**Tyranny 12.2**

**(Interlude)**

**Gods and Tyrants**

*I have returned, father.*

*Are you surprised?*

*You shouldn't be.*

*If there is one trait you gave to every one of your sons, it is undoubtedly your stubbornness.*

*In my case, I inherited your stubbornness to survive.*

*It was barely enough.*

*You took everything from me, father.*

*You broke my rituals. You unleashed your full might to destroy my plans. You crippled the preparations I had made across my domains.*

*And then you sent Russ and his Wolves.*

*My strength was crippled; my Legion in disarray. I stood no chance against your Executioner.*

*My defeat was inevitable. While I never had the precognitive talents of Sanguinius and Curze, I didn't need them as I was outnumbered three-to-one.*

*It didn't matter. I had sworn a vow when you stopped my Ascension.*

*And for this vow to be accomplished, I had to survive. In order to do that, I had to fake my death.*

*This was a critical problem. I knew your orders would include the retrieval of my body, and you would not be fooled by a convincing fake.*

*This meant that my corpse indeed had to be abandoned for the hunt to end.*

*But the soul...the soul was different.*

*My soul had survived the ritual you broke. In fact, my soul and sorcery talent flourished after my body was crippled.*

*The solution was as simple as it was elegant. I made a pact with one of those absurdly pretentious creatures that call themselves daemons. In exchange for several favours, I consented to invite an inferior slime into my body. I never bothered to tell this stupid entity that the Possession would start when Russ barged into my throne room and threw himself at me.*

*My body died. My soul survived.*

*But you did something blasphemous, father.*

*You took everything from me. My name. My Legion's name. My history. My triumphs.*

*You took everything there was to know about me, and you reduced it to ash and nothingness.*

*I lost all my names when you erased them.*

*I was nothing.*

*I was weak, weaker than the weakest daemon, and what was left of me was lost in the currents of the Sea of Souls.*

*I was soon devoured by one of the uncountable predators making the Immaterium their home.*

*But something happened, something neither the daemon nor me expected.*

*My name being obliterated ensured the entity couldn't properly digest me.*

*It couldn't destroy my soul and erase me from existence.*

*It couldn't vanquish me, but the same didn't apply where I was concerned. I acted like a parasite, a malicious tumour, one that the daemon was unable to expel or suppress.*

*It was a constant struggle, but after an eternity I* *had complete mastery of the essence. The daemon superficially looked the same from the outside, as I had taken great care to preserve the outer shell.*

*At long last, I could have a name. I could begin to claw back everything you took from me.*

*I could be the King in Yellow.*

*I could begin the true trials that would restore the power that was rightfully mine.*

*And now I have returned...Emperor.*

*Remember what I swore to you when you broke my rituals and my ambitions on that fateful day?*

***Eternity*** *will be mine, or there will be no eternity.*

*What would you say if you still had the ability to communicate with me despite the distance separating us? That the beings you call parasites are going to cripple me, much like they crippled you?*

*If you think so, prepare to be disappointed...Emperor.*

*I am the King in Yellow.*

*I am going to defeat the parasites and the miserable wretches they have enslaved...the things I was once forced to call 'brothers'.*

*I am going to create the first realm of* ***Eternity*** *in the Calyx Hell Stars.*

*And then it will be your turn.*

**Somewhere between the Warp and the Materium**

**The Tyrant Star**

Thought for the day: Glory in Death is Life Eternal.

**Knight Errant Psamtic Mehhur**

At first, Psamtic Mehhur had believed it was pure spite that had led the Simurgh creature to abandon him on this sterilised orb.

Inquisitor Contessa had managed to escape via a derelict ruin, assuming it had not been a trap like the rest of this dreadful journey. The other Space Marines accompanying him had perished or vanished.

Psamtic was alone.

He was alone, and his supplies were nonexistent.

Fortunately, he was somewhere food and water weren't needed. For what felt like an eternity, Psamtic had walked, but he hadn't felt thirsty or hungry. It was fortunate indeed, because his possessions here were restricted to his power armour and what was inside it...and needless to say, that was not much.

Psamtic had thought it was sheer spite from that parody of an angel that had led to his imprisonment there. The Simurgh had been denied, thus it had made sure the only escape Psamtic would ever have was to take his own life. Simple and merciless.

But this place, planet or not, had begun to change recently.

It was still sterile and devoid of life.

It was a realm of the dead...except the dead were now walking.

Fortunately, as the monotony of the landscape was now broken by countless hills and mountains. Empty riverbeds had been summoned into existence. Things that must have once been forests had now been replaced by forests...of bone.

At least all these new terrain features provided excellent opportunities to hide.

And hiding was very much needed.

No one was searching for him, but there were tens of thousands of skeletons everywhere in the valleys, supervised by animated corpses of Astartes, with more emerging from the amethyst-coloured sands in the nearby desert every hour or whatever passed for it in this strange realm.

At the very beginning, Psamtic had thought they had a clue he was here.

Now he was sure they didn't.

The skeletons and their transhuman overseers were fortifying their planet.

It hadn't looked impressive at first, not when you had once seen the Imperial Fists build one of their citadels.

But the skeletons never tired, and soon, as far as Psamtic's eyes could see there were hundreds of thousands digging trenches, creating kill-zones, and emplacing bunkers and redoubtable batteries of what had to be powerful weapons, except clearly not guns which had been invented and manufactured by any Forge World.

It was slow, and with the proper technology the Imperial Fists and the Mechanicus would likely have done it quicker and using fewer hands.

Still, there was a sense of...relentