No, he's dead. Cegorach, maybe?"

"How arrogant of you," the Avenger took an offensive stance and prepared himself for the onslaught, "to assume I need a God to deal with the likes of you."

Cruel laughter answered him.

"Let me return you the favour. *You don't have any idea who you are fighting, fool*."

There was a brief spark.

Asurmen's blade struck five times, and he didn't miss a single time.

It was for the best, for five enormous arrows smashed into the ground all around him.

Except they were not really arrows, weren't they?

To begin with, they were more akin to massive spears in length, and no tree, no matter how twisted, had been used to made them.

They were long, black, and they burned in orange fire. And the worst part? The things had maws and eyes growing out of them.

"That's really disgusting," Asurmen tried as hard as he could to keep the horror out of his voice. "You can stop hiding your arm, by the way. I've seen you shoot them."

"Impressive," his enemy complimented, revealing that his right arm had indeed become a sort of grotesque crossbow where flesh and metal had merged, and where five smaller orange-burning parasite-arrows were waiting to be fired. "Before the Fall, the number of Aeldari who survived Shaimesh's first attack could be counted with both hands."

"You have become quite a twisted monster." Asurmen answered. "This is not the true form your God bestowed upon you, is it?"

This time the laugh was more cheerful...albeit filled with cruelty.

"It is not." The arm-bow transformed into an enormous, barbaric-looking sword. "I am your hunter, Asurmen. Try to not die too quickly."

The charge of the Tyrant was incredibly fast, and there was no time to evade.

Asurmen blocked, and immediately received atrocious pain in his arms. Nothing was broken, but at this pace-

The second arm of the Tyrant transformed into a shield, and there was no evading *that*.

The pain...it was terrifying.

But he was Asurmen.

He has sworn to stand against Evil, and contrary to what he had said to El'Uriaq, he had not come to kill the Tyrant. He had to hold. The loner the duel lasted, the more innocents could escape Port Basilisk.

"You are weak."

Asurmen ignored the pain and evaded the next series of attacks.

"Where was this arrogance, when *Maelsha'eil Dannan* taught you a lesson in humility?"

That the new Empress had managed to beat this monster practically without effort was not good for his ego, but Asurmen would try to find any edge he could to break the concentration of his enemy.

"You will scream for that..." the hiss was loathing incarnate, and unfortunately, the attacks got more unpredictable.

Worse, the Basilisk Gate was beginning to open again behind the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom and-

Asurmen tried to evade the shield, only to be struck by the 'spear' this time.

The pain...it shook him.

No, it was...agony.

He was...bleeding? He was...Asurmen struggled, but managed to stand on shaking legs.

"I am the Manticore Emperor, the High Priest announcing a Glorious Future!"

There was an enormous thunderous sound, and with new screams of agony, the opening of the Basilisk Gate stopped.

One breath. His blood was beginning to colour the fire-themed mosaics that they had duelled upon. Two breaths. Three breaths.

"What was that?"

"Destiny answering. You didn't really think...you had seen every Harlequin Masque who attacked your outer defences...Tyrant?"

And with a new grinding sound, the Basilisk Gate...began to close, for all the efforts of the Drukhari to stop it.

"What. Have. You. Done?"

"By the will of Cegorach," Asurmen should have collapsed at that moment, but two Harlequins materialised and held him by the arms, while another threw some substance over his wounds, which provoked more pain. "I have been sent...to tell you your Evil will not be tolerated in the Webway anymore. The Ports...we are sealing them all. Shaa-Dom is going to be sealed away, *permanently*. Cegorach...sent me with a message. *The Webway was not created for the likes of you*."

"I can still kill you," the monster declared.

"But then you will trapped on the wrong side of the Gate," a Solitaire of the Masque of the Dance Without End joyously explained before adding a single word. "Fool."

And the Harlequins, dozens of them, laughed.

Asurmen closed his eyes...and laughed with them.

**The Webway**

**Shaa-Dom**

**Manticore Palace of Tyranny**

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

**Tyrant** **Kharsaq El'Uriaq**

For all the prodigious fires the power of Addaioth gave, his throne room seemed cold and empty.

Well, near-empty, it definitely was. Kharsaq had not decided to cut his own throat. The 'Emissary' had been granted an audience with only guards renowned for their loyalty above all else present by his side.

When the first words uttered, this was revealed to be a very fine idea.

"The Warmaster told you that Shaa-Dom was vulnerable."

"Maybe," Kharsaq snarked, "if I had been told that armies of Harlequins were amassing around my realm, I would have been able to counter their sabotage!"

"The Warmaster's sources of information are not known to me," the Emissary continued with some fake courtesy, "but it did not take a great warlord to predict the...rise of your God would mightily anger the Clown God."

Kharsaq El'Uriaq fought down the urge to kill the primate. The flesh was certainly too tainted for a proper buffet anyway.

"And while I agree with you proper information would have been appreciated, I assume this...sabotage, Lord Tyrant, was only the first option of the Harlequins. If it failed, they certainly had other myriad of plans in reserve."

"And if I countered these plans?"

"Then it is possible the Harlequins would have swallowed their arrogance and let Weaver's armies enter the Webway."

The Tyrant shivered. The memories of the golden-winged Empress defeating his God in less time than it took to say it...it had shaken him to his core. If the Harlequins brought *her* after securing a beachhead...

"Fine. You've made your point clear...Emissary. And this is all speculative. The Harlequins have sealed us away from the rest of the Webway." A single assault force had even added insult to injury by blowing up one of the Bridges of Shaa-Dom, hurling tens of thousands of Manticore soldiers into the abyss.

"Indeed. Surely you will admit, Lord Tyrant, that in this unfortunate position...you are not well-placed to satisfy your ambitions...or listen to the suggestions of the Warmaster?"

This diplomacy felt like a poison you had no antidote for.

"Yes. You are correct. Our mutual ambitions will...not be satisfied."

"In that case, isn't the time to use...certain extraordinary artefacts that were the pride of your race in a previous age?"

"It might." Kharsaq El'Uriaq answered. "On the other hand, I will remark that while Cegorach may have handed me a minor reverse, he is not the biggest problem outside the Webway."

Weaver was. And as much as he wouldn't admit it here and now, the leader of the Manticore Empire knew for sure that the destruction of Commorragh had been accomplished by a rather small number of primates, given the effectives they could launch at a problem if sufficiently riled.

If the Empress was allowed to muster her forces and deploy them against Shaa-Dom without the Webway hindering her...

"The Warmaster has thought of this problem, my Lord Tyrant. May I explain?"

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Malfi Warp Crown**

**Malfi System**

**Q'Sal**

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

**Warlord** **Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

"I'm sure you will agree, Chosen, that it is an impressive gift."

"Oh, I completely agree." Malicia nodded while grinning. "Still, I hope the Architect will forgive me if I say I would have preferred the gift intact."

The Q'Sal sorcerer chuckled with her.

"There are many proverbs about looking at gifts too closely. However I have to agree the damage is rather significant. The Titans of the False Emperor came really, really close to causing a meltdown inside the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*."

Malicia silently watched the dead Titan which occupied two-thirds of the immense subterranean bunker it had been moved to.

It seemed difficult to imagine anything could be a threat to this enormous dinosaur that Tzeentch had created by uniting flesh, metal, and the Warp.

Even with its hundreds of torn-apart scales and huge gaping holes, *Tyrannosaurus Rex* kept its aura of savagery and ferocity. The Titan-Dinosaur looked like it was ready to wake up and wage war at any moment.

Unfortunately, this impression was false. The Titan was very much dead right now.

The only good news was that though the Imperator *Exemplis* had slain it, they had avoided a 'reactor-heart' meltdown. If that had happened, the infamous Titan would have been a total loss...and Tzeentch would likely not have bothered to send it as a gift.

"The true question, I suppose," the sorceress ruling Malfi mused, "is if you can repair it so we can use it for the glory of the Lord of All Changes."

"I believe Q'Sal will be able to make sure the answer is 'yes'." Magister-Coordinator Musa Al-Khwarizmi slightly inclined his head in respect.

"Really? As far as I am aware, we have a critical lack of Titan-Forges or anything allowing the Malfi Forges to build Daemon Engines of that size."

"This is completely true, Destiny Unwritten...but several of my peers have made enormous advances when it comes to the parts necessary to build the Allosaurus Engines. If we temporarily order a sufficient number of parts and convince a few Magisters specialised in the triple union of divine, flesh, and metal, I believe the repairwork can be accelerated considerably."

"This is going to slow down the Allosaurus Project even more, isn't it?"

"Yes." The Magister-Coordinator admitted. "But the concept has already proven problematic during the fighting at Morwen VI. The Allosaurus was supposed to be a counter against the biggest war machines of the blood maniacs. Against the skeletons, it is far more vulnerable."

"Hmm...very well. You have my permission to convince your peers the repair of the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* is their new priority. But please find it some adequate aerial and ground escorts. I would be very displeased if this Titan-Dinosaur found itself destroyed again because we ignored proper Titan doctrine."

They left the bunker and the various teams already working on the last beast of Legio Vulturum, and walked across many atelier-bunkers of smaller size in close succession.

Everywhere the ingeniousness of the Q'Sal tech-sorcerers was on display: Mutator Guns of all sizes and receiving nine different sorts of attuned enchanted crystals, Death Masks which allowed them to control Chaos Spawns somewhat reliably, and Sceptre-Blasters inspired by her notes about Necron weaponry were everywhere, among many other things.

"Speaking of Morwen VI, I understand a critical revelation has been made."

"One can't hide secrets from you, Destiny Unwritten." Malicia hoped not, as that would be likely a death sentence given the ambition of certain underlings. Magister-Coordinator Musa Al-Khwarizmi seemed content to do exactly as his title suggested and ensure the hundreds of Q'Sal Magisters were productive for the glory of Tzeentch and Malfi, but not everyone had ambitions so reasonable. "Yes, it appears Magister Nouakchott was able to activate some secret power when digging in an incomplete ziggurat under the sands. He was able to extend the area of effect, and wherever it is active, the enemy skeletons stay dead."

"Extraordinary and totally unexpected," Malicia commented. "While I will not naysay the results, does he have any idea how it works?"

"Not really," Musa Al-Khwarizmi admitted. "That's why the Magisters are ready to give Magister-Immaterial Nouakchott the reinforcements he tried very much not to beg for. Morwen VI has suddenly become a very important piece of the game."

"I agree." The parahuman sorceress turned her head to look the Magister-Coordinator straight in the eyes, "that is why I am going to deploy the Anubion Cult."

After the defeat on the Tyrant Star, fifty or so cultists and practitioners of Malfi had banded together and swore on the names of Tzeentch that they would fight endlessly to put an end to the abominable threat presented by the King in Yellow.

They were far from the only ones, to be honest. What made them different from many covens and other forces was that they had rapidly gained a stupendous amount of followers, and they had invented several spells that looked quite impressive on the sorcerous testing grounds: ward-spells to keep the skeletons at bay from several sites, bone-destroyer curses, and many other nine-times-blessed magics.

Oh, and they donned jackal-shaped masks on a day-to-day basis. The name Anubion and the parallels to certain Egyptian curses were certainly not a coincidence. One more joke of the Architect of Fate...

"That would be a very welcome help." Musa Al-Khwarizmi nodded. "None of the complete ziggurats have been opened, but so far the Usurper's skeletons seem to face the same problem as Magister-Immaterial Nouakchott. I presume they have something to ignore the atmosphere made of nitrogen?"

"You presume correctly." The sorceress clad in blue and gold armour replied, while keeping her three Majestryx Golems in an esoteric formation which gave her a relative distance of security against assassination attempts. Most of the very advanced abilities were yet locked, but their mere presence had already convinced several would-be assassins their contracts had better be renegotiated in a hurry. "Any other subject you wish to speak about?"

"The Saimari are causing trouble. One of their Captains killed a few Apprentices of a highly-influential Magister for no reason at all...no reason but Eldar arrogance."

"Why I am not surprised?" the Tzeentchian warlord muttered. "They have been nothing but trouble from the moment they arrived."

Since the first 'Kaelari' – or Khornate Eldar – had been observed on different battlefields of Calyx, Malicia hadn't been really surprised when Eldar who had sworn allegiance to Tzeentch appeared in the Malfi System.

What had been an unpleasant surprise was how many problems they were causing for no result at all. The 'Saimari Armada' – a name dripping with their arrogance given that it numbered exactly nineteen ships – consisted of a significant faction of the Sky Raiders' Corsair Fleet that had refused to pledge itself to Atharti or Addaioth.

But they seemed more interested in bickering with any faction that crossed their path than in doing anything useful.

"Many Magisters of Tarnor and Surgub are already discussing that their souls would be far better used powering our Engines than doing...whatever useless thing it is they're doing at the moment."

"I happen to agree with them...that's why you are going to give them a mission in my name."

"The Laerthrys princelings are going to see this as an insult."

"Good. If they mention it, you can return the favour and tell them I am not the God of Charity's Herald."

The Magister-Coordinator laughed.

"What is the mission?"

"They will go into the darkness beyond the frontier storms, and find me Noctilith deposits," Malicia revealed with a cold smile, "or I will personally drag them to the altars by their ears."

As every sorcerer and sorceress worth the name knew, Eldar souls were easily worth a thousand human ones in sacrifice...

"I will tell them in person...with a rather large amount of protectors, of course. They are...their behaviour has been described as 'mercurial' by many of the Magisters studying the old dialects."

Malicia sniggered.

"Appropriate."

The Majestryx Golems took a new position behind her as they passed through a heavily warded door, before facing an even more imposing one with thousands of Change runes carved upon it.

It very much gave the vibes of a prison...for good reason, because it was one.

Blue smoke billowed as it opened.

Silence greeted her as she entered on the heels of Magister-Coordinator Musa Al-Khwarizmi.

Silence and glares coming from dozens of eyes met her.

"To answer the question many of you undoubtedly have," Malicia began the conversation by feigning not to notice the hatred, "I have on good authority your gene-sire has been deprived of his powers and is on his way to Terra as we speak. He's due for a meeting with his father, I believe."

"Laugh all you want, *witch*," one of the Thousand Sons decided to reply after meeting the eyes of his brothers, "one day it will be your turn. Your arrogant realm of sorcery and lies will collapse soon enough."

"Now that's just rude," Malicia rolled her eyes. "Here I come, for a cordial conversation about Lord Magnus and his whereabouts, and you are rudeness incarnate."

"Don't try to play the victim, *witch*," another Thousand Son spat, and fortunately missed by many feet.

"Well, technically, I gave you the choice of getting away from the Warp Crown and living your Astartes lives far away from my planets. It is you who tried to mount a coup against my servants in my absence. A coup that, in all honesty, was lamentably poorly organised."

"You can mock us all you want, witch. You can torture us in our minds and our bodies all you want, but we will not break." This was an interesting assertion, because the Q'Sal Magisters had been ordered to not torture as far as Malicia was aware, they had obeyed the command. Unless...ah, the Architect of Fate had their souls...

"We are the Thousand Sons."

"We are the sons of Magnus."

"And we will remain true to the oaths we swore on Prospero."

"Which are to play with daemons like one played at Pokemon in the past?" Malicia asked ironically, before sighing when they failed to get her reference. "Gonna catch them all. Really?"

"Stop your ramblings, witch!"

"Alas, the path of Change is filled with arduous trials," Malicia sighed. Sometimes it was very tempting to just send messages to Weaver for Vista, just for the satisfaction of knowing someone who understood the finer references of *Dungeons and Dragons* or some *Star Wars* quotes. "Very well. You want me to be blunt? I will be blunt."

"We are all ears!" a Thousand Son chained to the ceiling interrupted her, the bastard. For his trouble, Malicia conjured a blue tendril which struck him on the legs and left a significant blue mark behind.

"Quiet. You, ex-Rubricae, have proven more than useless; you have proven yourselves backstabbing, arrogant Space Marines whose curiosity is only matched by your arrogance. And unfortunately for you, Magnus is not here to protect you anymore. I spared you the first time because there was always a chance he would regain his Daemon Prince status. But it's clear by now he won't. He's powerless."

"But Ahriman isn't."

Malicia chuckled.

"The Exile is exiled no longer, true. But he marches towards his destiny. He won't be able to help you. So I am going to ask bluntly. Will you serve me?"

"No."

"NO!"

"No, we would prefer to die rather than serve a rambling child playing with forces far beyond her comprehension."

"The hypocrisy is strong today, I see." It was really too bad there had been no way to invite Space Wolves to this little conversation. Malicia had a feeling the comments would have been incredibly amusing. "But I thank you for the answers."

Malicia nodded to the Magister-Coordinator, who went to bark a series of orders.

She turned back to the chained Thousand Sons.

"You could have been warlords by my side. I gave you the choice."

"We are loyal to the ideals of the Fifteenth Legion!"

"Did you give the same speech to the population of Terra you slaughtered by the millions with your sorceries?" This seemed to at last stop the Thousand Son Marine from spouting more idiocies. "Anyway. You won't be warlords. You will be slaves."

It was a pity, but keeping dozens of Astartes here was not a solution. Sooner or later, the strongest psykers among them would figure a way to escape.

"Magister? You can begin their transformation into Harbingers."

"It will be done as you wish, Destiny Unwritten."

**The Eye of Terror**

**Approaches of Sortiarius**

**Cruiser *Word of Hermes***

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

**Master** **of Ruin Ignis**

"Clearly," Ahzek Ahriman began, "the *Tizca's Revenge* survived the epic disaster which destroyed the Word Bearers."

"Evidently," Ignis agreed. "And that means soon, we will have to deal with our 'Exalted' T'Sathis Vhorr."

As part of the Order of Ruin, Ignis was specialised in the tactical and statistical acumen of war. As a result, the Thousand Son Legionnaire could say quite rightfully there weren't many of his brothers whose very existence infuriated him.

It had never been worth it. The Legion was already too close to extinction to lose more members in stupid feuds.

Moreover, the number of 'brothers' Ignis truly hated could be counted on one hand with fingers to spare. And it was a big galaxy.

Unfortunately, T'Sathis Vhorr was definitely one of them.

"I bet everything I own on this warship that the 'Exalted Sorcerer' fled Fenris or wherever the Black Crusade fought the second Magnus was neutralised. And it was likely his idea in the first place to build this enormous pyramid."

"It has the tonnage and the armaments necessary to stand against a Super-Battleship of the Furious Abyss class."

Ignis sneered.

"Given that those pieces of trash always seem to be destroyed during their first campaign, you will forgive me Ahzek, I'm sure, if I say I don't believe emulating the failures of Lorgar is a good idea."

"And what would you do then?" The leader of the Prodigal Sons and former First Captain inquired with amusement.

"I would build Glorianas," Ignis replied honestly. "Terra and Mars built between forty and fifty, and until the Legions were torn asunder by civil war, most of them were able to survive, suffering only moderate damage. Nine Hells, Ahzek, some of them are still in service on both sides four thousand years later! The Gloriana flagships are a good idea, the ideal balance of mobility, communications, and overwhelming firepower. Building something bigger reeks of arrogance."

"I agree with Ignis." The voice made him shiver, and the less said about the effect the vision of Helio Isidorus next to Ahzek gave him, the better.

Ignis wasn't emotional, but every time he saw the faces of the Rubricae that had been sealed within their armours for millennia...

"Of course you do," Ahzek said with something like a fond expression, removing his helmet, whose mutations had curiously withdrawn after the Rubric's primary effect ceased to be. "I suppose we won't listen to your ideas how to handle Vhorr, Ignis."

"I will survive the disappointment," the Master of Ruin snarked, watching the impressive number of warships sailing towards Sortiarius.

The Thousand Sons had been so close to extinction, so decimated when the effects of the Rubric ended, that no one had seriously contemplated what kind of effectives the Legion would be able to gather in a single location if the Rubricae were returned to their previous bodies.

Well, now they knew.

Assuming no more than nine Thousand Sons per visible warship, there still would have been something like a thousand Legionnaires here.

And Ignis knew better than to hope the entire Legion had assembled here and now; many warbands and forces did not have the skills to return to the planet they had made their home after Prospero was lost. Some wouldn't have the desire, the Master of Ruin wasn't naive.

It went without saying that-

Ignis blinked. Was his mind playing tricks on him?

No. A quick glance at the instruments told him the first impression had been correct.

"Ahzek... a strange Warp phenomena is forming with Sortiarius as its epicentre...the planet is beginning to move! The planet is moving away from our fleet!"

"That's..." the leader of their warband was rarely speechless, but today would evidently see one such occasion added to Ignis' tally. "There are only very few entities capable of doing that. And there's no way all our brothers freed from their torment on Sortiarius would be able to do it themselves."

"Correct." Ignis grimaced as a corona of blue sorcery became akin to a new sun, engulfing Sortiarius, and making sure the planet's acceleration increased instead of diminishing.

Magnus was gone. Which meant this was Tzeentch's work, or a Greater Daemon so high-ranked there was no real practical difference.

"This is a trap."

"But do we have any choice but to engage the pursuit?" Ahzek Ahriman asked. Ignis knew the answer to the question immediately. Assuming no one had left and the Rubric's cancellation had had the same effects on Sortiarius, all the Rubricae kept inside the Tower of the Cyclops and the rest of the armouries were now flesh and blood.

All their brothers. Abandoning them...if they did that, they were not worthy of calling themselves Thousand Sons, even a born calculator like him could acknowledge that.

"All ships," the warlord nicknamed the Exile after Magnus banished him from Sortiarius ordered, "full speed ahead."

The evil laughter of daemons and other abominations was soon heard after that.

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Pirate's Haven System**

**Spoliation Station**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Warlord** **Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

Today had at least solved a mystery. *Spoliation Station* really was as chaotic on the inside as it appeared on the outside.

Maybe more.

Lotara wished she was exaggerating. The outside was bad enough. It looked like someone had merged hundreds of old-fashioned pre-industrial dirigibles, a derelict shipyard, several Cruiser hulls, an enormous fuel tanker, half a dozen monitoring stations...and then thrown it into a haphazard orbit around the gas giant which was more or less the only thing valuable in this very system.

Khorne must have blessed *Spoliation*, because the ship-mistress of the *Conqueror* didn't see how it was possible something so unstable could exist in the first place.

Lotara had observed *Orks'* ramshackle structures that looked better built.

The Warlord some nicknamed the Blood Rose turned her head and watched the eight Chosen of Khorne in the outrageously-decorated hall.

This reunion would have to be quick. Already some of them were looking for a reason to murder their peers. And the less said about their respect for proper authority...

"The forces united under the banner of Lies are preparing an expedition towards the Halo Stars," Exegete Hundsturm announced in a mechanical voice without being invited to speak.

Immediately one of her spear's blades was against the thing that served as his throat.

"Speak again without my permission," Lotara promised, "and the Archaeologists will need to find another leader."

"I...apologise, Warlord."

"Make sure it doesn't happen again." The Archaeologists were useful; they were the most powerful faction of Tech-Priests worshipping Khorne in the Calyx Hell Stars. One of their beliefs was that, if it was a weapon that allowed them to spill a lot of blood, it needed to be mass-produced. If it didn't spill blood, however, the weapon or the object must be buried on the spot so to preserve humanity from 'anti-purity'.

"I am aware of the expedition Malicia and her lying wretches intend to launch into the Halo Stars. We aren't going to follow them."

"It is one opportunity missed to spill blood," the Master of *Spoliation Station* predictably grumbled.

Lotara yawned...and she launched her spear, missing the head of the former Rogue Trader by half a finger. If that damaged the ridiculous throne of skulls and thousands of gemstones in the process...well, it was a happy coincidence.

"Next time, it will be in your stomach."

Saint-Just de Montbars looked at her with clear hostility, both in his eyes and on his face. Blonde-haired and green-eyed, the man could have worked for the Remembrancer Order during the Great Crusade, and likely made a fortune through his looks alone.

Alas for everyone save Khorne, the young Saint-Just de Montbars was born as a scion of a Rogue Trader Dynasty, and the usual internal quarrels saw him rise in the succession order until the Warrant of Trade fell in his hands before he reached his thirtieth birthday.

And then the young Montbars had begun to make himself a name.

Not in trade, like so many inexperienced Rogue Traders tried to. Not in pilgrim transportation. Not in exploration of mysterious planets.

Montbars had had some religious education, and had apparently learned that it was a holy duty to exterminate xenos wherever they could be found.

In other words, Saint-Just de Montbars had decided his life's purpose was to commit xenocide after xenocide, and be paid for it.

With his overeager enthusiasm, it had not been long before he was nicknamed 'the Xenos Exterminator'.

The problem was that known xenos colonies which were patiently waiting to be exterminated were not counted by the hundreds or even the dozens by Imperial authorities. So Montbars had turned his activities to the extermination of pirates...and then when the pirates fled wherever Montbars' ship was sighted, his fellow Rogue Traders.

When exactly the man had begun to hear the roars of the Blood God was unknown. On the other hand, by the time the Holy Ordos declared him a heretic, declared his Warrant of Trade null and void, and sent many warships to hunt him down, Montbars was a very enthusiastic servant of Khorne...too enthusiastic, in fact.

"At least blood will be spilled."

"Then you will go to Morwen VI." This hadn't been her initial intention, but one had to improvise. "You will go with Hekatii."

"With me?"

The red-haired Succubus Queen had come half-naked, as Lotara had feared. And what she did wear was more to entice than to hide her perfect white body.

"With you. You know what the ziggurats of Morwen VI are."

"They aren't Eldar ziggurats," Warlord Ghostfire of the Ghostfire Horde grumbled. The huge human was almost as tall as Kossolax...and he wasn't a Space Marine.

"No, they weren't built by my people," Hekatii replied in a voice so filled with arrogance that Lotara had to recall her spear and place it into a new throwing position to avoid violence from breaking out. "But we were there when this species' civilisation was around. They called themselves the Builders, or you would translate it as such in your inelegant tongue."

"Why would anyone build ziggurats?" rumbled General Gore of the Gore Warriors, commanding the regiment of guardsmen and highly equipped human armed forces in her order of battle.

"Why do primates build cathedrals?" Hekatii smiled, but did not give them an opportunity to answer. "Because they fear Death."

"Everyone fears Death." Commander Eclipse of the Blood Caste proclaimed. Melancholic an instant before, the Tau seemed to regain new vitality when the subject was mentioned. His new red armour...or rather, his white armour covered in so much blood it appeared red, made aggressive sounds to support his point.

"In most cases, we Aeldari generally fear what comes after it," the Succubus Queen purred. "Anyway. The Builders built these ziggurats to be eternal. They researched the secrets of metal, and once they were satisfied, they built the ziggurats of Morwen VI. They built for Eternity."

That was the moment Lotara understood.

"They feared Death so much they stored souls and everything that made them...a civilisation, inside these ziggurats."

"Exactly." The little reverence Hekatii gave her response was so blasé there was no doubt it was an insult.

Khârn growled.

Hekatii smiled.

"This changes things. The forces of Decay have for now been content to fortify Tanstar and lead erratic raids. But the purpose of Morwen VI's ziggurats is as much an insult for the King in Yellow as it is for the diseased hosts."

"They will all be buried." Exegete Hundsturm proclaimed. "War is pure. Blood is pure. Denying the Lord of War...that is impure. It is folly. It must be punished."

"How does one open these ziggurats?" Lotara asked the arrogant ruler of Clar Karon, temporarily ignoring the rambling of the Archaeologists' leader. "The Magisters of Q'Sal, the undead Astartes of the King in Yellow, and many other warbands, some serving our Lord, have failed to find an entrance, or to scratch the metal making them."

"Blood is the Key."

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Fenksworld System – Access restricted by order of the Holy Ordos**

**High Orbit above Fenksworld**

**Exorcist-class Grand Cruiser *Purge of Infidels***

**8.891.310M35**

**Lord** **Inquisitor Luigi Barberini**

The planet was, to put it mildly, not beautiful.

It was a mass of ugly green and dark blue, and it easily gave the impression moisture was surrounding the three oceans this world boasted.

Once you set foot on the planet, it was worse.

There were many dangerous animal species which had no compunction about eating a man for dinner...and the odour of salt mixed with the green plants was awful.

But for all its problems, the planet had abundant fresh water, and once the proper facilities had been built, the food production had begun on schedule. And that was all that mattered.

"I would have thought you would make your Inquisitorial headquarters in a requisitioned Starfort, my friend."

"I thought the same thing," Luigi Barberini told the other Inquisitor who had been his classmate at the Schola Progenium. "But then I was told several of the Starforts I had been eyeing with real interest were sent to reinforce the defences between Terra and Cadia."

"Ah."

"Yes, ah." Luigi grimaced. "This wouldn't have bothered me too much, of course, if a lot of the reinforcements I was counting on hadn't also failed to materialise, as they were diverted to other warzones. I know the Grey Knights also requested reinforcements, and didn't receive them."

"Segmentum Obscurus is a mess at the moment, as I'm sure you are aware," the tone wasn't reproachful, but there was a slight warning in it. "The Black Crusade was stopped, but every member of the Holy Ordos is overworked with the heresies they have to deal with."

The Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus raised a hand in appeasement.

"I know, my friend. I am very well aware their efforts are as critical as mine when it comes to the security and stability of the Imperium."

The man he had known for decades grunted.

"No need to apologise, my friend. And before you ask, no, there is no conspiracy. Several Adeptuses have been concerned any counteroffensive in this region would be counterproductive if done in insufficient strength, but that's exactly why we are armed with warhammers when the situation calls for them."

"Is the situation that bad elsewhere?"

The shrug he received in answer was rather neutral.

"In my humble opinion, we endured the storm rather well. Fenris aside, there was no important planet destroyed. There were hundreds of rebellions and uprisings, but most of them were poorly executed. The Traitor Marines were unable to support their fellow oath-breakers, and it seems that for several reasons, the senior heretics didn't trust their slaves with the art of summoning daemons. The military and civilian losses are, all things considered, acceptable for the price of destroying a Traitor Legion and the horrors it allied with. But it is still going to keep the equivalent of about twelve Crusades busy for the next decade in Obscurus alone."

"And in the meantime, the heretics of the Calyx Hell Stars are growing in strength." Luigi finished. "And while our colleagues are doing what must be done, I must note a small number of their heretics escape each time to take refuge in the Calyx pits of damnation. The arrival of the Death Guard has accelerated this problem, I'm afraid."

"I read your report. The Traveller. I would have had doubts if Battlefleet Cadia had not confirmed that fiend successfully escaped their pursuit. This radically changes how much strength you require."

"Yes. And that's not even the worst part. We have confirmed, at heavy cost, that the Plague Marines have acquired some Noctilith. And of course they corrupted it to spread their corruption in what was the Tanstar System. That way, no Imperial reinforcements will able to come from that direction...but theirs will."

"Not pleasant news, yes. I suppose your next requests to our colleagues of Saturn will include Aethergold and Battlefleets in abundance."

"And Space Marines," the Lord of the Ordo Malleus added. "This wasn't really a problem at the beginning, but we're really seeing an increase of Traitor Astartes in the Warzone year after year. It was possible to deal with it at the start, there were only a few big names and some platoons...but it's getting worse."

"I can issue a call," his friend's glum voice said enough about the odds of a Chapter answering it. "But the Astartes Praeses Chapters are reinforcing Cadia and everything around the Eye. The sons of Guilliman have joined them or rushed to Ultima and Macragge. The Dark Angels and their Successors are busy killing the heretics in eastern Obscurus. All of that to say the reliable Chapters I would trust with that sort of campaign aren't available."

"Inconvenient."

"From what I gathered, the strategic situation is going to change quickly. Give it five years or so, and the various remnants of the Black Crusade will be destroyed, the xenos who tried to challenge us will be no more, and we will have a lot of additional assets in position."

"I know. And I pray every day the reinforcements will arrive sooner, because I fear something terrible is going to happen before the end of that deadline."

"I see. I can...try to accelerate the process. But it will require me to immediately depart for a travel to Ultima Segmentum."

"You would?"

"My friend, for all the blustering and the political manoeuvres ruling the Senatorum, there is only one person that can create and deliver Aethergold."

"True."

"I am going to do my utmost to get you the resources you need. Do your best to hold the line until I contact you again."

"I will, Berlin...I will. May the God-Emperor's be with you, my friend."

**Edge of the Astronomican Illumination Zone**

**Former Thramas Sector**

**Tsagualsa System**

**Tsagualsa**

**8.894.310M35**

**Captain** **Zso Sahaal, the Talonmaster**

His hunt was over.

The *Corona Nox* was his.

The crown of the Night Haunter, the very symbol of authority of Konrad Curze, his fallen father, gene-sire, and Primarch, was his.

The hunt was over.

And it had been revealed as the meaningless exploit his father had warned him against.

There had been no great battles, and no indomitable enemy to fight.

There had just been a few mortals easily culled, and Zso Sahaal had left the world of Equixus with the ignorant population none the wiser about his presence.

Little had the Talonmaster had realised that the disappointments had just begun.

There had been frequencies a Captain of the Night Lords could listen to. And they had revealed to him that everything was worse than in his worst nightmares.

His hunt had taken too long. The Great Crusade was just an old legend.

And the Night Lords didn't care anymore about the *Corona Nox*. Assuming they ever did.

His first meeting with the force calling itself the 'Pierced Wing Warband' had not been a disappointment, though.

It had been a slap in the face.

Zso had thought that after the destruction of Nostramo, the Eighth Legion had fallen far. Meeting with these degenerate descendants of the Eighth Legion had convinced him he had known nothing.

Yes, the Eighth had been cruel. Yes, they had broken their oaths and rebelled against the False Emperor. Yes, they had never been the most disciplined Legion. But this rapacious band of petty spoiled children who lived in a perpetual charnel house and tortured every moment of the day for a yes or a no...

This was an insult to every tenet of what an Astartes Legionnaire should be. This...this vermin didn't know the first thing about the Eighth Legion's history or culture. Even their language was an insult, unable to speak anything but a butchered version of Nostraman mixed with Low Gothic.

For the crimes and their multiple attempts to kill him like he was a simpleton, Zso had slain them all...and claimed their ship.

It was barely the size of a small Destroyer, the state of maintenance was appalling...but the mortals reduced into slavery by its former masters had worked hard to restore everything once Zso had sworn they would be treated like human beings, not like the cattle these disgusting parodies of transhumans had treated them as for so long.

"And so I return here, Father. To the palace where you chose to die."

Silence was the only answer he received.

Strangely, it didn't disappoint him.

Not anymore.

"The Eighth Legion is dead. You got your wish, father."

The *Corona Nox* was delicately placed on the black throne.

It was amusing, in a macabre way, that for all the evidence that everything was in a dire state of disrepair – about half of the palace had already collapsed around him – the Night Haunter's throne remained pristine and seemingly untouched by the ravages of time.

"I listened to the vox communications of the mortals who came to settle this world. They forgot us." Zso Sahaal laughed. "They forgot us! The only thing they remember is that this world is called Tsagualsa. It's...pathetic."

The *Corona Nox* seemed to radiate darkness at his words, though when he blinked, it was revealed to be only his imagination.

The crown was still there; the seven rubies and the single pale diamond provided little light in this sea of darkness, but a Nostramo-born Legionnaire didn't need it anyway.

"The hunt is over."

"**Yes and no. The hunt for the Corona Nox is over. A new one can begin**."

Reflexes forged on a thousand battlefields instantly sprung into action.

"Who is there?" growled the Night Lord Captain that many among the Eighth Legion had seen as a successor to Sevatar angrily.

"**That is not the correction question, Zso Sahaal**."

"Ha! And what is the correct question?" It alarmed him a lot that even with his custom-made Bolter in his hands, he wasn't able to acquire a firing solution on someone. The shadows seemed to shroud his opponent completely...

"**The right question is: why are you still here, when the Prince of Crows is sailing to the Somnium Stars even as we speak**?"

"Lies," the Talonmaster hissed venomously. "Sevatar is dead. The Dark Angels caught him when we were routed."

"**But they did not kill him**. **And they have been given a lot of reasons to atone for that error**."

"Who by all the Nostroman Hells are you?"

"**Go to the Somnium Stars**," the voice suddenly grew weaker with every word. "**And you will have that answer, Zso Sahaal. You will have all the answers you desire**..."

**Somewhere Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lord** **Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

When Ezekyle came, it was not in his black armour, much like the majority of them. Amurael Enka, being a Dreadnought, could hardly remove his equipment without dying, and Ilyaster Faylach would likely contaminate the Ezekarion Council Chamber in addition to killing them all if he tried, courtesy of Decay's numerous curses.

The damage from the divine confrontation which had raged inside the *Vengeful Spirit* had been more or less erased, though there were details no one could miss. The crystalline statues, both of Sanguinius and other copies of the dead of the Loyalists who had died in the last battle of the Siege, were gone.

They had been replaced, alas.

Now they had to contend with miniature statues of the fallen God Khaine in many different compartments.

And if you decided to blast one of them? The 'statue' collapsed into a river of blood that when touching living beings provoked a mad frenzy.

"I understand there are several reasons why killing Weaver was not a good idea, brother," Valicar Hyne, Master of Fleet of the Black Legion, began by common assent, "but you will forgive me, I hope, if I admit I think it would have been better if *somehow* she was removed from the equation of war. I have plenty of reports arriving of the enormous advantage those 'Aegis Battlecruisers' gave her forces when facing the Word Bearers' Armada. The sons of Lorgar didn't stand a chance."

"Far be it for me to doubt your expertise, Valicar," Ezekyle replied levelly, "but it is a very specialised design which requires a Titan-Moth to operate correctly. And those can't stay inside a starship for long, due to logistical issues if nothing else."

"I'm afraid I am not so optimistic, Ezekyle," the former Iron Warrior shook his head. "First, I calculated the theoretical range of the Moths' bombardment, and unfortunately, based on the figures I have, I am confident a Moth can support Aegis Battlecruisers within the same system. Unless Weaver does us a favour and gets as arrogant and stupid as some Eldar, what is going to happen is that key worlds will get a...a Titan-Moth colony, along with a squadron of Aegis Battlecruisers."

"A very good point, Valicar." Ezekyle, unsurprisingly, didn't tell him this hypothetical scenario was wrong. "Any other predictions?"

"The Titan-Moths will likely receive an increase in protection," the Master of the Fleet responded. "I know for a fact the red-clad Sororitas protect them when they aren't in the air, but I wouldn't be surprised to see specific aircraft designed for the very purpose of protecting them no matter where they go."

"This will be a pain to deal with," Vortigern voiced out loud. "Speaking as one who will certainly have to deal with that annoyance in the near future, I would have vastly preferred we avoided that kind of complication, Ezekyle."

"The complications would have come anyway," the Lord of the Black Legion replied serenely. "The moment Commorragh and Slaanesh were no more, no going back to the previous status quo was possible."

"Still," Moriana intervened, and Iskandar couldn't help but frown in displeasure at her presence, "the Legions of the Emperor's Children and the Word Bearers would have been great assets to-"

"No."

The word struck like thunder, and the Prophetess had the good sense to immediately close her mouth.

"No," Ezekyle continued more affably after a few seconds of silence, "those Legions wouldn't have been of any use. At best, they so far were hindrances when it came to waging the Long War. At worst, they were true enemies. Did anyone forget what happened before we sailed to destroy El'Phanor?"

Most of the Ezekarion grimaced. That particular incident had not been the brightest hour of the Black Legion...though it had ended in a stunning victory in the end. And the Council of Sicarus had sworn on the Gods, whatever that was worth, that they had not given the order and all those Dark Apostles killed in the fighting were renegades and heretics, to obviously go against the will of the Gods.

That the weapons were all brand-new and directly delivered from Sicarus' Temple-Forges was just a coincidence, of course.

"Nonetheless," Iskandar mused whimsically, "this is over two hundred thousand Legionnaires that have been slaughtered for no significant operational objective seized."

"A great loss," and one which didn't bother Ezekyle at all, judging by his expression, "but as I said, they weren't committed to the Long War...and I would argue they weren't Legions at all."

"As much as I wish to argue otherwise," Telemachon smiled, "it is true the Naga and my former brothers were more concerned with hedonism and other decadent pursuits than fighting the Long War. They could still fight, but that wasn't their priority."

"Exactly. And this is why I didn't tell Lorgar to stop this folly. Not that he would have listened to me, of course."

"Of course," Vortigern agreed. "His Dark Council already tried its best to stab us in the back every time, the Primarch himself would have refused to meet us in the first place. But that still leaves seven Legions, from all those who rebelled against the False Emperor."

"And that's why nine Legions will fight the Long War."

Many in the Ezekarion didn't know how to react to this sentence...Iskandar was honest enough with himself to include himself in the lot.

"Ezekyle..." the Lord Vigilator cleared his throat. "Let's assume you convince Bile or someone else to build two Legions from nothing. I don't think it's possible, but let's say we muster enough support in the shadows to go with it. Let's say we do go back to nine different Legions. Brother, it will be only a question of time before we will fight each other again. For slaves. For resources. For the support of the Mechanicum. For-"

"For the favour of the Gods," Sargon Eregesh, formerly of the Word Bearers, finished.

And Ezekyle smiled, for his point had been made.

"This will be the Legion Wars all over again," Ceraxia, Mistress of the Arsenal, affirmed.

"The Great Game," Sargon confirmed, "only with Weaver and the returned Primarchs at the gates. She will come here. Won't she, Ezekyle?"

"We have some time," their brother announced with a face which might as well be made of stone, "but if things go as I envision them...yes, the Angel of Sacrifice will muster her forces at the Cadian Gate. And the Long War will enter a new phase."

From his expression alone, Iskandar could say he didn't expect this campaign to be an amusing one.

"We need to prepare," Ezekyle declared after giving them time to properly assimilate the information. "Many things have changed, but the Long War will continue. Nine Legions, brothers. One to take the forefront of the Long War, bowing to no one, not even the Gods. Eight other Legions. Some may be the original ones, having acknowledged they can't continue to be slaves in a war that isn't theirs."

"One and eight," Sargon calmly spoke. "There are currently eight major Warp Storms created at the edge of the Astronomican's illumination zone. One per Legion to claim. We won't fight each other if we have different realms to rule. One per Power."

"Awesome," Lheorvine Ukris interjected, "but what's happening in the Tyrant Stars doesn't really give me any hope...brothers. The Legions are all fighting each other there, in case you forgot."

"I haven't forgotten, Lheorvine," Ezekyle smiled for an instant, before frowning. "Though there has been an obstacle in my plans that I didn't see coming."

"The master of the undead," Moriana whispered. "The King in Yellow."

"His Legion wouldn't be very committed to the Long War, that much is true," Valicar replied automatically before stopping as Ezekyle didn't show his approval. "What?"

"You didn't guess already, brother? The Usurper's ambition is not limited to Godhood and becoming the Fifth Power. It also does extend to all Legions. Why tolerate being one of Legion among many...when you can be the Lord of All Legions?"

"We must really eliminate that bastard, and the sooner, the better..."

**Realm of Ultramar**

**High Orbit over Laphis**

**Peregrine-class Fleet Carrier *Falcon's Nest***

**2.952.310M35**

**Captain** **Freya Brasidas**

Freya did not walk towards the door. She stumbled.

Good Lord, the celebrations of the Sanguinala doubled with the battle's victory had taken place for most of the night! Who was knocking at this unholy hour?

The Aeronautica Captain opened the door, her mouth ready to insult the dangerous maniac which thought knocking at eight in the morning was a thing to do...and froze.

Eight enormous eyes met hers.

"Webmistress!" The loud exclamation hurt her hears and immediately gave her a headache. "I found her! Oh, and it looks like you have won your first bet with Lady Vista!"

"Not so loud," Freya complained, before realising that no, it wasn't a hallucination, there was really an enormous spider in front of her. And that meant...

Loud footsteps echoed from every direction, and less than five seconds later, at least a dozen red-clad Space Marines came into view. Their cloaks and the insignia on their pauldrons made clear enough who they were.

The next person to appear was in a simple uniform of the Imperial Guard, and here the golden wings weren't visible...but everyone knew that face, given how the Macraggian propaganda had showed it everywhere.

"Captain Brasidas...an interesting choice of undergarments."

Freya grimaced...in her haste to open the door, she realised suddenly that the night robe she had donned had been left open...letting everyone see her lingerie underneath.

"Lady General!" She could only salute.

"At ease, Captain," Freya was thankful the Lady Basileia wasn't laughing, though her starry gaze seemed to be filled with shooting stars. "I will try to ignore Captain Nils' presence in your bathroom in the meantime."

"Err...I am...everyone was celebrating and one thing led to another?"

The supreme commander of the Guard forces on all theatre seemed to seriously consider her words...before shrugging.

"It's one of the most reasonable answers I received this morning. Solaria, give the Captain the proposal please."

A red data-slate was handed to her, though Freya didn't try to read it. Something told her that could wait.

"You have proven yourself one of the best aces the Aeronautica Imperialis could boast about." In many voices, it would have been praise to obtain something from her, but the Lady General Militant told it as an unquestionable fact. "I will have need of your talents in the future where the Nyx Sector is concerned. The squadrons of fighters need the best Academy instructors that can be recruited. And there are other plans that require test pilots."

"I...I understand." Oh damn it, she wouldn't have had sex or drunk so much if she'd known she needed to have a conversation like this in the morning. "Or I think I do. I...I didn't expect it, to be honest? I...I sold a lot of my possessions before embarking for this military campaign. I didn't expect to return to Nyx, except for a short detour to see my sister...there's nothing really waiting for me there except her."

"Hmm...fair enough. I can create the incentive, though."

Freya's eyes narrowed in incomprehension.

"I can give you back your title of Duchess."

"Our House was officially abolished after...several revelations were made. My father and my brother got heavily fined. I didn't really follow the entire affair, but they lost all their nobility privileges. And you didn't create a House above the rank of Baron during decades of rule...Lady General."

"That was more due to the lack of worthy candidates than a hard rule against it," The Basileia assured her. "And yes, your Duchy is officially no more. But I can create a new one, along with a Nobility Chart to go with it."

"That's...very generous." Had the Living Saint changed her stance so much that-

"The noble title will be non-hereditary," the mistress of the excited arachnid informed her, confirming that no, she wasn't an impostor. "But I am willing to create a nice Duchy package around it. Old properties of your House can be assembled again. Adjutant-Colonel Solaria has her duties about your carrier today. She will listen to your proposals and tell you if they are possible or not. But I will need a firm answer before the day is over, Captain."

"I...I am interested, but why the precipitation?"

"Because the Tech-Priests are modifying the *Midgard* so it can return to Nyx under its own power, and we will place many squadrons and pilots inside it. The Lord Admirals want to test all possible options, and a super-carrier is one of them."

Freya tried to imagine how much the enormous ship could carry in starfighters and bombers...and failed. Like everyone, the Captain had seen the vid-picts...this was beyond the Glorianas that were the pride of the Space Marines, and those weren't small at all.

The opportunity to be inside one...and honestly, the other proposals...

"Ten seconds will be enough. I accept."

"Good! Read your data-slate nonetheless, and contact Solaria if you have any questions."

"You will find me on the secondary bridge!" the golden spider told her. "Praise the Webmistress!"

"And should you happen to meet a certain Captain Nils," the Basileia continued as she let her golden wings shine into existence, transforming the corridor into a spectacle of blinding light. "Would you be so kind as to give him his data-slate? The dual offer of Academy instructor and test pilot is also on the table for him...though I'm not sure why he would want to return to Nyx..."

"And hiding in the bathroom will not be sufficient, Captain!" The arachnid joyously shouted towards the door Nils was hiding behind. "The Webmistress sees all!"

**Laphis**

**Ravenna City – west of the Polenta River**

**2.954.310M35**

**Maia** **Numerius**

Ravenna was nothing but ruins.

Every time Maia came here with the other Laphisers, she realised how lucky she was to be alive.

East of the river, things weren't so bad. But west of it? It looked like Titans had trampled Ravenna until there was nothing left standing.

The museums and the markets alike had been incinerated. Palaces and mosaics which had been built a millennium ago had been wiped out alongside the more humble homes.

Today this had changed.

The ruins were still there, but a gigantic army of insects had investigated them, and begun to demolish the stone carcases of every block, before beginning to transport away the marble and all the elements which had made Ravenna...the Ravenna they loved.

The insects were countless. Maia, like every Laphiser, had thought the arachnid and the other reinforcements which had allowed the great victory were legion.

They had been wrong.

Those had been nothing but the vanguard, and now they were seeing the real army. Were the other enemies fought on Ardium and Macragge that terrifying that hundreds of thousands of giant ants, scorpions, millions of beetles, and more things that she hadn't a name for were sent to other battles away from Laphis?

Maia turned her head to her left. At least Celestine wasn't thinking of that. Her daughter had decided to enjoy the day by riding her new 'friend', who was none other but the giant spider named Erbina, which had been decisive when it came to their lives' salvation.

"Hop! Hop! Hop! We keep the pace, sisters! Oh, it's you, Erbina! The Webmistress is waiting for you and your friends! HOP! HOP! HOP! Sisters! The city isn't going to rebuild itself! More spirit! Laphis must remain a paradise for all splendid servants of the Webmistress, no matter if they have eight legs or not!"

Maia couldn't help it; she laughed.

The spiders didn't seem to mind it; they seemed to like it, in fact.

The chuckles and the giggles faded a bit when they approached the Angels of Death.

There were so many of them here...so many different colours...and each of them seemed more impressive than the previous one she looked at.

"I'm not saying Laphis doesn't need to be defended Diamantis, but please, more art! One might start to think you want a series of bunkers to be built here."

"You realise," a yellow giant grumbled, "that to be really defend something, we need walls. The spiders are correct building a system of canals will make the new city more defensible, but if you really want to go on that route, Ultramar will need to bring a true orbital grid here. And it's not the same price, my Lady."

"You raise an excellent point...please monitor the removal of the dead Word Bearers beneath the rubble. The protocols are vigorously enforced, but one might never know. I have a guest to speak with."

The Light of the Emperor was warm as she approached.

Maia was not so proud to not admit she sweated a lot...and her legs felt weak. So did her arms.

"Err...should I call you...Saint...err?"

Maia cringed; she was completely ridiculous!

"Lady General will be enough." The wings of light disappeared, and Maia breathed easier. "Lady Maia Numerius, right?"

"I am not a Lady," she protested humbly.

"Oh? Ah, many of my spiders seem to have been a bit hasty when they interviewed the Laphiser refugees." The heroine of Macragge smiled. "I apologise for coming so late...I was unfortunately busy."

"You don't have to apologise Lady General! Without you, we would be all dead!"

"Well, my soldiers and my Swarm played an important role, yes. But don't count out your all strength. Many Laphiser soldiers bought the time needed for the reinforcements to deploy and stop the enemy dead."

That was...somewhat true. Maia realised then the Lady General, shining in a perfect black-grey uniform, was not looking at her...but at an Adjutant-Spider which her daughter was riding upon.

"Your daughter is having fun, I see."

"Err...should I...apologise?"

"No. Why should you? I assure you, Erbina is letting Celestine ride her of her own volition...she's quite enjoying the attention, in fact. Her sisters often had to let guardsmen climb on their back by sheer necessity, and they're considerably heavier."

Maia was relieved...and then other things came back on her tongue.

"There have been...rumours, Lady General. After...the heretics vanished from the eastern bank."

"Rumours which said your daughter was like me, I suppose," the eyes were truly black and brilliant with stars...Maia looked away really fast.

"Yes? The Priests made a ruckus, the Space Marines, including the big white Dreadnought, told them to shut up, and the Inquisitor...err..."

"I will deal with the Inquisitor myself in a few hours," the Heroine of Macragge reassured her with an amused expression. "As for your daughter...no, she isn't like me right now. All I am going to say is that she has potential."

"Oh." That was...kind of a relief, to be honest. "I...that's...good."

"Some of my spiders will stay here on Laphis while I have other obligations. When your daughter is older, should she wish to go to College or any of the famous places of learning Macragge is renowned for...I will pay her tuition fees. Though to be noted, I will do the same for a lot of orphaned children of Ravenna. I only demand a solid work ethic of them in return."

"This is still...beyond generous, Lady General. My daughter would never have had that chance otherwise. There was a system on Laphis which allowed some scholarships...but it only became available when the father or the mother reached Captain's rank." And Celestine's father, while perfect in her eyes, had not reached that rank before disappearing into the storm of death that had torn apart Ravenna.

"It is the least I can do. My forces did not wish to bring the war here, but there's no denying there was...a rather liberal use of artillery to decimate the Traitors. Ravenna will be rebuilt, far more protected and as beautiful, in a different style."

"We will make it a marvel, Webmistress!"

It was really strange to think that of all the strange events that had happened, the talking spiders were one of the easiest to adapt to...

**Gamma Quarantine Hospital**

**Inquisitor** **Contessa**

When she opened her eyes again, the parahuman she had waited for days for was here.

"Welcome home, Inquisitor Contessa. We were all wondering why you hadn't called."

"Very funny," the female Inquisitor retorted. "You had your spiders test me for an eternity. I know you ordered them to keep me in quarantine. Now if you have finished complimenting yourself about your jokes, you will let me go."

"I don't think so."

"I am not under the influence of the Simurgh...Weaver."

"That's funny, that's what every person that is yet to transform into a raving lunatic claims." The ruler of Nyx crossed her arms in a posture that made her look far younger than she truly was. "You were tested with Aethergold and Bacta, and declared uncorrupted, that much is true. But you broke your quarantine the first time."

"I had no choice. I had to save the girl. You met her. You know what she represents."

If anything, the displeased expression became more and more evident on Weaver's face.

"I met Celestine, yes. I met her mother, Maia. And I know what you gave to her."

"You know it was necessary, then."

Contessa's power saw the slap coming. But this time, to her surprise, the move was way too fast to be avoided.

Her cheek suddenly hurt...and as her power informed her, Weaver had not used her real strength to slap her.

"You did something that is going to paint a target on her back. Are you utterly mad, Inquisitor? There are elite soldiers of the Imperial Guard who would have died trying to fight what the Ruinous Power of War sent against her! Hell, many Space Marines would have perished against the Betrayer and the new Champion that Ilmarina fought!"

"The situation was under control."

"It was under control because you somehow managed to convince two of my spiders to pursue you, along with a particularly audacious Eldar taught by the Queen of Blades, and some other elite guardsmen. And even then, it could have turned into a disaster if the Vile One had not tried one more epic legendary betrayal for the sake of it."

"You have-"

"If you say to me 'I have no idea of what is at stake', I will slap you again." The words resonated like an iron judgement. "Damn it, Inquisitor! The girl is at an age where her life should revolve around dolls, friends of the same age as she, and going to school to learn some funny anecdotes about Macraggian history!"

"At her age the Cadians are already learning everything there is to know about the lasgun."

For a second, Contessa believed Weaver was about to strike her again. The hand never moved, but it was a very close thing.

"Yes. And that's why the planet is a gigantic military barrack, with all the crime problems that come with it. Cadia is our bulwark against the forces of Chaos. It is born of necessity. It is *not* something that anyone but the Cadians should take pride in."

Taylor Hebert turned around, presenting Contessa her back, and a Space Marine of the Raven Guard appeared in her field of vision.

"You are going to stay out of Celestine's life," the command was made in a ruthless voice. "You have already done enough damage with your manipulations. Erbina will be her guardian for the foreseeable future, along with a few Sororitas playing the role of my Adjutant-Spider's 'minders'. If you try to aggravate the problem, I will make sure you will regret it."

The female Inquisitor didn't tell the insect-mistress that she had done what she needed to when it came to the child. The 'gift' had been made; whether it would be successful or not was not in her hands anymore.

"Are you not going to ask about the trap I was led into?" she asked just as Weaver reached the hospital room's doorstep.

"Are you going to answer truthfully?"

Contessa ignored the sarcasm.

"The Tyrant Star. The Simurgh sent us to the Tyrant Star. The lair of the thing that calls itself the King in Yellow."

The other parahuman turned back to face her, and her power grew with every second, sign that she had at least earned her attention.

"You have won many victories, Weaver. But the true Enemy is far from vanquished. There are new weapons being forged into the pits of Chaos as we speak."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Former Fenris Sector (currently in Administratum limbo)**

**Somewhere close to the Fenris System**

**The *Rock***

**5.999.310M35**

**High** **Interrogator Astaroth**

"The three Hereteks of the Campo-Paz Rebellion. One thousand, six hundred, and twenty-eight crimes against the Emperor."

"The sentence is death."

"Approved. Interrogator-Executioner, you can proceed."

Mechadendrites were plunged in a special acid, and the screams began.

They ended when the blades fell.

"Execution was successful, High Interrogator," the announcement came after ten seconds. "Per the procedure, I will begin Procedure Kappa-Alpha when you give the order."

"Authorisation for Procedure Kappa-Alpha granted. The containers will be here in less than twenty seconds. Transfer to the Lynx Hangar Bay will begin upon your authority, Interrogator."

Astaroth didn't say one more word as he moved away and marched to another execution room. Three gates opened before him. They closed behind him each time twenty seconds after he crossed each threshold.

And then it resumed.

"Captain Khodur of the Black Legion. Twenty-six thousand, four hundred and ninety-three crimes against the Emperor."

"The sentence is death."

"Approved. Interrogator-Executioner, you can proceed."

Normally, a Space Marine's death should be by Bolter and Blade, but this particularly vile Traitor had killed several brothers of the Fourth Company several decades ago while donning a Fallen Power Armour and pretending to be one of the rare, very rare, Fallen Angels who sought redemption.

For this, the method of execution was extraction of his two hearts. Only then would the blade decapitate him.

The Traitor tried to scream, but the gag made sure there was nothing but groans to be heard.

It took a long, long time for the Black Legionnaire to die.

"Execution was successful, High Interrogator."

The orders were given. The security measures, modified and increased to new levels after the recent disaster, were scrupulously respected.

Fallen insignia was removed from existence.

One by one, the prisoners of the *Rock* met their end.

At last, the procedures ended...for this level of the prison.

"Seventy-two prisoners were awaiting judgement in the Impious Crypt. Seventy-two prisoners have been executed in the Impious Crypt. The Emperor's Will is done. The orders of the Supreme Grand Master have been obeyed." Astaroth hesitated, before finishing. "May the Lion forgive us."

"May the Lion forgive us."

All the Interrogators left as the equipment was moved away and the devices were reverentially put back into their stasis-caskets.

All but one.

"What is it, brother?"

"The Inquisition fleet is here, High Interrogator."

"How many?"

"One Battleship accompanied by thirty-one capital ships. This is-"

"This is as the Supreme Grand Master expected."

"Many of our battle-brothers are asking questions. Two-thirds of the 4th Company are particularly vocal in their demands for explanations. And they have supporters in every Company...in addition to many rank-and-file battle-brothers of the other Unforgiven Chapters."

And there laid the biggest problem. The Dark Angels had known from time immemorial that not every battle-brother could be trusted with the full tale of the treachery which had occurred on Caliban.

Yet with the escape of Sevatar and the terrible consequences it had, there was no time to slowly give the battle-brothers a few secrets and leave it at that.

"We could give them these prisoners and say they represent the entirety of what we have in the cells of the *Rock*."

"We," Astaroth replied coldly, "will do nothing of the sort. The Inquisitors are not stupid. By now, they must have acquired enough rumours and collected plenty of secrets, more than enough to know if we lie to their faces. At the first sign we're behaving like they are complete cretins, they will see themselves as no longer bound by the accord the Supreme Grand Master struck with Weaver."

"That is-"

"Besides, there is nothing to fear." Astaroth continued. "The three Fallen Angels we had in the Persuasion Crypt were all corrupted by the power of the Warp. Once the symbol of the Dark Angels is removed from their armour, they will be indistinguishable from other traitors serving the Ruinous Powers."

"Genetic analysis will reveal the truth."

"The probability is small, given the level of mutation two out of three suffered from. And they are hardly the only Legionnaires executed today."

"We could-"

"No." Astaroth interrupted ruthlessly. "So far, the information reported by our agents on Terra is that the High Lords aren't happy, but provided we cooperate, they're willing to close their eyes and pass this behaviour off as a large mistake made in the name of overeager dedication to our duties. They see it as one error counterbalanced by millennia of excellent service. We aren't going to give the Inquisition a reason to say otherwise. This is the will of the Supreme Grand Master...and I fully support it."

"But...the secrets..."

"Many things will have to change. Many secrets...too many secrets are known by loyal souls who are not of the Unforgiven. But this will have to wait. For today, the Interrogators' duty, our duty, is clear. You have finished the inspection of the Humility Crypt?"

"I have. The Traitors did not use it for their assault."

"I see. This is extremely concerning."

It was bad enough that the Prince of Crows had escaped his cell and was free to roam the galaxy again, but what was more concerning what that even after many, many days, the Unforgiven were still not able to fully retrace the steps the raiding force including Night Lords and Alpha Legionnaires had taken inside the *Rock*.

"The Master of the Fleet and the Master of Relics swear the defences protecting the primary systems stood true during the assault. The data-banks haven't been infiltrated. And the Crypts' lore-data was stored in an entirely different vault only the Inner Circle could access."

"And yet the Traitors found out about it and were confident enough about its reliability to launch a daring raid inside our halls."

Concerning was really an understatement...

"Follow me. There is still one prisoner I must deal with personally while our brothers prepare the corpses for their release to the Inquisition."

"But there are no other prisoners, High Interrogator!"

"That is unfortunately untrue, brother. There is one more."

"A Fallen?"

"Worse," Astaroth grimly revealed, "a man."

And only two Unforgiven knew of his existence. Astaroth himself, and the Supreme Grand Master. This was as it had always been, ever since the destruction of their homeworld.

The descent into the entrails of the *Rock* was long and demanded to give a litany of codes in its own right.

"This is an entire different section of the Redemption Crypts."

"Astute answer," the High Interrogator responded. "In many ways, it is the original template of the Redemption Crypts. What was adopted above with stasis cells and many other devices are merely copying the original dispositions here."

Astaroth correctly answered a new challenge from a venerable machine-spirit which would have turned the entire corridor into liquefied plasma if he had proved too inconsiderate not to...and exhaled as a wall of adamantium began to move by the side.

The High Interrogator mentally prepared himself. In many things, what he was about to do was the death knell of the Unforgiven. Maybe not in a week or a month, but the Quest to bring all Fallen to justice was-

"By the sword of the Lion! What happened here?"

Past the wall of adamantium, devastation awaited both his brother's gaze and his.

"No!"

Astaroth began to run, but with every step, destroyed machinery was waiting for him.

"NO!"

There was no shimmering or sound indicating the stasis fields were active.

"NO!"

How was this possible? None of the security systems had been activated. None of the Unforgiven battle-brothers placed on the Jaguar Gate had seen anyone enter or leave this part of the *Rock* in *years*.

"NO!"

But as Astaroth turned the last corner, the doors were shattered.

And the cell beyond it?

It was empty.

Luther, adoptive father of the Lion, Greatest Traitor of Caliban, Lord of the Fallen...the man was gone.

Luther had escaped.

"Run to prepare the Astropaths. We must send word to the Supreme Grand Master immediately. The raid which freed the Prince of Crows...was far worse than anything we imagined."

**Beyond the Astronomican's Light**

**The Dark Depths of the Eastern Fringe**

**The Somnium Stars**

**Dominus Minoris System**

**Heavy Battleship *Vaults of Moravec***

**Approaches of Reserve Nodal Base Number Eight**

**9.999.310M35**

**The** **Prince of Crows**

The galaxy had changed.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the Somnium Stars.

When Sevatar and the Eighth Legion had battled the Dark Angels in the Thramas Sector, the region had been merely extremely difficult to access due to the impossibility for Navigators to rely on the Astronomican's light.

You had to make small Warp Jumps. And it had still been a relatively dangerous adventure.

The risks had easily been multiplied by a thousand now.

The Somnium Stars had been swallowed by a Warp Storm.

It was relatively recent; the other Legionnaires of the Legion and their other 'allies' had estimated its formation to have been in the months following the destruction of the Dark City of Commorragh.

The last part of their journey, as a result, had been absolutely horrible. They had fought every hour to destroy every abomination which managed to slip through when there was a fluctuation of the Gellar Fields.

Thankfully, said devices had only been under heavy strain; they had not collapsed. The former First Captain knew for sure that if they had, they would have never reached their destination.

"We have arrived at the coordinates you gave me," Sota-Nul didn't waste time with pleasantries when he arrived on the observation bridge. "Congratulations, you were right. The system has not been placed in the path of the psychic storms forming a barrier between the Somnium Stars and the rest of the galaxy. There is, however, a problem you failed to mention."

Metallic protections which had made it impossible to look outside were removed, and everyone present on the vast observation deck.

Sevatar knew already what was going to be shown...and thus he grinned.

There were exclamations of stupor as the first asteroids appeared. Then everyone realised how many of these enormous rocks they were orbiting around the gigantic red star in the distance.

"There is no planet to be found." Sota-Nul's accusatory tone was clear to everyone. "There are only asteroids and various objects that can be entered in the same category."

"Of course," Sevatar didn't even try to apologise. "Why would the Night Haunter have ordered the construction of a base on a planet? All it would have achieved was its rapid destruction when our enemies found out about it."

No matter how well-hidden, no matter how ingenious the stealth technology or how deep they had dug, all the depots and muster grounds of the Night Lords Legion had been wiped out by their enemies with desultory facility.

"The first defence was to place the last base of our Legion beyond the Astronomican's light." Sevatar explained to the Hell-Forge Mistress and the Night Lords present. "We had...our ways to avoid the problems the Navigators were facing, though unfortunately it was not foolproof; the sons of the Lion clearly figured out a way to imitate us in that regard. So the decision was made by the Night Haunter, when he was sane enough to listen to some reasonable advice, to place 'Reserve Nodal Base Number Eight' here."

"In one of the asteroids." Sevatar didn't bother turning around to see who had spoken.

"Yes. The enemy psykers may have been able to rip the coordinates of this system from my head. They may have discovered the image of the asteroid the same way, or by torturing me...they weren't successful, but they could have been. But finding the correct asteroid in a system where there is nothing but asteroids? The sons of the Lion could have brought their entire Legion into this very system, and they still would need to search for decades to have a chance of success."

"That doesn't make the base impossible to find." Sota-Nul retorted, though her mechanical tone seemed far less angry now...which was good, because if it came to a fight, Sevatar wasn't sure the Night Lord survivors and himself could win.

"Well, we didn't rely entirely on the 'too many asteroids' defence," Sevatar admitted. "There were plenty of void mines planted. They are of a special type to avoid targeting the asteroids and they can remain in place for thousands of years. We made fake 'asteroid bases' too, and booby-trapped them copiously. That way if someone clever thought a modified asteroid was the location they were searching for, it would blow up in their face. Those are just two cheap examples of the measures we employed."

"This must have required a lot of manpower to prepare."

"Not really," the former First Captain contradicted. "One hundred Legionnaires and a few Tech-Priests, plus one Forge Ship and an ammunition transport."

"And no one spoke? After the Legion scattered, someone surely thought there was an opportunity to take over the base!"

"The Legionnaires didn't leave Reserve Nodal Base Eight after it was completed." Sevatar revealed. "They are all still here, in stasis. I was the only one to leave the Somnium Stars with the Night Haunter and a few other allies...who were killed immediately when we returned to Tsagualsa."

The plan had been perfect...in theory. In practise, it was anything but. Yes, the Dark Angels had been unable to discover where their last base had been hidden...but since he was taken prisoner, the same had applied to the Night Lords.

And in the millennia which followed the Great Rebellion, the majority of the Eighth Legion's descendants had degenerated into something that could best be summarized as 'transhuman pirates enamoured with atrocities and wearing flayed skin'.

"How are you going to lead the *Vaults of Moravec* in these asteroid fields?" asked Sota-Nul, interrupting his thoughts.

"There are hidden naval buoys that will give us a moderately secure lane, once we enter the proper codes. Progress is going to be slow by necessity. Your Heavy Battleship is far bigger than the ships we used the last time..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Demeter Sector**

**Hamartia System**

**Emperor-class Battleship *Hydra's Scales***

**7.001.311M35**

**Harrowmaster** **Phocron**

Despite a great deal of effort, the Alpha Legion had never managed to find out why the Sixteenth Legion had constructed a base in the Hamartia System.

This region was nominally part of the Demeter Imperial Sector, yes, but it was mainly because there was no one living there, so a cartographer idiot must have thought that 'no one to contest the claim' translated to 'Imperial-controlled'.

It must have been controlled by some Legion at some point, to be fair. Several warships of the Emperor's Children had been destroyed here millennia ago, and for all the incompetence of the sons of Fulgrim after they were corrupted by Slaanesh, the Harrowmaster rather doubted they had been so stupid to friendly fire their own ships by accident.

"There must have been a good reason to place a base here," his second noted, echoing Phocron's thoughts. "But whatever it may be, I am unaware of it."

"Let's be fair to our cousins, the 'base' wasn't an enormous investment to begin with." On the hololith a three-dimensional representation of the object that the survivors of the Alpha Legion had come here for appeared. "It is a small refuelling station that was copied by every Forge World in existence. This one has been slightly modified to refuel up to four ships at the same time, and I note they have added a few turrets far away from the fuel tanks since our cell last checked up on them a few decades ago."

Against a ship like the *Hydra's Scales*, this armament would not even be considered a bad joke, but against the odd pirate who plagued the Demeter Sector, it was likely to be overkill.

"And it is still active."

"Well, that is rather fortunate." Phocron remarked. "We came here because it was the closest *active* base we had in our databases."

"And because while it is quite close to the Maelstrom, the Demeter Sector is not exactly near it, and wouldn't be the first choice of the Imperial squadrons no doubt hunting us right now."

Phocron chuckled.

"Indeed. I think we are close enough to open communications now. Give it a few minutes, and our warship would need to have no functioning auspexes to miss the station."

The next seconds were spent in complete silence as every Legionnaire busied himself with his duties...and with the damage to the *Hydra's Scales* and how few Legionnaires remained, there was certainly a lot of work to do.

"The station answers our hails. Standard Legion protocols. Our cousins have some good equipment here. We have enough for a high-level lithocast communication."

"Then go ahead. It would be rude not to answer."

Phocron took a few steps to the right, so he was the first Legionnaire the other party would see.

A second later, the familiar form of a Black Legionnaire, one having donned a Raptor Power Armour, confronted him.

"I am Captain Haarken of the Black Legion. By the will of the Despoiler, this station is mine to command. If you have any sense, snake, you will leave the Hamartia System and forget our existence."

The Harrowmaster had to admit it took some guts some threaten another Astartes when the potential opponent had a Battleship and you had just a small and under-gunned fuel station. This Captain Haarken certainly wasn't one to just go quietly into the darkness.

"I can't do that, Captain Haarken. We have deliberately sailed for the Hamartia System to meet you."

"Then you have made a mistake," the Legionnaire sworn to the Black Legion responded bluntly. "I have fuel aboard this station, but I won't sell it to you. And if you want to repair the massive wounds I see in the flanks of your Battleship, you will need a well-equipped shipyard. The same is true for food, water, and everything you and your crew undoubtedly need."

Phocron shook his head.

"Let's be blunt, Captain Haarken. I am Harrowmaster Phocron, and I am not interested in whatever hypothetical resources your station contains or whatever mission led you to bring a refuelling station here. We both know for sure it wouldn't fill a tenth of the needs the *Hydra's Scales* to be somewhat battle-operational again. No, I came here because my Legionnaires are succumbing to Anarchy corruption at an ever-increasing pace."

The mere fact of mentioning it brought some pains in his guts.

"I suppose you have already heard of it."

To his credit, Haarken didn't waste his time lying.

"I was given reports which included this information, yes. But the corruption shouldn't be that dangerous. We are quite away from the Eye of Terror-"

"Unless," Phocron interrupted, "we were in the system where our Primarch was turned into a giant horned rat abomination by some Anarchic deity."

Haarken stared at him...before removing his helmet, revealing a shaved head and traits typical of the Sixteenth gene-line.

"Yes, that would indeed generate the...inconveniences. You must have been quite lucky to survive Fenris."

"We survived Fenris *and* Macragge, Captain Haarken." Phocron replied acidly. "Though I admit we weren't present for the latter's final apocalyptical fighting. But we still have a lot of battle-data and knowledge."

"How...extensive are we talking in terms of battle-data?" Haarken inquired, and had Phocron not been a veteran, he would have sighed in relief.

"We have extensive knowledge of the deals of many factions negotiated in the shadows before Lorgar gave the order to sail for Cadia. And we did our best to increase our intelligence efforts once we were past the Cadian Gate. A minor percentage of the information was lost due to some of our Legionnaires going mad, but overall, we have likely the most complete account of the Black Crusade's utter failure you will find in any library that is not frequented by servants of the False Emperor."

"Very interesting," Haarken didn't pretend he wasn't interested in acquiring it for his superiors. "Though you assumed rather quickly after Macragge that the Black Legion has something that can keep the influence of the giant rats away from your Legionnaires."

"The Twentieth Legion is no more," Phocron announced carefully, "but we aren't going to pretend we don't have contacts with several of our brothers who kneeled before the Despoiler."

A faint smile appeared on Haarken's severe face.

"An Alpha Legionnaire Harrowmaster who doesn't pretend to be Alpharius, and there's a total absence of riddles. What galaxy are we living in?" The officer of the Black Legion opened his mouth as if to laugh, but no sound of hilarity left it. "Good. You were blunt, so let me return the favour. Yes, you're not the first Alpha Legion warband to come to an officer of the Black Legion. You're the first for my station, but others were contacted. So here was I told, coming straight from the *Vengeful Spirit*. The Despoiler is willing to protect you. But it will require true commitment."

"I suppose you mean it will take more than some litres of black paint and vague promises." Phocron ventured, and received a nod a couple of second after.

"You understand." Haarken bared his teeth. "A few dozen Legionnaires tried to play *him*. I think they are still screaming on the wreck thrown on a collision course to Skavenblight."

That was quite a message, all right.

"I won't make the same mistake," the Harrowmaster swore truthfully. "The details of the conditions?"

**The Galactic Core**

**Stellar Graveyard**

**Acquisition-class Cruiser *Iridium Plunder***

**9.001.311M35**

**Överfurir** **Alvar of the Axe**

"The Trade-Commodore reports we have engaged the enemy!"

"BY MY BEARD! I AM GOING TO STRANGLE THAT IMBECILE!"

"We can't do that, Överfurir! Think of what the Talion will do to us if we slay their favourite!"

"That assumes we survive the next minutes and return to some place that is owned by those *beardless bankers*!" Alvar growled, his fury alone powering his old muscles as he finished donning his Exo-Armour. "This is the Stellar Graveyard! This isn't a wrestling competition you find every shift in a Bastion!"

"He thought he was going to...surprise them..."

The entire ship shook, and incredibly violently at that.

"Menig Torvald," Alvar grunted with all the humour left in his lungs, "it looks to me they surprised the useless pile of bones we call a Trade-Commodore! I have never professed to be a genius of the Axe, that's why I'm still an Överfurir, but it looks to me that when someone manages to board you that's not-"

"WAAAAAAAGGGHHH!"

The roar was unmistakeable to any veteran.

"Oh Ancestors save me," escaped his throat followed a selection of colourful insults, "he was surprised by greenskins? It's not possible to be *that* incompetent!"

Beard and Beer, there were stupid leaders, but even so, there had to be limits. The lout he was supposed to call 'Trade-Commodore' was a Duardin, right?

"WAAAAAAAGGGHHH!"

Alvar struck with his Plasma Warhammer, and the first enormous brute received it in the face, something that ended the beast's life in a single blow.

A second came right behind it. It was dealt with the same way.

In less than a minute, the corridor outside his personal armoury contained so many corpses it was difficult to move...something that worked in his favour.

"Visit the Stellar Graveyard, Överfurir, it'll be an easy contract..." Alvar grumbled while crushing legs, arms, and dislodging teeth that were almost of a size to be proper melee weapons. "That will teach me to not read a contract of those Talion extorters attentively enough."

"Bror is coming our way, Överfurir!"

"Because he charges to join a good battle, or because there are hundreds of greenskins in pursuit?"

"Err..."

The eloquent answer of the Menig youngster he was supposed to turn into a proper 'Journeyman' of the Axe – as if he was going to utter the modern title of the Guild ranks like 'Apprentice' and other stupidities – told him everything he needed to know.

"Great." Alvar smiled. Aside from his battle-lust being satisfied, there was no reason to show any joy, but when the situation was bad, a Duardin had to be confident and stand like a Bulwark against the storm. "Stay close to me, Menig, we are soon going to swim in green blood."

The fighting had already repainted everything in green and red, why not continue?

"The Grudges will be repaid." The Överfurir swore. "Our Warhammers will be our vengeance. Our Beards will be white before we shame the High King's Honour."

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGHHH!"

Alvar struck the nearest greenskin, but deep inside he winced. For this scream had not come from the enemy he was facing. It had come from the transceivers relaying everything that was happening on the main bridge.

Their imbecile of Trade-Commodore had been even more incompetent than Alvar's worst nightmares. Please, please, let someone tell him in the next minute that the bridge had been sealed and that it was only a single greenskin dying above the communications' tech-relays...

"WAAGH. Da name iz Kaptain Brukk X-Brukk." The Trade-Captain better be dead, because if not the Överfurir was going to kill him personally, even if it was the last thing he ever did! "I 'amz in charge of your bridge, stunties. Dat waz not a bad foight! But ya lot need to get betta! I scrapped with Da Swarm Bringa! I saw dragons and grew bigger for da WAAGH! What do ya say, stunties? Wanna proppa scrap? Becauze Brukk and 'is Rock WAAGH will give ya a proppa WAAGH! WAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHH!"

The effect on the brutes they were fighting was immediate. Eyes burned green, and the familiar feeling of getting utterly screwed as green lightning began to burn several greenskins could be smelled in his Exo-Armour, despite it being sealed.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Yn Cromarc Wyldyr System**

**Arranoc**

**Halls of Tal Eth Ayr**

**8.005.310M35**

**King Adanhu**

Adanhu was quite happy he had prepared everything for a private audience alone with the Goddess' envoy.

By the Oak of Ages, the King of Arranoc was quite happy his Queen and himself were living a marriage of love.

Otherwise Adanhu believed he would have been seduced by the High Priestess.

Aurelia Malys was already a vision of grace and beauty while staying at a bow's range, but once she was close enough for him to touch her, the effect was almost hypnotic. Her skin was the colour of the fabled silver moons of legend, and her hair seemed imbued with the essence of all purple flowers.

"High Priestess. Thank you for answering my kingdom's messages."

"I could hardly leave you in the shadows..." what a bad pun, for the days were long, and the night short in Arranoc, courtesy of their two suns, "and I won't pretend there aren't other reasons for my coming. But since we both know you have many questions, I will let you speak first."

"Thank you, High Priestess." Adanhu slightly inclined his head in respect. "You didn't warn us *this* was going to happen."

The 'this' required no elaboration, as sure as his realm was a never-ending forest.

Adanhu's skin had been a subtle colour between the brown and darker shades of autumn of leaves. Now it was a magnificent green, almost identical to the summer leaves over the Halls of Tal Eth Ayr.

"In many ways," Aurelia Malys reluctantly admitted, "we weren't sure if you were going to be touched by Atharti's blessings when it happened...when destiny was sealed and a new future was born for our race. We are not so arrogant as to believe our ways are superior to yours, but the near-totality of Atharti's worshippers in the years after the Second Fall were living in the Craftworlds or the Webway itself. And well before that, the different factions of both sides, while allied in times of dire need, had massively diverged."

"But touched we were," Adanhu pointed out politely, "and while I will not pretend Harmony is not a great boon that increases our bonds with the trees and the flowers of Arranoc, many of my subjects wonder what kind of demands will come with those presents."

"The list of demands from the Empress has yet to be completed," the purple-haired High Priestess answered quickly, "but one of the key points that is certain to be voiced is to leave the humans and their 'Imperium' alone, unless they specifically ask for our help. In exchange, enough Slavhreenur for an Altar of the Goddess will be delivered, increasing the protections and the potency of the World Spirit."

"A World Spirit which will allow the Goddess to watch over us and guide us into our new abilities and our choices."

"Not everyone in your family chose Harmony."

"A hot-headed grand-nephew chose Passion. And two cousins chose Moderation."

Adanhu heard an appeasing song in the distance, and recognised quite early the voice of his Queen. The King of Arranoc felt many cycles of exhaustion vanish with it.

"Things have changed," Adanhu continued softly, "and I do not think myself foolish enough to believe the changes brought to our bodies and souls can be fought, nor that it is desirable to do so. I made my choice, and I believe Atharti is truly our best choice at Salvation, as you called the material for the divine altars. But I am not naive."

"And which points do you feel are...untouched by naivety, Sovereign of Summer Leaves?" The moon-skinned High Priestess presented her body like it was a work of art created by divine hands...and to be fair, it was exactly that.

"Of all my fellow Kings reigning over the worlds Lileath gave us," Adanhu spoke seriously, "I am one of those who have maintained many contacts with the dangerous galaxy outside. I know the Second Fall destroyed Biel-Tan and Commorragh, and in this furnace billions of souls of the most belligerent warriors were lost forever. Our Goddess will likely gather millions of worshippers around her. This will with almost complete certainty make us the voice of all Aeldari. It can hardly be otherwise when the main alternative is the Primordial Annihilator. But we will be vulnerable. And Arranoc has already been invaded thrice in my reign."

And all of those invasions, while ultimately repelled, had caused great damage that was still mourned to this day.

"You would not tell me this if you did not have something in mind, Sovereign of Summer Leaves."

"I want to speak with the Empress." Adanhu eschewed the usual flowery language. "One of the invasions we endured and prevailed against was done by her species. I understand they were the foulest sort of monsters in her eyes, but this opened my eyes as to the destructive power of their weapons. I remember. And by the lipid lakes around my Halls, I want to know the mind behind the power we all bowed to at the end of your plots. If I am reassured, I will formally ask for Arranoc to be placed under protection."

Aurelia Malys didn't seem offended.

"This speaks in a very positive way of the concern you have for your subjects, Sovereign of Summer Leaves." The High Priestess' fuchsia eyes became thoughtful. "I can't promise the Empress will come. The Empress is... *Maelsha'eil Dannan*. No one really controls her, and if you hear someone claiming otherwise, Sovereign of Summer Leaves, that person is a liar. But you can trust her word. I will speak with the Empress as soon as I can."

"That's all one sovereign can ask," Adanhu was reassured in many ways; if the High Priestess had told him it was within her ability to make a gesture and force the Empress to visit Arranoc, that would not have been very convincing. Unlike many worlds born from the seeds of long-gone Athel Loren, Arranoc had accepted refugees from the First and Second Fall...and some had had visions of the Queen of Blades duelling the yet-to-be-crowned Empress. Their minds had had to be appeased for many days and nights, and some were still trying to forget it to this day.

"You have an advantage, in many ways, Sovereign of Summer Leaves. You have something the Empress wants."

"Really?" Rumours from the worshippers of Cegorach were unreliable by definition, but Adanhu sincerely doubted something of the power and the reach of the Empress had a lack of something Arranoc had.

"Really. You see there is a black stone called Noctilith, and it just so happens one of the moons you call the Night Hawk..."

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Kolskov System**

**Kolskov**

**Inquisitorial Siren Facility**

**3.010.310M35**

**Inquisitor** **Crixus Taft**

When his master had judged him ready to become a true Inquisitor with all the privileges and duties that entailed, Crixus had been elevated.

Finally, after long decades of sacrifice, the role of 'Fireman-Acolyte' who was sent anywhere in the Samarkand Quadrant any time the Archenemy reared its ugly head no longer fell upon his shoulders.

It had taken him exactly four days to realise that while his days as errand boy for his master were truly over, the days he was the 'errant Inquisitor' for the far more senior Lord and Lady Inquisitors of the Ordo...well, they had just begun.

During the days where everything was calm, Crixus was ready to admit it wasn't that much of a chore. And there were a lot of calm days in the Nyx Sector now, which left him able to pursue his pet project: tracking heretics and law-breaking nobles by investigating the various economic shenanigans they concocted away from the God-Emperor's Light.

In blunt terms, Crixus was following crime money.

So far, the results were relatively modest. With newly recruited Acolytes – veteran guardsmen of Commorragh who had been bored once they returned to civilian life – Crixus had caught two Atlas Barons trying to smuggle tainted artefacts and one Bishop-Count negotiating a few matters with a party that were going to see him rewarded with a death sentence. A mid-sized Cartel had also been carved apart in the Wuhan System, though that one was a joint effort with the local authorities, who for good reason thought the Cartel Heads were not paying the proper tithe due to the Throne.

And with such modest results, the Nyxian Conclave was truly seeing no reason to send him on 'errand missions'...like today.

Fortunately, there were far worse places to be sent than Kolskov. The wind was a bit too strong for his taste, and his training made him uncomfortable to be in the open like this.

Aside from that, the view presented before his eyes was one a lot of Imperial worlds would envy: large mountains on the southern horizon, a carpet of green grass if you turned your head to the west, and a gargantuan lake if the move was made eastwards.

It had to be noted that the lake in question was so big that even activating some devices before his eyes, Crixus was unable to see its far shores from his current observation post.

"Lord Inquisitor! Thank you for coming so promptly!"

The Acolyte who greeted him must have some desire to get off of the planet, Crixus mused. His affairs and duties in the Nyx Sector were common knowledge if you were part of the Holy Ordos, as was the fact he was a 'mere' Inquisitor.

And the 'prompt' part was just adding a praise that was quite untrue. Crixus had been in the Sub-Sector when the request came, but he had taken the time to conclude his affairs both on Wuhan Secundus and at Harbin Tertius before making a detour here. When the request came as marked 'not urgent at all' in the messages of an Inquisition Lord, it could hardly be otherwise.

"Your message mentioned some important development when it came to the cooperation with the Sirens, yet remained vague on the subject."

Which to be fair, was a little intriguing in its own right. The Inquisition had obtained a lot of knowledge in the first years after Commorragh, but after a while the Inquisitors had departed. The Sirens were valuable enough for tests of psychic resistance and some other dangerous aspects of Inquisitional work, but deploying them outside of Kolskov? Many members had vetoed it the first time it was suggested, and no one had asked for it since.

"Yes, Lord Inquisitor! You see when-"

There was an enormous splash, and several guardsmen grabbed their weapons...just as a Siren jumped out of the water.

And yes, 'jumped' was the correct word.

As ridiculous as the thought was, Crixus stared as while in mid-air, the long and powerful tail of the Siren disappeared.

By the time the 'landing' occurred, there was no doubt what sort of xenos body was kneeling in front of his party.

The long-ears were immediately recognisable. The pale blue skin was definitely new, but the muscled body and the rest were not.

The female xenos was *Eldar*.

"Don't shoot!" Crixus commanded to his escort. "What is happening here?"

"The Empress has not returned yet." The voice had not lost any potency in psychic power, and Crixus was lost in confusion. The no-longer-Siren sensed it, clearly. "You call her Weaver, the Lady of the Swarm. We will forever call her *Maelsha'eil Dannan*, the Angel of Death...and Empress. We will serve her. We have made our choice."

There were many splashes, though the other...transformed Sirens stayed semi-hidden in the water. Most of them were showing blue skins like their 'representative', but they were some showing red or green hide.

"I...I see." No wonder the senior Inquisitors had sent him with vague instructions and even vaguer reports about what required his presence. "We have much to speak about, clearly."

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Gothic Sector**

**Edge of the Orar Subsector**

**Void Stalker-class Battleship *Anthem of Fallen Suns***

**8.015.311M35**

**Autarch** **Ulion Lakadieth**

The problem with being hero was that everyone expected you not only to win splendid victories, but to do things that were suitably *heroic*.

At least it was 'heroic' in certain mouths.

Ulion largely preferred to label it 'life-threatening'.

Sometimes it was relatively safe. The recent battle against the slaves of the Primordial Annihilator had been well-planned, the corrupted humans and other monsters not realising his squadron was even there until the *Anthem of Fallen Suns* began to slaughter them.

Sometimes it was absolutely not safe.

Working for Sliscus had been in this category, assuredly. And now sailing into the middle of the largest Corsair fleet he had ever seen without any support...it was too.

Some part of the Lugganath-born Autarch – though he didn't know what the rank was worth these days, after Atharti's rise – very much enjoyed the fact that the Goddess hadn't really changed him. He was still...himself. Ulion didn't feel like a hero.

Unfortunately, some of his admirers – and plenty of Lugganath elders that were definitely not friends – had decided to take his choice of Moderation as a sign of *humility*.

And so when Ulthran had needed someone with a prestigious name for an insanely dangerous mission, guess who had been chosen by Lugganath?

"I count two hundred starships in the possible 'ambush formation' half-hidden by the star's flares, Autarch. This is of course in addition to the two other formations protecting the Corsair flagship. Now that we are so close, I can estimate there are over a thousand warships in this stellar system. In this number must be counted thirty-one Battleships."

Ulion didn't wince or curse...but the magnitude of the firepower assembled generated a frown on his face. The entire fleet of Lugganath, assuming it was assembled to defend their Craftworld, could not field these numbers, and they certainly couldn't even crew that many Battleships unless they resorted to extremely desperate measures.

And this wasn't the full might of the Void Dragon Corsairs, the most successful and powerful of the Corsair Fleets of this galaxy. Lugganath and Ulthwé had confirmation many impressive fleets were active near the Eye of Terror, south of the Galactic Core, and in the Halo Stars. The complete list would need several days to compile, and would likely still be incomplete.

"We are ordered to stop."

Ulion shrugged.

"Obey. Let's not test the patience of our hosts."

Not a single warship was using active targeting measures, but no one aboard the *Anthem of Fallen Suns* was stupid enough to believe there weren't hundreds of batteries ready to fire the moment the order was given.

The Void Dragon Corsairs had not risen and mustered a fleet bigger than the one Sliscus commanded by being lazy, naive, and incompetent.

"The *Star Drake* is hailing us, Autarch."

One could hardly miss it; it was the biggest Battleship, and it had just dropped its stealth holo-fields.

It was extravagantly decorated, with at least five different shades of red visible on the prow alone. As your eye moved towards the stern, the ship's paint got darker and darker until it was void black.

Lapis-Lazuli colours indicated the name of the ship.

"Accept."

There was no time to say anything more; not when the communication opened and all screens changed to present the same thing: what was certainly the throne hall of the *Star Drake*, and the soul who ruled over it.

"Princess Saarania," Ulion Lakadieth saluted but didn't bow, "it is an unexpected honour-"

"So they really did send the Hero of Lugganath in person." The Mistress of the Void Dragons, clad in black armour, interrupted with a smile that could be described to be swimming in smugness.

Ulion sighed internally. He was really beginning to hate that nickname.

"According to my spies, you accepted to become Ulthran's messenger. Something about worshipping a certain Goddess. If that is the case, Hero, I assure you that you have wasted your time coming here. My Corsairs are free in their choices...and not a single one chose to worship Symbiosis. If it had been merely Carnality, I might have been tempted. But Symbiosis...we don't accept a leash, no matter how enticing."

Well, that answered how good the spies of Saarania were. Aside from the High Priestess and Ulthran himself, there had been only ten other souls participating...so they had really one of the senior figures of Craftworld Ulthwé giving information to the Void Dragons.

Fortunately, the possibility had been anticipated. Though Ulion hadn't liked the contingency at the time, and he didn't like it now.

"Absolutely not! I have come," the Lugganath-born Autarch began, "to convince you to change the name of your fleet."

The Princess was surprised, at least. That was quite clear. Most of her court hissed in anger, though. At least until she burst into laughter.

"A nice quest, hero," and the laughter doubled in intensity. The lackeys and the advisors chuckled or howled, though all seemed...fake. "You want to steal my fleet and defend your poor Craftworld with it?"

"I want," Ulion announced seriously, "to avoid divine retribution now that the Yngir abomination bearing this name has proven to be very real and very malevolent."

The laughter stopped instantly.

"The Void Dragon. Active."

"One shard of the great monster was freed during the Battle of Mandragora. Many parties, including *Maelsha'eil Dannan*, battled it. And it was imprisoned again. But the warning was clear."

"My Princess, the Autarch is lying!"

For all her faults, and they were legion, Saarania was not stupid. Arrogant to the point that between Sliscus and she, they could have organised a galactic competition of it, but not stupid enough to dismiss this threat.

"No, no he isn't." The Princess made a sound of disapproval. "The warning has been heard. I will send ships to find the relevant information, and decide for a suitable name that will not see us cursed by that abomination of the Dark Times."

That was...better than most scenarios his mind had conjured. But the conversation wasn't over...

"There is also the secondary matter you've heard about, Princess. Eldrad Ulthran wishes you to-"

"Eldrad Ulthran can die of old age! It will come for him before I will grant him an audience."

The courtiers' giggling and barbs resumed as if nothing of the ordinary had happened.

"That is regrettable."

"Regrettable, the *legend* of Lugganath says. Tell me, oh mighty hero. You have seen the might of this fleet arrayed before you. Know that it represents only a third of the ships that sail under my banner. Know that we have rediscovered and exhumed many weapons in our quest for eternal freedom. You have been given the time to observe the power I hold as Princess. Now I want you to answer a simple question. Can this so-called Empress who branded us with this insulting mark of authority defeat me?"

Ulion Lakadieth did not need very long to think of the answer he wanted to give...and after a few heartbeats, decided that since Saarania had asked, it was best to be blunt and to the point.

"Yes." The Autarch declared with utter certainty. "If it comes to a true war between your forces and the Empress, *Maelsha'eil Dannan* will kill you."

Saarania remained silent for long, very long heartbeats.

At last, she answered.

"Interesting...very interesting. You can leave. When I will have reached a decision, I will contact you again."

The communication abruptly ended, and everyone on the bridge visibly relaxed.

"A true pleasure," someone muttered, and everyone who listened laughed nervously.

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Fortress of Hera**

**2.019.311M35**

**Chapter** **Master Aeonid Thiel**

"I apologise in advance for the hours of duty we're taking you away from."

"Think nothing of it," Taylor Hebert immediately assured as she walked by his side, over a dozen Space Marines following her. "I'm in fact genuinely happy for the change of pace. It seems half of the Imperium wants something from me these days. Even with Artemis and my other loyal Adjutants, I had to triple my staff's effectives...again...just to handle the day-to-day bureaucracy and the replies to the Astropathic messages."

"The Imperial Guard and the High Lords, I suppose?"

"And the Adeptus Astronomican, the Magisterial Houses of the Navis Nobilite, the Ecclesiarchy, the different Chapters of Space Marines...to name only the different parts of the Imperium." The Lady General Militant made an exaggerated sigh. "The times are gone when I was an unimportant Major, I'm afraid."

The Space Marine in black armour directly behind Weaver made a loud snort. Aeonid had to agree with him there; the idea that the golden-winged woman had been unimportant some decades ago was ridiculous in the extreme.

"Anyway, I thank you for coming so close to your departure for Baal. This way, please."

The location Aeonid led Weaver to with her escort had received many names in the last millennia.The one the new Chapter Master of the Ultramarines used was the Founding Hall – it had been here his predecessors had gathered the sons of Guilliman for the announcements of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Foundings.

Roboute Guilliman, trapped in his armour, to which had been strapped a considerable number of medical-monitoring 'Omnissiah-blessed machines', was waiting for them.

There had been multiple Primarchs present before, but this was no longer the case today. Leman Russ had sailed for Terra long ago, and Corvus Corax...the Primarch of the Raven Guard had likely returned to Deliverance, though no one had been able to confirm if it was true or not.

Refreshments were given, the courtesies were spoken, and two Adjutant-Spiders took position, seemingly immobile but assuredly not missing a single word of everything exchanged here.

Past that, the order of the day was immediately very important.

"I wondered if you had thought about my proposal about the Imperial Pylons and the structures you have worked on with the Custodes?"

"I have thought about it, yes," the young black-haired heroine who had saved Macragge replied with a nod. "But before making a decision, I want to know who I am speaking with. Is it the former Lord of the Five Hundred Worlds I am talking to? Or is the former Lord Commander of the Imperium?"

"The practical is 'former' here," his Primarch noted. "But to answer your question, the former."

"I see. In that case, I would say I am against the deployment of the Pylons at Macragge or on the worlds which are part of the realm of Ultramar."

"Theoretical: you are concerned I will try to rebuild the Five Hundred Worlds."

"I am. Are you ready to swear you won't?" The tone was light, but the black eyes filled with stars were deadly serious.

"No. I think you over-dramatise the importance of my intentions."

"Lord Macragge," this time, the smile was definitely sarcastic, "I've read enough documents dating from the thirty-first millennium and from the sons of Sanguinius' archives to know that the 'Five Hundred Worlds' name referred to the five hundred major centres of industry and technology Ultramar built and developed during the Great Crusade. When one looked at a map, the Civilised Worlds, the mining outposts, and everything that fell under the aegis of Macragge was closer to *fifty thousand worlds*, not five hundred."

Aeonid really did his best not to chuckle. Who was the one who had dared voice this argument in public the last time? Oh, right...it was the Lion...if the rumours were true.

"And you disapprove."

"Chapter Master Valens has proven that in certain situations, the Ultramarines would be for all intents and purposes playing no part in the military campaigns of the Imperium. This was when the Regent of Macragge ruled thirteen systems. Am I supposed to be filled with eager anticipation for the Ultramarines to govern and administer five hundred?"

"A sound theoretical, but I am not Cato Valens, no matter how much I respect his sacrifice." Guilliman pointed out. "And you have far greater confidence in Chapter Master Thiel and myself."

"This is not just a question of confidence." Lady Weaver shook her head. "It's dealing in the long-term. Forgive me, Lord Guilliman, but both of you aren't eternal. You can go missing, or perish in battle. I wish it won't happen for a very long time, but if there's anything this galaxy has proven, it is that it has horrors that can slay even beings which could be considered Demigods in their own right."

"And you fear that should that happen, the Five Hundred Worlds would drift apart, maybe declare complete independence eventually."

"I do." The high-ranked guardswoman confirmed with a large dose of stubbornness. "And since I am honest, I also must raise the question of your future ambitions. Will you give your time and administrative abilities to Macragge, or will you return to Terra once you have recovered?"

"You apparently don't believe I can do both at the same time."

"You're perfectly right. I don't." Eyes for a moment turned in direction of the Adjutant-Spiders. "Even with my loyal helpers, the power of my Administration Shard, and tens of thousands of staff servicemen, I am not capable of ruling Nyx while several thousand light-years away. This is just flat-out not reasonable."

"But you are on a path that will lead you to make the same choice as I," his gene-father commented encouragingly.

"Yes." The red-robed officer replied with surprising honesty. "And if I have to make that choice, I will choose Nyx."

Aeonid cleared his throat.

"A...surprising choice."

"Not really," the Lady of Nyx huffed. "I would be a horrible High Lord. I have improved my repertoire when it comes to politics, but I still hate compromises that don't involve me coming out on top. On Terra, I would be forced to juggle with myriads of factions and other powerhouses I have no influence over. I am a hammer; one needs a scalpel to navigate through the powerhouses of Terra."

"But you will go to Terra...for the Triumph if nothing else."

"Yes. But first, many High Lords will try to delay it for as long as possible, past the days of cheers and celebrations. And then...the Emperor wants me to go to Terra. And it will be to play my role of hammer, not for a role of negotiator I am not suited for."

Aeonid wished he was surprised to hear it...but he wasn't, not really. Terra was very different from what it had been during the days of the Great Crusade...and even then it had been far from a safe place.

"And your opinion about the Codex? Since you gave me your views on everything else, I am interested in hearing your opinion about it too."

"The Codex is near-perfect to ensure the Imperium is never again confronted by the same rebellion which almost destroyed it over four thousand years ago." Lady Weaver began with a thoughtful expression. "And in ages of relative peace like the ones the Imperium enjoyed after the Scouring, Chapters of one thousand Astartes are near perfect. But when it comes to ages of total war like this Black Crusade...the Space Marines will be overwhelmed if the era of turmoil and disaster lasts too long. They have neither the numbers nor the industrial capacity to endure more than several years of war against a peer opponent."

"And if you had a hand in pushing for reforms?"

"I would support creating different...templates." The black-haired Lady General Militant began carefully. "Your texts leave a great deal of flexibility, but they unfortunately failed to emphasize the differences between what a fleet-based Chapter needs and what a Chapter possessing a single fortified homeworld requires on a yearly basis."

"Not bolstering the number of Astartes per Chapter?" The Avenging Son asked for clarification.

"That might come in time. But the most important thing is proposing some doctrine that really allows to unify the Chapters in a greater whole. I'm sure you've heard, but the Space Wolves and the Black Templars in particular really pay no attention to your magnum opus."

"I am aware of it, yes." The Thirteen Primarch didn't present an annoyed face, but Aeonid knew him well enough to know that it had not amused him at all...especially when it came to Leman Russ and his Wolves, who must have literally burned their copies of the tomes before they left Terra after the end of the Second Founding.

"My friend Dragon, who is a far better historian than I will ever be, made interesting comparisons between the situation at hand and the duality Limitanei/Comitatenses which was used by the Roman Empire some thirty-five millennia ago on Old Earth."

"I will have to check my personal library," and yes, the signs were there Roboute Guilliman was very interested, "but the comparison with this epoch is...rather pertinent. There are clearly Astartes whose home Sector is repelling xenos and traitor invasions every decade, while others have relatively safe neighbours, and thus deploy their Companies on long-range campaigns, going as far as to wage decades of war in different Segmentums. You have given me much to think about, Taylor Hebert."

"My pleasure," the young woman replied earnestly, "I have had a long time to think about it, and I don't think I have half of the answers I want...but I spoke with a lot of people who read the Codex Astartes...and there were a lot of Space Marines among them."

"Often the easiest way to discover mistakes in one's work is to speak with other theoreticians who have a different opinion on the subject," Guilliman agreed. "Have you thought about writing a Codex for the Guard by yourself?"

This was exactly the wrong thing to say with Adjutant-Spiders in the room.

"Webmistress, please allow me to write the book in your stead! This will be the most superb codex of the Imperium!"

"Out of the way, sister, the *Codex Weaverian Arachnae* is mine to create!"

**The Halo Stars**

**The Ind Cluster**

**Maharashtra System**

**Maharashtra**

**8.088.311M35**

**Captain** **Boros Kurn**

"Warlord, you were not joking when you said there were going to be a lot of ruins."

"I will admit, Boros...I did not know it was going to be *this* large." Malicia replied from the hill they were using as their initial observation post. Precise release of incendiary ammunition had quickly removed all the jungle from that area, making sure dozens of Astartes and multiple warbands could deploy.

The city which had been called 'Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods' by the Vizier was here, waiting for them.

One might have thought that since everything on this continent was covered in jungles, it would be difficult to distinguish the city from the trees.

But one would have been wrong. No one had any problem locating the greatest temples of what had been Maharashtra City. They were hundreds of metres high, after all; some even seemed to reach the sky.

Most were covered in liana and all sort of tropical vegetation, of course.

But it was impressive that after several thousand years during which no one maintained them, the temples were still that well-preserved.

It was impressive...and suspicious.

There was a lot of flora growing in this city, but even from this distance, the jungle seemed oddly...subdued.

The air was breathable. There was no trace of toxins in the air. Hundreds of sorcerers had done their best to discover a threat, and save those who were lying blatantly – they immediately paid the price for it, naturally – the most skilled Warp-dabblers found nothing.

"I am not a psyker, Warlord, but this city...I don't like it."

"Something truly evil waits beyond these ancient walls," Malicia agreed. "And I don't think it's the artefact-weapon I've come here to claim."

"If the information you found is correct, the False Emperor himself didn't dare pass through the gates while they were standing."

Evidently, after four millennia in which Maharashtra had been forgotten by the galaxy, the gates had long crumbled...and sometimes the arches of the gates had collapsed too.

"Yes...if the information found is correct. Some things the Scribe Caste found make sense. The involvement of the False Emperor doesn't."

"While I am far from a loyal Legionnaire to the Golden Throne," Boros decided some humour wouldn't hurt at this point, "I will admit that Virus Bombing is not the style of the one who styled himself 'Master of Mankind'. And during several battles of the Great Crusade, the False Emperor proved he was not at all reluctant to slaughter billions, be it by orbital fire or his own considerable powers. By that logic, only the city itself should be showing forms of life. If it was so dangerous, massive orbital bombardment would have been ordered. Jungle or not, we would have seen the craters...along some rather impressive devastation."

"I had similar thoughts."

"And yet we are going to enter this city."

Boros didn't bother phrasing it as a question.

"Yes. Anything of note you spotted so far?"

"Apart from the profusion of styles, you mean?"

Malicia chuckled.

"Those who settled here seemed to have really chaotic ideas where their worshipping themes were concerned, I agree. I would have thought that given its name, this planet would have been settled by Terran colonists from the Ind Hives, but the more I look at it, the less convinced I am of this theory."

"One temple at least seems to be a copy of the Macraggian structures, with those typical marble pillars, cubic shape, and significant column of statues." Or what remained of them, after the jungle swallowed most of it. "But this one," the Legionnaire pointed to a familiar triangular shape, "is very similar to a pyramid like the ones the Thousand Sons lived in on Prospero. And the one next to it is horribly twisted, like if they venerated some swamp horror...I have difficulties believing it was a human temple."

"Maybe it wasn't. There are many things we don't know about this planet."

"We advance?"

"The warbands will advance," Malicia confirmed. "Send the cultists first to scale the walls. Our time here is precious, as I don't think our opponents in the Calyx Stars will let me grab my prize without a serious fight..."

**Warlord** **Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Boros Kurn had been completely right to not like this city. Though to be fair, Malicia hadn't liked it either the moment her senses were close enough to perceive the disturbing aura it generated.

But there were few choices but to go forwards. Her travel to this part of the Halo Stars must have been noticed, and some enemy force was undoubtedly on their way to counter her.

Tzeentch might be willing to let her grab a weapon of significant power, but the same didn't apply to the other Gods.

After a few seconds where she and her nine Majestryx Golems used a large opening in the halls where there had once been a gate, both her Shard and her sorcery wards shrieked in alarm.

The reason was kind of obvious.

Less than one hundred metres away, the city had begun to change.

And it wasn't subtle.

On the right and the left, enormous precipices had opened.

These were abysses of utter darkness...and there hadn't even been a shiver of it in the Sea of Souls.

Everything was calm.

It would have been less frightening if their contact with it was blocked with Pariahs.

"How is such a thing possible?" asked a Magister. "We didn't feel anything."

"The city has been built in an interstice of reality," Malicia explained slowly. "As such, it can afford to ignore the Euclidean laws...it can ignore everything."

"Must we enter the temple?" Boros Kurn wondered. "This sort of...ugly cathedral reeks of a trap."

"We have no choice. I doubt sorcery can allow us to fly over the abyss..."

It went without saying that a fool on an enchanted disk had to try to prove her wrong.

His long and pathetic scream as he fell into the darkness and disappeared from view was quite something.

"We enter this temple. Whatever things reside in this city, it seems there's a will that wishes us to confront them."

The blonde parahuman didn't like it. No one liked it. A look at the ugly cathedral was enough to tell you that it wasn't the kind of place you wanted to visit. Malicia had seen plenty of Imperial churches and places of worship, and honestly, she hadn't been impressed by the 'Gothic style'. But today, they seemed almost desirable compared to this 'Chaos Cathedral'.

The black walls of the temple had been sculpted to represent...things. Malicia would have dearly wished to say they were daemons, except she wasn't familiar with any common breed of daemon that was eyeless and possessed multiple maws.

The black spires and the structure which seemed to engulf all reality were oppressing.

And once the Majestryx Golems blasted the doors open, it became worse.

There were over nine thousand cultists and warriors, in addition to nine Magisters...and that was just her vanguard. More were following behind. It would have to be enough. It must be enough.

"Boros. Find me the exit. We can't afford to lose precious hours."

"Right away, Warlord."

"Majestryx, we have found something...ARRGGGH!"

The Tau Scribe didn't stand a chance. The humanoid construct they had mistaken for a statue suddenly broke free of its prison of stone and revealed itself by planting enormous fangs in the throat of the blue-skinned alien.

Three seconds later, Malicia uttered a spell of nine syllabuses which disintegrated the attacker's head.

For the Scribe, it was too late. The creature had literally eaten most of his throat.

"What by the broken oaths is this?" One Space Marine cautiously examined the corpse of the creature. "It looks like the body of a human woman...a starving human woman..."

"I didn't feel anything. A sort of mutation triggered by a ritual, maybe?" Malicia shrugged. "Anyway, if you see more of them, blast the head, it seems to work...oh hell."

Ahead of them, dozens of small stone supplicants were revealed to be nothing of the sort. The creatures were leaving their prisons of stones. And they were hideous.

It looked like someone had sown shut the eyes and mouths of females of diverse species. Some were undoubtedly human, but there were aliens too...some of them Malicia had encountered in the Calyx Expanse.

"Remember! Blast their heads! ATTACK!"

It became a bloodbath in mere heartbeats.

The creatures...they were incredibly fast, and the moment the first attacks missed, cultists and Space Marines realised how bad it was.

"They're regenerating! Their limbs are growing back!"

"The heads!" Malicia snarled! "Pulverise the heads, forget about the rest!"

The Astartes had enough discipline and their Bolters were precise enough to target exactly what they wanted.

For the rest...blood flowed. The monsters were fast, incredibly ruthless, and once they had grabbed something, the sewing closing their maws was torn apart, revealing enormous fangs that were absolutely not natural.

Malicia sensed there was something at play, something...oh, damn it.

Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods. This not-cathedral was a temple to an unborn God of **Hunger**.

"Ax'senaea. Go. Destroy the heads of these Hungering Ones."

Immediately, over sixty of the monsters burned in the cursed flames of Tzeentch, and her Majestryx Golems reaped a fearsome tally. This gave the cultists and Magisters' servants the time to rally and fight back, mainly by providing a meat shield for the Space Marines of Boros Kurn.

Before long, the entire opposition was terminated.

"Let's get out of here, Warlord."

An enormous cathedral door opened in the distance, and the light of day could be seen.

"Yes. Let's go."

The vanguard stormed out of the 'Chaos Cathedral', and immediately Malicia was assailed by an enormous influx of psychic and not-psychic communications. Because of course this damn city could block anyone contacting them from the outside, without them being aware of it.

"Majestryx," the Magister she had given command of the fleet was the first to give his report once a semblance of order was restored. "I have bad news, I'm afraid. Exactly...thirteen minutes ago, an enemy fleet translated into real-space. They arrived at the Mandeville Point we assigned the codename 'Echidna'. Over thirty ships in all, but most of them are capital ships, and they're very heavily armed."

"Understood. They are part of the Khornate fleet and the *Conqueror* is at their head, right?"

"No, Majestryx...they are part of the Fourth Legion. Those are Iron Warrior warships."

For several seconds, Malicia believed her ears had failed her.

"What?"

\*\*\*\*

**92nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**TORAMINO**

'**THE ARQUITOR WARSMITH'**

'**THE CASTELLAN OF XANTHIAR'**

**COMMANDER OF THE 235th GRAND BATTALION, FOURTH LEGION**

**TRAITOR SIEGE-MASTER ASTARTES**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-BETA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF BETA-CLASS NAVY AND MILITARUM ASSETS ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**REWARD: 17 TRILLION GELTS, 1 PLANET**

\*\*\*\*

**The Ind Cluster**

**Maharashtra System**

**Repulsive-class Grand Cruiser *Master of Xanthiar***

**Warsmith** **Toramino**

"The enemy fleet is abandoning the high orbit of our target, Warsmith. The calculations predict the Battleship and most of the Cruisers are going to hide behind this huge blue giant."

"The rest of the Tzeentchian fleet is fleeing with their mutated tails and tentacles between their legs for different Mandeville Points. What a shameful display of cowardice."

"Do we pursue, Warsmith? They have nothing to stand against our Heavy Cruisers."

"No. I don't care about these wretches. We have received our orders. The recovery of the weapon is our absolute priority. Our Destroyers have arrived?"

"They have, Warsmith."

"Then unleash them against everything the enemy has in this system," Toramino ordered, his Olympian aristocratic looks presenting an expression of disgust, as always when he thought about these upstart slaves. "They may not be able to destroy the enemy Battleship, but they will savage the other ships of these cowards."

"It will be done, by the will of Perturabo."

"What is your command, Warsmith, for the coming planetary campaign?"

"We can't raze the city," Toramino grunted. "The Primarch has made clear that this weapon is to be recovered intact."

"But we can raze the jungles around it."

"No Exterminatus," the Warsmith of the 235th Grand Battalion ordered. "No Phosphex or weapons we reserve for the Great Sieges. Incinerate the jungles of this world. Burn the trees and every mutant which might hide underneath their canopy."

"It will be done."

"The cultists and other cowards will take refuge in the city, Warsmith. And we won't be able to use Ordinatus artillery against them."

"This is why we traded favours to refurbish as many Spartan Assault Tanks and Arquitor Bombards as possible for this battle." Toramino glared at his Captains. "Send the Obliterators and the other fools who thought that inviting Warp-spawn into their flesh was a good idea. They will accompany the Bolter-fodder."

"It will be done, Warsmith."

"Obliterate this Tzeentchian band of cowards in a tide of iron and fire. The Primarch will have his prize, and you...you will earn the weapons that I will be rewarded with. Iron Within. Iron Without."

"IRON WITHIN, IRON WITHOUT!"

**Maharashtra**

**The Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**

**Warlord** **Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Malicia had been really worried by the arrival of the Iron Warriors and the enormous amount of firepower they brought with them for a confrontation with her forces.

If the enemy commander knew how to handle the temple's challenges, it promised to be an incredibly difficult fight. The only advantage on her side was that even with total control of the space around the planet, orbital fire was denied to the Iron Warriors. The same was true about aerial supremacy.

But the moment the Legionnaires of the Fourth Legion smashed into the first temples with their Land Raiders and heavy mechanised forces had brought much relief.

Quite clearly, someone had been able to locate her ultimate destination. Evidently, this planner had some hint of the prize she had come here for.

But whoever was behind this scheme, it was obvious they had chosen a tactician who understood nothing of the fight of symbols and dangerous monsters that were providing the main obstacles between a claimant and the weapon.

The Iron Warriors and their slaves had entered the Graveyard, storming one hundred Temples at once.

And it was...it was a bloodbath.

"ARRRRGGGGHHHH!"

"Make this music stop! Make this music stop!"

"Monsters! Monsters! They are eating the plates of our tanks!"

"We need reinforcements! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS!"

Listening to the communications of the Iron Warriors was...extremely satisfying. It looked like of the two, it was her host that had come over-prepared.

"Boros."

"Yes, Warlord?"

"I'm going after the weapon. Keep the imbeciles of the Fourth Legion busy until my return. Ambush them, play for time...tell the Magisters to trick them into entering more and more Temples of the False Gods."

"Are you sure, Warlord?"

"Awakening so many horrors..."

The female parahuman snorted.

"So far I have yet to see even one of the abominations inside the different Temples leave it."

An enormous tank, one she recognised as a rare relic called a Cerberus Heavy Tank Destroyer, fell into one of the gaping abysses that separated each 'temple-block'.

"And if you can acquire a few of those super-heavy machines along the way, the day would be perfect."

"We will try," the Astartes' tone was not exactly enthusiastic, "the Iron Warriors do not part lightly with their equipment unless it is thrashed beyond repair."

"How unsurprising," Malicia smiled. "Have fun."

Her escort had decreased by two-thirds as they rushed into the 'inner city'. Many cults and warbands she had brought here had decided they could conquer the baleful auras of the Temples, or thought challenging the Iron Warriors would be fun.

Malicia was not going to shed a tear for them. If they wanted to behave like idiots, then let their fate be that of idiots on the Path to Glory.

The nine hundred or so souls who remained by her side obeyed her commands scrupulously. In reality, that meant avoiding the Temples as much as possible.

Something that, honestly, was easier said than done.

The deeper her little force went into the Graveyard, the more Malicia was convinced this was no city at all.

The landscape, which had already been weird and impossible by the laws of physics, grew more and more impossible. You could descend some stairs only to find yourself at a higher point than you had begun at.

Some temples looked like their foundations were up and the 'temple's summit' was down.

Fortunately, the Scribes' researches had warned her to come prepared. And so Malicia had. Powerful tracking magics were activated; spell-chains were turned into instruments that allowed them to dispel all of the more dangerous illusions and to give them a path of reality to get through the unreal.

Nonetheless, this was not a place where they could survive for long with what sanity they had left relatively unharmed.

This place was not of the Warp, but in many ways, it was worse.

The sounds of fighting had ceased to echo behind them...but the Malfian ruler didn't trust it.

They had to find the weapon and get out of the Graveyard as fast as possible.

Like her thoughts had allowed it to materialise, the Final Temple suddenly appeared.

"Majestryx...who built that thing?"

"I have no idea."

Several major Chaos Temples of this city had clearly been parodies of structures built by the Imperium and other human civilisations. Hunger had been a parody of a Gothic Cathedral, but there had been many others, with references to Terran past few among her warband would be able to understand. Indian, Chinese, Aztec, Egyptian, and plenty of others. There had been alien Temples too.

But this new Temple...it didn't seem it was something that had been built by mortal hands. The entire structure was colossal, yet it seemed to be tethered to the ground by...a tortuous series of stairs alone.

Just looking at it and trying to examine the shape of the walls and where exactly the Temple ended was hurting her eyes, and her Shard urged her to stop.

Malicia looked at the stairs after a few seconds. Those at least were real enough to not give her a headache.

"Ax'senaea, with me." She and the Majestryx Golems would accompany her. "The rest of you, stop any interloper who managed to follow us here."

The rest of the journey, to be honest, was something Malicia would have few memories about. There were lethal traps, because of course there were. There were hateful shades whispering lies and temptations, promising her power and urging her to stop her 'doomed' quest.

Walking alone was arduous. It seemed to require an extraordinary amount of energy.

Physical and mental exhaustion assailed her.

Sometimes it seemed a room was taking her an eternity to cross, yet at the end of it, the sorceress couldn't recall a single challenge of the multitudes she had endured.

The Temple was testing her, that at least she was sure of.

And then they reached the Altar room. Ax'senaea had many new scars, and her own blue armour had numerous claw marks that would require a lot of repairs, though the efficiency of the warded Power Armour remained acceptable.

There were no statues here. There was no distortion of non-Euclidean nature. There was no sorcery in the room itself, though murky things crawled inside the walls.

The Altar room was bare and cold, and this time it was no illusion or attempt to convince her to lower her guard.

There was really nothing...save the weapon she had come for, and the crystal-prison keeping it trapped here for the Gods only knew how long.

One of her Golems advanced and touched the crystal-prison. No trap was triggered, no daemon shrieked and revealed itself.

"This is too easy..."

"Reaching this place was complicated enough, foolish presence at the edge of my mind," Ax'senaea told her when she was allowed to speak.

Malicia snickered.

"If only if it was that simple..."

But she couldn't afford to wait. The Iron Warriors may have approached this war in a stupid manner, but they still had enormous assets that needed to be dealt with.

Malicia approached the crystal...and used all her strength to punch it directly.

The crystal exploded, and her parahuman powers protected her from the collateral damage.

The sword was freed...and though its shape didn't change at all, within a few seconds, the entire metal of the blade was covered in cursed purple flames.

"Ah. So that was the trap."

"**Congratulations, genius. It took you a really long time to arrive at that conclusion**."

Malicia wanted to believe it had been telepathy...but Ax'senaea was startled, and thus had heard it too. Since the idea of her Golems speaking was completely stupid, that left...

"Of course. That was the Vizier's idea of a super-weapon." The female parahuman drawled sarcastically. "My rival gets the versatile weapons, and I am sent on a Quest to find...a sword which talks. Glorious."

"**How dare you!"** The mental attack which slammed against her defences was a battering ram which made her grimace. "**I am Calamity Incarnated! I am the Litany of Disaster! I am the Herald of the Carnage to come! I am the Black Blade of Antwyr**!"

The daemonic sword flew into her hands, and instantly the struggle began. Malicia immediately screamed in pain, and it was only when her Shard really allowed her to push against this insidious attack that she was really able to strike back.

Her sorcery...it had completely failed her at the worst possible moment.

*Damn you, Kairos Fateweaver. Damn you, Tzeentch. You knew what was going to happen*...

Malicia fought. It was a long struggle. The purple flames were melting parts of her armour, before remodelling it into something that could corrupt her and attack her physically.

But this was a test of survival.

And Malicia had promised herself that no matter what path Tzeentch led her on, she would never turn into an eldritch abomination again.

It was a long battle.

It may have lasted hours, maybe days.

But when she threw the blade away, the warlord ruling over Malfi could proudly affirm truthfully she was still herself.

"Damn it..." Ax'senaea fell from the ceiling where the sword-shaped abomination had neutralised her, unconscious. The same had happened to her Majestryx Golems. "Damn it...that was...a hell of a fight."

"**How? How could you resist my power?"**

Malicia couldn't help but giggle...though it left her mouth as a croaking sound.

"Do you really expect me to answer that?" The Unwritten Destiny sorceress coughed in pain. "Change damn it..."

"**You are far too weak**." The purple-black blade told her smugly.

"And you, I hope you will enjoy an eternity here in your prison," Malicia retorted with unhidden pleasure. Her sceptre slammed on the ground, and slowly, the shards of the crystal-prison began to reassemble. "When the next claimant will come to find you, tell them it was my power who sealed you anew."

"**What? No! You are supposed to wield me! You have braved uncountable trials to wield me! It is your destiny!"**

"I've changed my mind," Malicia replied truthfully. "And I spit upon fate and destiny. If I had obeyed their capricious whims, I would have been an eldritch monster until entropy claimed me. I am the Destiny Unwritten. I won't be your puppet, Blade of Antwyr. Possess the next fool which will come after me, for all I care."

"**You can't leave me here**!" The daemonic sword appeared to actually be on the edge of genuine panic, evidently having the ability to feel her complete sincerity. "**The Enemy knows where I am now! Sealed or not, it will come for me**!"

"I don't care." Though it was interesting the Blade of Antwyr was speaking of an 'Enemy', not about the Gods of the Pantheon...

"**A Pact! I will swear a Pact!"**

Malicia blinked.

"What do you mean by 'Pact'?"

**Warsmith** **Toramino**

"But what do we must do to slay these mutants?"

"I told you to shoot them in the head!" Toramino growled angrily, wondering how by Medrengard's polluted skies the Grand Battalion had fallen so low.

"We did, Warsmith! But they're rising anyway now! Nothing seems to be able to put them down permanently anymore!"

"They're coming from the Arch! Those ghosts...they are nightmares made flesh! I need more Legionnaires here!"

"What by all the steel is this? Is this a tongue? They are coming! They are coming again! Damn the orders! Use the chemical weapons! Everything we have!"

"We are pinned down by the octahedron structure. They have us surrounded. We will not bend. We will not break. Iron Within! Iron Without!"

Disaster. This entire assault was just disaster after disaster.

But he was going to bring back the prize he'd come for to his Primarch, no matter the losses.

He was Toramino, Warsmith of the 235th Grand Battalion. He was a son of Olympia, and in his veins flowed the purest blood of a thousand Tyrants.

He was going to win this war, and this time, the titles and power that should have been his long ago would be given to him.

"Bring more artillery here! These spectres may think they have the upper hand, but they will swiftly realise the error of their ways once we pulverise their Temple. Bring me four battalions of Bombards here! This is an order!"

"By your will, Lord Warsmith...err...where has the enemy vanished to?"

Toramino turned around, and sure enough, his Legionnaires had stopped firing their Bolters and other guns. The Spartans had taken a pause after shooting hundreds of HE rounds. Even the artillery was momentarily stopping its bombardment, suddenly facing itself short of targets.

And then the smoke was banished, revealing a lone figure marching before a line of Space Marines and thousands of mutants.

The armour was cracked and the blue-gold theme difficult to recognise, but there was no doubt it was the cowardly child whose sorcerers had led so many Legionnaires into the Abominable Temples.

"On my command!" Toramino barked, feeling somehow in danger despite seeing no threat.

"Antwyr? Prove your worth."

"**OBEY!**"

"FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!" Toramino saw the black blade burning in purple flames...and the power hit him like a thousand shells at the same time.

Something in him screamed...and fought.

It was painful...but he was a son of Olympia.

"From Iron, cometh Strength. From Strength, cometh Will. From Will, cometh Faith. From Faith, cometh Honour. From Honour, cometh Iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany, and may it forever be so."

Toramino opened his eyes again, feeling absolutely drained from all his battle-ferocity.

And his stupefaction increased as one by one, the Warsmith saw his Legionnaires, every Astartes of the 235th Grand Battalion that he could see...they were kneeling before the sorceress.

"What...no...Iron is stronger than...release them. RELEASE THEM!"

"You missed one, Antwyr."

"**This one was marked as a sacrifice, oh Majestryx. I think someone thought his blood would make him the perfect candidate to wield me**."

"Would it have worked?"

"**No**."

"Well, someone*'s* trying to innovate I guess. Ax'senaea, be a dear and neutralise this imbecile."

There was a flash of blue, and Toramino's senses erupted in pain...then everything was darkness.

**The Ind Cluster**

**Maharashtra System**

**Battleship *Terminus Est***

**8.100.311M35**

**Typhus** **the Traveller**

The *Terminus* *Est* was still several million kilometres away, but the explosion was rather impressive to observe.

Especially when it was followed by two others in close succession.

"The Heavy Cruiser *Barbican* has been destroyed, Lord Herald. The second death was likely the Cruiser *Determined Attrition*."

"Acknowledged." Typhus took several minutes before making his observations known. "Either the weapons of the leader of the Malfian forces function incorrectly, or she is blowing up the warships she doesn't have the manpower to crew."

"My assessment is that it is the latter, Lord Herald. We have all treated mortal slaves like Bolter-Fodder at one time or another, but the Iron Warriors are far worse than us in this regard. And the Graveyard must have bled them heavily."

"Hmm...a sound reasoning, Captain." Typhus examined the data several buzzing drones brought him, before concluding his subordinate was most likely right. "What did the creator of the Malfi Warp Crown get away with?"

"One Repulsive-class Grand Cruiser, identified as the *Master of Xanthiar*. One Bombardment Galleon, identified as the *Charon's Will*. Two Heavy Cruisers, the *Menelaus* and the *Orestes*. The..."

All in all, fifteen capital ships had been captured by the girl who had chosen the sorceress name of Malicia.

Even by the standard of the Legion Wars, this was truly a one-sided victory.

"Estimates of how many Iron Warriors were convinced to rally her banner?"

"Based on the rotation of orbital transports...between three and four hundred, Lord Herald."

This was really bad news. The sons of Perturabo were foolish in the extreme with their delusional conviction that they could refuse to embrace the Gods and suffer no consequences for their defiance, but no one was going to pretend the siege-experts couldn't wage long wars and inflict devastating casualties while doing so.

"I will have to contact the Death Lord. He must be informed of his brother's meddling, if nothing else."

Typhus had known *someone* was going to do something stupid when it was revealed a certain Tzeentchian sorceress was sailing for Maharashtra, but the Iron Warriors had never been near the top of his list.

Proof that even so-called 'geniuses' could lead their causes to some awful defeats when they ignored some basic facts.

The hours passed.

The newly united fleet of the Sons of Change and the Iron Warriors raced for a Mandeville Point without firing one more shot in anger. Some Legionnaires grumbled, but the expectation had never been that there would be a fight today, and many returned to the cages when they wanted some violence.

The *Terminus Est* placed itself in high orbit of Maharashtra, and the scale of the devastation left by the Fourth Legion was quite considerable. The Graveyard of the False Gods was intact, as mortal weapons were powerless to inflict any significant damage to it, but the weapons of the Iron Warriors had incinerated everything around it, creating a near-perfect circle of sterilised earth.

The Herald of Nurgle didn't like it. Life was to be followed by Death, but between them was the state of Decay, blessed by the Grandfather. This...this was not pleasing. The cycle had been broken. Perturabo's sons had much to answer for.

Fortunately, as Typhus and his Legionnaires approached the ruined walls, it appeared not every son of the Lord of Iron had left with Malicia.

Four had remained behind.

As they were all stuck to the walls by some type of smelly glue spreading a pleasing odour of rot, Typhus acknowledged the insolent child had some potential when it came to the art of delivering results.

"You arrive too late."

"Warsmith Toramino," Typhus gurgled in pleasure. "I thought I had seen your flagship somewhere in this very system. The Lord of Iron must be really desperate to employ such an incompetent Warsmith."

"You don't understand, given how many hours after the battle you arrived!" The armour of Toramino was really exquisite in its manufacturing and decorations. But then this scion of Olympia had always been a prideful bastard. "She found the weapon. She turned my legionnaires against me in an instant. I don't know the name, but I can guarantee you-"

"The name of the weapon is the Black Blade of Antwyr."

Since the Iron Warriors all had their helmets removed, it was a pleasure to see the Warsmith's face turn red with rage.

"You knew? You knew and you let her grab that weapon?"

"Did you not wonder for a single second, my poor Toramino, why you were the only one to oppose the sorceress today? Surely you can't believe your father was the only one to predict her presence here! I assure you I knew the day and the hour she would land on Maharashtra...seven conspirators at Malfi alone informed me when she left."

"You lie!"

"Even the False Emperor and his dogs knew she would come here." Typhus continued, ignoring the pathetic attempt to deny the truth. "Everyone had their plans, my dear Warsmith. And they didn't involve stopping Malicia from claiming the Blade of Antwyr. It is a bit more surprising that she seems to have triumphed over the Blade of Antwyr and prevented Possession for now...but that's nothing that can't be corrected in time."

"That sounds like someone trying to find excuses for when he will return to his Primarch's side...because if you weren't going to claim the Blade of Antwyr, why come here in the first place?"

"I'm so glad you asked that question, Toramino. You see the Graveyard is a fascinating location. It was both the prison and the refuge of the Blade of Antwyr. It is where a thousand False Gods have their last Temples, for once the galaxy is ready to forget them, they can only choose between oblivion and coming here to delay their extinction for a brief period. It is a place where many mad scientists and ambitious warlords experimented upon the souls and bodies of their followers, in hopes of creating invincible armies which would conquer the galaxy. But above all...*the Blade of Antwyr is not the only weapon which was imprisoned here*."

Typhus turned towards the Death Guard Legionnaires who had landed and were waiting in silence behind him.

"I will go into the Graveyard. Only volunteers who have seen the reaper's scythe in their dreams will follow me."

Seventy-six Plague Marines stepped forwards.

"Excellent. The rest of you will wait until my return, be it in seven hours or seventy-seven years."

"Lord Herald...what do you want us to do with the...fallen Warsmith and his three Companions?"

That was, honestly, a very good question.

"The three Legionnaires symbolise the three states we must all enter at some point: Life, Death, and Decay. Give them the choice every member of our Legion was given."

"Perturabo will kill you, Typhus!"

"As for the so-called 'Warsmith'," the Herald of Nurgle added with a gurgle, "The Grandfather is very displeased about his actions. His part in this story must end here and now."

Seven Harvesters, the blessed Power Scythes of the Legion, were raised.

Toramino began to insult them.

The Harvesters fell.

Typhus suddenly felt in a far better mood as he stepped through one of the enormous holes the Iron Warriors' siege engines had created in the walls of Maharashtra.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**High Orbit above Holy Terra**

**Apocalypse-class Battleship *Thunder of the God-Emperor***

**0.101.311M35**

**Lord** **High Admiral of the Imperial Navy Rabadash y Byng el Calormen**

Rabadash had woken up in a pleasant mood this morning.

He had spent a pleasant evening with two of his favourite Concubines dining and listening to the latest musical creations of some popular singers, which had been followed by even more pleasurable activities.

This was following on top of the last days which had seen bad news disappear from the reports. The Obscurus Sectors which had been targeted by the destroyed Black Crusade had been purged or liberated, depending the magnitude of the corruption problem, and many of the Battlefleets he had been forced to deploy were returning to their bases in Segmentum Solar. All the agitation on Terra and near the Throneworld from the plebeians was returning to manageable levels. The political gains from the latest campaigns were consolidating the political power of the Imperial Navy among the Senatorum Imperialis nicely...his power was growing, and his seat among the High Twelve would not be contested anytime soon.

The good news continued this morning at breakfast. His First Wife had taken a holiday to some Paradise World. As a result, everything was an oasis of peace and calm. Some of his favourite foods had also arrived from the Agri-World of...well, Rabadash didn't remember the name, but the food and drinks were absolutely delicious.

Yes, there were days it was good to be the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy.

As per his schedule, his chief of staff entered a minute later.

"Three major conferences today, my Lord."

Rabadash quickly nodded, abandoning his cookies covered in mulberry jelly for a few minutes.

"The first is about the settlement of that lamentable affair on Shangri-La IV, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, my Lord. Pure stupidity in my opinion."

"I agree." When there were contracts to tell you to build a fuel depot for the Imperial Navy, you built a fuel depot. There may be some funding which needed to be given here and there, but you certainly didn't pocket money that belonged to the Imperial Navy and then 'forget' to work! "These bastards will all be executed slowly if I have it my way. The second conference?"

"Several Admirals have pushed for a change in our Destroyer doctrine, with the fame new classes like *Warrior* and *Hoplite* have gained in recent years."

"I don't see why not," Rabadash said before correcting himself, "as long as we can build these new classes in our shipyards of Segmentum Solar."

Much like the plebeians had to stay in their Emperor-ordained place for the Imperium to work as it should, Kar Duniash, Cypra Mundi, Bakka and Hydraphur had to stay in theirs so that Terra could get the lion's share of the most profitable contracts.

"The third conference?"

"The matter of the infighting to decide which classes of Battleships will be built in the next decades is nowhere near decided, I'm afraid."

This time Rabadash y Byng el Calormen grimaced.

"I suppose it was too much to hope that new candidates haven't brought new designs and ideas." The silence of his chief of staff was rather eloquent by itself. "Fantastic."

The new flights of Victory-class Battleships had been met with a lot of satisfaction by hundreds of Admirals when it began to enter service three decades ago.

Alas, contrary to what the Navy's propaganda had tried to make everyone believe, the Victory-class was not the replacement he had chosen for the ageing Apocalypse class, which was in dire need of a successor, given how many had been built during the Great Crusade.

"Certain parties from Zion have proposed a new class."

Rabadash snorted.

"Their previous creation, the Zion class," he couldn't help but snort a second time, "is the equivalent of Kisher's Battlecruisers, only bigger. I don't care if the one who designed them is the cousin of the High Lord of the Administratum, we are not going to build hundreds of Battleships which will be as resistant as a Destroyer in a conventional void battle."

It was an exaggeration...but alas, not a big one.

"I was far more impressed with the prototype that was sent three months ago. Now that is a Battleship worthy of the name. Who was the Admiral who came to recommend it?"

"I am afraid I don't really remember," his chief of staff admitted. "He's one of the scions from those big dynasties from northern Solar, I believe, but-"

A loud thrill came from the device his subordinate had placed on his breakfast table, and Rabadash sighed. The urge was there to complain...but most of the alerts that were allowed to pass into his private quarters unimpeded were the urgent kind.

"What is it?"

"Lord High Admiral...a Custodes ship has just translated into the Sol System. According to our contacts...it came straight from Macragge. The Primarch Leman Russ is aboard."

Rabadash opened his mouth to tell his chief of staff not to be ridiculous. Macragge was in the Eastern Fringe or right on its doorstep – there were multiple schools of bureaucrats fighting over the subject, no doubt – and a starship couldn't travel between the homeworld of the Ultramarines and the Throneworld in so little time.

But the grey-haired officer didn't withdraw his words.

And Rabadash shivered.

A Primarch was here.

And they were not ready.

Nothing, be it on the political front or...well, everything, was ready to oppose him.

"Warn the other members of the High Twelve! Now!"

**Imperial Palace**

**The Lion's Gate Spaceport**

**0.120.311M35**

**Lord** **Militant Commander Paul von Oberstein**

If this week was not the busiest Paul had in his career so far, then the Lord Militant Commander had no idea which week was supposed to beat it.

The *de jure* commanding officer of the Imperial Guard had known battles were exhausting.

They didn't compare to what he and his men had been on the receiving end on these last days.

As one could expect knowing the reality of how things worked in the Sol System, hundreds of millions of men and women had been aware the Primarch had arrived within the hour.

The proverb that it was only possible to keep a secret on Holy Terra if everyone involved was dead had been confirmed in every way which mattered...again.

And once people really began to consider the implications, thousands of starships had begun to race back to the Throneworld. They were merely the first drops of water before the flood, of course.

And after a few hours...pilgrims and Terrans eager not to miss this unique historical moment had a new goal: be as close as possible to the Lion's Gate Spaceport when the Primarch landed.

There had been riots. There had been millions of tickets sold for an event that had not been organised by Imperial authorities. People had married in front of the Spaceport, and people had died. Markets had flourished, half of the shops selling 'relics' and clothes that were ridiculously expensive and that the Ecclesiarchy had vigorously denounced.

No one had anticipated this. Maybe they should have, but the Primarch's arrival had been supposed to be months away, and the High Twelve had still been trying to assimilate the consequences of the victory won at Macragge.

In the end, Paul von Oberstein had had to deploy his troops to restore some order after the third day when two 'mobs' of pilgrims – each were the size of a proper Army Group – had come to blows in the Lion's Gate Spaceport.

This had brought some temporarily reprieve, but now the Lord Militant Commander's greatest desire was for this entire affair to end. Paul had been forced to station nearly ten million guardsmen in the immediate vicinity of the Spaceport because the Arbites had proved they couldn't do their job, and while they were there they couldn't be deployed away from Sol, onto battlefields where their real purpose was.

"At least the High Twelve honoured you, Lord Militant."

Paul sighed.

"It isn't an honour, Colonel. It's just that most of them think the Primarch is going to kill them on the spot, so better to test if that is true or not by sending someone that can be sacrificed."

"Ah."

"No agitation for now?"

"No. Or at least not above the levels we have come to consider 'normal' yesterday."

That wasn't what Paul wanted to hear, but since it wasn't in his power to change it, better to go with it and hope for the best.

The Lord Militant Commander left his super-heavy tank. Instantly, the technological marvels of the Mechanicus stopped shielding him from the noise, and it was like hearing multiple artillery brigades firing all at once...except unlike the guns, the thunderous roars never ended.

Paul exhaled. A good thing he had not brought his faithful Pilou here. His poor companion would have been traumatised by the noise.

And the crowds...the High Lord commanding the Imperial Guard really had no words to describe it. There were billions assembled on the Tropophex, the lowest level of the Lion's Gate Spaceport. It was the biggest and the largest part. It had the bulk of the landing pads. It was, as befitted an important centre of trade and cargo transport, ridiculously large.

It was nearly impossible to distinguish where the statues of the First Primarch and all the leonine animal representations were placed. There were men, women, and children as far as his eyes could discern. All the main pilgrim congregations which currently held the favour of the Ecclesiarchy were present, colouring several sections in unique combinations of colour.

And then the real explosion of noise came, for bronze-painted gates built to let Titans pass through opened.

The crowd went delirious...and Paul could not help but chuckle, for the High Twelve were not going to like that at all.

There were hundreds of them. They were tall and their howls convinced millions of pilgrims to immediately shut up.

Paul von Oberstein had seen many Space Marines lately. He had yet to find another Chapter that played the 'barbarian warrior' stereotype better than the Space Wolves of the now defunct world of Fenris.

They wore furs, pelts, amulets, and many trophies of bone. There were some who carried fangs or claws of some enormous super-predator.

But even if they had not, the hirsute long beards and hair were intensifying the savagery of their expressions.

Many armies of the Imperium were not what Terra would call 'civilised', and the Space Wolves were proudly demonstrating it today.

"This wasn't part of what was intended!" A Lord General snarled next to him, and he had to shout to make himself heard in the tumult of cheers and other acclamations. "They were supposed to stay in orbit!"

"Why don't you go tell them that?" Paul retorted, counting the Space Marines as he spoke.

After a good minute, he arrived to an approximate number of six hundred and forty. That was a very reasonable number for a Space Marine Chapter...until you considered that only three Great Companies of the sons of Russ had had time to reach Terra so far.

And Paul von Oberstein knew from Lady Weaver's messages that before she left for Baal, there were approximately two hundred Astartes protecting *The Fang* in the realm of Ultramar.

Conclusion: accounting for the Companies that had yet to materialise, the Space Wolves still had more Astartes than the average Chapter should have, even after suffering catastrophic losses.

Everything became unimportant, however, as the Wolves took position before his guardsmen...and as figures appeared in the distance, the six hundred-plus Astartes all kneeled.

They all kneeled, as an ancient Dreadnought holding in his gigantic claw the banner of the Chapter marched proudly, and for all the exclamations, the noise began to be more bearable as billions fell silent.

For behind the Dreadnought, there was a Primarch.

There strode Leman Russ in person.

Paul von Oberstein could clearly see the effect the Demigod had upon his troops. The Lucifer Blacks knelt without order, and their comrades of the other regiments bent the knee or saluted before kneeling.

In this they did better than billions of pilgrims. The majority simply prostrated themselves. Tens of millions cried.

And the Primarch continued to advance.

The closer he came, the more Paul realised how right the High Twelve were to be scared of the Wolf King.

He was a Lord of Winter and War.

He was the Barbarian King fighting at the frontiers you hoped to never see return in your lifetime.

He was the Axe which severed necks and limbs, the Hunter in the snow, and the Killer in the middle of the night.

He was terrible and uncivilised.

And he was here.

"Lord Russ. Welcome to Terra."

And then the Wolves began to truly howl around them...

**Approaches of the Lion's Gate**

**Primarch** **Leman Russ**

"I DON'T LIKE IT, JARL. THE PLANET IS DEAD, AND THEY ALL WORSHIP HIM."

Any other time, Russ would have howled in laughter at Bjorn's remark.

Today he didn't...not when billions of human were prostrating themselves and seemed ready to polish the ground his armoured feet were walking upon.

The guardsmen and the Space Marines present kneeling? That at least was somewhat understandable. During the Great Crusade and the years after that, a meeting where someone wasn't allowed to prepare for his presence had many times begun in this fashion. And had they done it simply as a gesture of respect, the Lord of the Sixth Legion wouldn't find it that bad.

But the prayers? The mindless worship? The religious Priests?

No, he didn't like those at all.

Leman had thought this part of the celebrations in the Macragge System had been bad.

He would have to apologise to several people, including Weaver. As a matter of fact, the religious issues encountered during his stay in the realm of Ultramar weren't bad at all when you compared them to this...this mess.

"The planet is not dead." Bjorn had to be corrected, for that was the truth. Terra had been cruelly wounded by Horus and the monsters he had sold his soul to, and the millennia which had passed since had not helped the planet to recover.

But the world was enduring. It was not yet dead. There was still hope.

But the damage...

"I notice, Lord, you didn't say anything about the worship."

Leman turned his head to look at the Lord Militant Commander. The Custodes had of course given him some information about the High Lord of the Imperial Guard, but there was no substitute to meeting someone face to face.

To be honest, the Sixth Primarch was a bit surprised a man like Paul von Oberstein had accepted to serve on 'Holy Terra' for so long. Everyone had his share of shadows, but there were only so many of them you could consider to embrace as part of your duties.

"I am not saying anything about it," Leman grumbled, "because I find it utterly ridiculous. My father was a man. I proved it when I defeated him in an eating and drinking contest."

The black-uniformed officer coughed loudly as the enormous tank they were riding towards the Lion's Gate was applauded by hundreds of millions...each of their moves recorded and broadcast across the planet by an absurd number of public-address plates.

"Err...the tales don't recount it that way, Lord."

"WHY THE HELL NOT?" Bjorn asked. "IT WAS A MIGHTY FINE SAGA IN ITS OWN RIGHT! OF COURSE OUR JARL LOST THE THIRD TRIAL, THE EMPEROR BEAT HIM LIKE A DRUM AND DELIVERED BLOWS A TITAN WOULDN'T HAVE EQUALLED, BUT THAT IS LIFE! THE YOUNG PUPS STILL REMEMBER IT! THEY SANG IT TO ME BEFORE WE SAILED FOR THIS DEPRESSING SPECTACLE!"

"Many things have been forgotten...Lord," the High Lord of the Imperial Guard remarked grimly, superbly ignoring the crowd as the immense batteries of the Lion's Gate were revealed one by one. "For you, the Siege felt like it was yesterday. For us, it was millennia ago...and not even our grandfathers' grandfathers were around when the skies of Terra burned in the fires of war for the last time."

"At least you had the good sense to build powerful orbital batteries." Leman approved after observing the enormous guns and the neat ranks of hundreds of thousands of soldiers waiting immobile on the different parts of the fortified defences. "My brother Rogal would likely be horrified by all the ridiculous decorations you shaped the stone with, but I am far more pragmatic than he was."

"According to the Lord High Admiral, Holy Terra is impregnable."

What the hell had happened to call the world 'Holy'? It was ugliness shown to the entire cosmos...oh, right, his father was here, and they considered him a God. They were truly swimming in a sea of stupidity.

At least Leman could howl in laughter. It was an apt retort to this declaration.

"No, Lord Militant Commander." The Lord of the Vlka Fenryka bared his teeth. "This world is not impregnable. Your capable subordinate I met at Macragge is largely capable of taking this system without my advice. My brother Roboute can take this system with the might of Ultramar at his back. I can take this system, though not by limiting the collateral damage. My brother Corax...can likely take this system too, though likely he would need far more than time than us. You don't have the Space Marines to defend it, and you don't have adequate walls except around the Sanctum Imperialis."

Something that, if he was honest with himself, worried him a lot. The Sons of Horus had been famous for their decapitation strikes long before they turned Traitor.

"JARL. THE CUSTODES ARE HERE."

"I saw them, Bjorn."

"DO YOU WANT ME TO SEE IF THEY'RE READY FOR SOME LIGHT EXERCISE?"

Leman Russ growled in amusement. And some claimed it was *he* who was setting a bad example for the Vlka Fenryka.

"The Captain-General is here," Paul von Oberstein noted. "I advise against fighting your way in...especially given how ecstatic the crowd is. It wouldn't take much to spark riots here."

"I am not blind."

Leman jumped from the tank, and went to salute the Custodes who had replaced Valdor. That is, if anyone could really replace someone like Valdor.

"Captain-General."

"Lord Russ. By his will, I ask you formally to relinquish your two prisoners into my custody."

Leman turned towards the two large grey prison-transports which had been modified to carry Magnus and Fulgrim's body along with a heavy security guard.

"They are yours."

The Captain-General nodded and gave a series of orders. The Custodes marched towards the transports, which his sons evacuated promptly.

"I want to speak with *him*."

"You will. But not today." The tone made clear enough it wasn't negotiable. "You will meet the High Lords first."

"Something I've wanted to do for many days," Leman allowed himself a smile.

"And you're not authorised to kill any of the High Twelve," the commander of the Adeptus Custodes promptly added.

"YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE SAID THAT," Bjorn amicably informed the golden-clad warrior, the traitor...

**Inner Sanctum**

**Hall of Victories**

**Speaker** **for the Chartists Captains Aliénor Gutenberg**

The decision to wait for the Primarch in the Hall of Victories had been reached in a mere twenty-four hours.

It was, and everyone around the table knew it, far too quick.

No common strategy had been adopted; there was far too little time to agree on anything between the High Twelve, something that rarely happened anyway even when the subject was non-controversial.

And so they waited here, in the heart of the museum displaying Mankind's greatest technological achievements.

There had been no real time to compile what they knew about the Primarch of the Space Wolves save what a low-level Adept could learn in a few minutes. Inquiries had been made, investigations launched, but the early arrival had caught all of them flat-footed.

They had only faint ideas of what the son of the God-Emperor's goals were.

They had-

Aliénor sniffed cautiously.

"It is troubling, but...I am smelling...food?" It was a pleasant aroma, some sort of fried meat, and her stomach chose to remind her that for the last several hours, her sustenance had been limited to pure water. A privilege many citizens were ready to kill for on Terra, but it wasn't helping you fulfil your duties.

"Forget the smell of food," Tudor Brezhnev grouchily replied. "There must be a restaurant for the pilgrims near the Hall of Victories. What we must speak of is how the Wolves challenged our command. They walked on the sacred soil of Holy Terra without our approval! This is the opportunity we've been waiting for!"

Jakov Balevolio sniggered, his third eye hidden today by an expensive eye-patch of some psychic blocker presenting the appearance of black silk.

"I'm so glad you find it so amusing, Paternal Envoy."

"I'm sorry, but have you seen the crowds outside praising the name of Russ?" The Navigator mocked the Grand Marshal. "Try to arrest a single Wolf and the crowd will storm the headquarters of the Adeptus Arbites."

"This is utter nonsense," Tudor Brezhnev's voice began to increase in volume, and anger was evident for the first time. "I have everything under control and-"

"MY FRIENDS!"

He was here. The Primarch was here.

And with him...

Wait, why were there dozen of cooks?

Why...what...was happening?

"To you, my friend, I offer this sublime Mammoth Carpet!" Arch-Cardinal Terran Salomon Rovere had jumped from his throne-chair, and was hugging the Primarch like they had been raised together.

A barrel of expensive mead was opened before them, and before two thoughts arrived in her head, Aliénor had emptied something like five cups of it.

"MY FRIENDS, TO VICTORY!"

"TO VICTORY!"

The Speaker for the Chartist Captains felt like it was a waking dream...did the Primarch kiss her hand like a gentleman before offering the pelt of an enormous bear pelt to wear as a coat?

Did the Mistress of the Astronomican receive an enormous set of bones with brilliant golden carved sigils?

Was Xerxes Vandire given a sort of strange helmet in the shape of a spider?

They were...dreaming. Surely it was just a dream!

"BRING MORE MEAD AND SUPERB MEALS! SOME OF US ARE STARVING! BJORN, DON'T STAY SILENT LIKE THAT! SING US ONE OF YOUR SAGAS!"

Musicians began to play, and the Hall of Victories' heart began to be covered in amulets, an authentic chimney was built, and enormous pieces of venison were brought in.

There was too much alcohol...too much food...

There was too much...everything...

"MY FRIENDS! ANOTHER TOAST!"

"A TOAST!"

"TO VICTORY!"

The Primarch was speaking, but it seemed to be...so far away...was he eating something the size of a grox by himself?

"It seems we have enjoyed the good old Fenrisian delicacies a bit too much, my friend? All in favour of adjourning the next session until tomorrow?"

"AYE!"

**The Imperial Palace**

**The Golden Throne**

**Primarch** **Magnus the Red**

There was enough psychic energy at the entrance of the Imperial Dungeon to banish a horde of Neverborn in a second.

Magnus may have lost his psychic powers, but there was no need to have them to see the golden mist which was an integral part of the air.

And with every step the Fifteenth Primarch took, it became worse.

It was not that the Custodes and himself were trying to avoid the consequences of breathing these projections.

That was impossible when you were more or less swimming in a sea of golden power.

And no, this wasn't good news.

While Magnus couldn't exactly do a proper examination without his talents, the Lord of long-gone Prospero was ready to bet this was the result of quadrillions of humans praying to his father.

It was said that faith could move mountains.

Magnus would humbly say that in this galaxy, it could entirely remodel reality.

This was the power of belief.

And it was changing the Imperial Dungeon and everything it contained.

In many futures that the Crimson King had watched come to fruition, this would have awful consequences. When quadrillions of souls believed and prayed for a corpse-like entity on a Golden Throne, the consequences were exactly what one might expect.

Today this future had little chance of happening.

Reality nonetheless changed as the progression continued.

Magnus saw angelic Legionnaires stand silently in disciplined formations, an Honour Guard watching over the Lord of the Imperium.

There were flowers falling in cascades, but no matter how many there were, they vanished as they touched the marble floor.

There were many things which shivered and materialised before blinking out of existence. Magnus thought he saw enormous cats and spiders, watching each other dutifully on each side of the never-ending avenue.

And the power rose to new heights. The walk was not over, and Magnus had to breathe harder. Not to the point it was really dolorous...but enough to estimate that men who lacked enough determination would collapse and likely suffer massive health problems in mere seconds.

In this area where the golden mist was law, the Custodes seemed to be the only real things one could take for granted.

Magnus was a bit amazed by the Companions' resistance, honestly.

Staying in the Imperial Dungeon for several minutes was not exactly easy for him, and though he did not have some of the gifts the Custodes were given when they were created, Magnus had some they lacked.

And staying so close to the Golden Throne...it demanded your entire physical and mental strength, no matter how regularly you rotated the Companions.

Yes, the golden power could not change them like it changed the other visitors...but the blackened armours proved that Anathema-empowered flames could definitely *burn*.

The Golden Throne finally came into view. Gold and gold, each part of the edifice had been distorted by the prayers and the sacrifices of billions of psykers.

It was exactly everything the early Imperium had thrived to eradicate.

The Captain-General said something.

Magnus wasn't able to hear the words.

He walked.

*And suddenly the air is less oppressive*.

*The scenery is completely different.*

*There is still a great golden castle, but it is on the horizon.*

*All around, there is a sea.*

*He is on an island.*

*Magnus hears the birds singing.*

*He hears the roar of an immense cascade.*

*There is a long pier made of wood.*

*Magnus walks upon it, and soon enough, he sees an armchair at the edge of the pier.*

*It contemplates...ah, the cascade. Everything around the golden castle and this small island is a cascade.*

*Seated in the armchair is an old man. Magnus does not look upon most of the terrible injuries that seem to have received bandages and medical treatment recently. No, his attention is on a black eye-patch covering the right eye of the old man.*

"*Just for the record," the Fifteenth Primarch says, "Leman has already claimed every part of the Norse mythology for himself."*

*There is no immediate answer...but two big ravens begin to circle over their heads, before landing on each shoulder.*

"*Odin. The All-Father. Seriously?"*

"*Magnus. My son. Do you really think your attempts to present yourself as a sort of star-gazing Librarian-Pharaoh have escaped my attention?"*

*He has wondered for a long time if his father kept the ability to silence him with a few words. He has his answer.*

"*No, I suppose not."*

*There is no long speech, no loud accusations.*

*Magnus would almost prefer for there to be.*

"*I am sorry. I...ruined a lot of things. The Webway. The Edicts as you intended them to be."*

"*Are you apologising because they mattered to me, my son, or because you are sorry to see them in ruins?"*

"*To be honest...far more the former than the latter, father. I understand you did what you thought was best for Mankind...but I wouldn't have supported it."*

"*Well..." the Emperor contemplates* *the water flowing around them for several seconds. "That's indeed honest, my son."*

*His father for several seconds looks very tired and his eyes are lost gazing at something in the distance. The ravens fly away.*

"*In return I am going to be equally honest. While the destruction of the Imperial Webway was indeed your fault, you not acting like you did would in all likelihood not have saved it. The wards were keyed to my blood, a necessary precaution to avoid some of the most problematic sabotages of the parasites of the Warp."*

"*Ah. So as long as one of us turned Traitor...the Imperial Webway could have been destroyed in its infancy." Magnus winces...and then pushes onwards. "That's quite a flaw, father."*

"*I was, in many ways, trying to build a new Webway without the blueprint and not a single one of the original architects to help me. Flaws were unavoidable. I did not expect this one to be exploited so easily."*

"*Some might say...that if you had trusted us far more...plenty of bad things would have been avoided."*

"*Really?" This time, Magnus is sure his father is sarcastic.*

"*Really."*

"*So when I told you certain disciplines of the Warp were off-limits for you and your Legion, when I gave you several important hints that there were things psykers were to avoid at all costs...you would have listened to my commands and respected them in the spirit they were given?"*

"*That...that is not the same thing!"*

"*Is it, my son?" To his surprise, his father sighs. "When I found each of you, you were still terribly young, for all your apparent adult bodies. I wasn't the one to raise you. I wasn't the one to tell you how terrible and beautiful this galaxy can be. But I could be honest with my sons. Trust and truth would be met by truth and trust. With every reason you gave me that you understood the problems I was facing, information and trust would have been given."*

"*Revelation after revelation...it sounds a bit like the approach the sons of the Lion have for some things."*

"*In many ways, it is. In many other ways, it isn't."*

*The former Lord of Prospero does not need long to arrive at a conclusion.*

"*Some of us would never have accepted that." In fact, the more he thinks about it...the more Magnus is certain many of those who rallied Horus' banner would never have accepted this approach for the Warp and the Imperial Webway.*

"*Indeed."*

*The Emperor seems in pain for a moment as his face pales...the moment passes, and the 'Allfather' appears to regain some strength.*

"*I promised myself I would raise you like my sons. My own flesh and blood. As long as you weren't corrupted by the parasites...you were my sons. I committed countless mistakes in my long life, who was I to order someone to not make any errors?"*

"*And that's why you saved Angron...without his companions." Magnus knows this is a dangerous topic to tread. "In my humble opinion, it would have been more merciful to kill him."*

"*Unfortunately you are right. His companions were already falling to the embrace of Chaos. I couldn't save them, and even if I did, Butcher's Nails always make sure the life of an unaugmented human is incredibly short. I could not foresee where Angron's hatred would lead...too much was clouded from me."*

"*But you knew it could come."*

"*I thought that given the proper funding, some method to remove the Butcher's Nails could be found. I was wrong."*

*And in the meantime, the Twelfth Legion decided to go with the Butcher's Nails too, becoming more and more a rampaging horde of crazy butchers.*

They *must have laughed a lot ruining the plans of his father.*

"*What now? Am I of no use to you without my psychic talents? Are you going to kill me?"*

"*Some would say you deserve it, my son," Magnus grimaces, "but I am willing to forgive, if not forget. Understand me clearly however: if for any reason, you betray me again, the moment I become aware of it there will be many Custodes ready to end your life."*

"*I understand."*

"*And as part of your punishment...you are going to tidy up and classify my library."*

"*Oh? That isn't much of a punishment-"*

"*Not that library; the one only accessible by the Hall of Leng. The one that you, my son, snuck into the moment Malcador and I had our backs turned."*

*Magnus grimaces. Ah yes, that library...and suddenly he clearly remembers the...lack of organisation of it. To be polite.*

"*I'm not one to complain...but can't I trade my punishment with Leman?"*

"*Out of the question! He is going to be punished too. When I commanded him to negotiate with the High Lords, I didn't mean for him to organise a massive Fenrisian style feast and get them drunk until they couldn't remember their own names!"*

"*Ouch." It is not something that is going to increase the productivity of the High Lords to be sure. "Well, after much deliberation, I accept my punishment, father."*

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Morwen System**

**Battleship *Drethuchii***

**8.128.311M35**

**The** **Blood Muse**

Every time she closed her eyes, the nightmare returned.

*There is a great throne of brass, atop a mountain of bleached skulls.*

*Next to it is a lake of blood.*

*Around it war is raging.*

*It never stopped since the War in Heaven lit the inferno, and it will not stop unless the living species which inhabit this galaxy will know to accept true peace.*

*The war is raging.*

*But at the feet of the mountain of skulls, two creatures of destruction attract everyone's gaze.*

*They are mighty, these monsters.*

*They are mere parts of the being which watches from the Skull Throne, but their individualities and songs of murder have echoed across millions of stars.*

*One is called the Angel's Bane. The other is the Skull Lord of Doom.*

*They are fighting for the right to claim a skull.*

*They are fighting for dominance.*

*They are fighting because they can't even contemplate a choice which doesn't involve violence.*

*And so war is raging.*

*Sometimes the two monsters get too close to the mountain of skulls.*

*When that happens, the Guardian strikes them, and the battle temporarily moves away.*

*She uses the opportunity to crawl away.*

*It is in vain.*

*The thing that is waiting on the Throne of Skulls is watching.*

"***You will serve me. Fail, and your skull will join my throne****.* ***Remember: Blood is the Key****."*

*The lake of blood grows in size.*

*Armies scream in fury.*

*And a meteor appears above the endless battlefield.*

*The Slaughter Hosts begin to scream a name*...

And Hekatii opened her eyes, gasping for air.

"Mistress?"

"Get out!" The Succubus Queen of Clar Karond ordered.

The black-skinned wretches that had succumbed to the Blood God immediately fled.

"Weak..." The Blood Muse commented as she swam to the edge of her blood bath before climbing out and seizing the carmine towels waiting for her. "I am too weak."

For long seconds, Hekatii meditated, trying to notice the tiniest detail of her visions that could give her a chance to escape.

But there was nothing.

"Blood is the Key, yes. But what does it really mean? Opening the ziggurats of the Builders is nothing in the grand scheme of things. Many Aeldari looted some in their lifetimes. Offering their souls to a Power is not something that will give great boons or change the outcome of a war."

And here she had thought long ago that the brute atop his Throne of Skulls was fundamentally unable to make complicated plans.

On this like in many things, she had been dead wrong.

"The problem is the creature falling like a meteor." The nightmarish vision made her shiver. "It was once a Demigod, but now, it is just rage and violence incarnate."

There were very few opponents the former Apprentice of the Queen of Blades doubted her chances of victory against, be they part of the galactic empires vying for supremacy or the Great Game of the Primordial Annihilator.

That abomination was definitely one.

Hekatii frowned as the doors pivoted again without her permission.

Through the opening, one of the 'Space Marines' appeared.

It would be oh so tempting to decapitate him and add his blood to her bath.

Tempting...but likely not worth the trouble. For now.

A click of her fingers, and a long blood robe covered her body.

"We have arrived in the Morwen System."

"I know, stupid primate." There were days she felt courteous enough not to insult these bloodthirsty brutes. Today was not one of them. "Speak fast and begone. I have a sudden urge to impale your two hearts and then proceed to ritualistic exsanguinations above my bath."

"Do you think the Warlord will let you-"

Hekatii moved, and the brute didn't see her. A heartbeat, and her fingers were around her enemy's throat.

"She would have to accept it, I think. And you forget the ugly truth: our enslaver does not care whose blood flows, only that it does."

Hekatii released the brute, throwing it against one of her doors. The sound was...oddly satisfying.

"And here I thought we were stupid falling for the lies of Slaanesh...it's just pathetic. No wonder the Lord of War wanted me on your side...if my Empress accepted either my allegiance or my body, she would have been unstoppable."

"Argh! You...just because you bask with this...why...aren't you cursed like the other Kaelari?"

Hekatii inclined her head and bared her teeth.

"Look at that. For the first time, the primate asks an interesting question." She grinned. "The Empress' curse requires two things. First, the Aeldari must swear allegiance, voluntarily or not, to a facet of the Primordial Annihilator. Second, the Aeldari must be less powerful than the Empress. If one of these conditions isn't met, the skin doesn't turn into a shade between ugly grey and dark black."

"You're more powerful than the Destroyer of Commorragh?"

Actually, she was not. By her best battle-analysis of the visions she had been granted, Hekatii knew the young Empress that her former Mistress had approved of was roughly at the same level as she was...though her predilection would be in long-range attacks, unlike her.

Still, it was amusing that the brute had never considered the possibility Hekatii had never sworn allegiance to the Skull Throne.

She wasn't taking her baths in this blood pool because she had enjoyed it too much while everyone called her 'Red Crone'.

The Blood Muse was taking blood baths because it was her leash.

"Your doubts about my strength are really disappointing. I have killed many duellists for far lesser reasons."

"Maybe if you gave a demonstration of this might, we might take you seriously."

Hekatii sighed...and then used her Haemokinesis.

Eight spikes were shaped from the blood of her bath, and they impaled the brute before it had any opportunity to react.

It was a mockery of the number of the Skull Throne, yes.

Blood flowed.

"The *Conqueror*...will...find..."

"You really know nothing, *primate*." Hekatii shook her head. "I am not afraid of the Blood Rose. While the Skull Throne forges her into something redoubtable, I can fight her. No, what I fear is going to the warzone you call the Calyx Hell Stars."

A life ended.

And so her next words arrived at the ears of a corpse.

"I fear the wrath of the Red Angel."

**Author's note**:

The Tyranny Interlude Arc will continue in the next chapter, which is tentatively titled *Tyranny 12-2 Gods and Tyrants.*

There will be many scenes on Holy Terra as always, where a court-martial is about to begin. This second Interlude will also see many scenes in the Nyx Sector. Macragge and other planets will be visited.

But as the fires of the Black Crusade are dying down, the war is escalating in the Calyx Hell Stars.

In the words of Warmaster Horus, Let the Galaxy Burn...

Until next time, readers.

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

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption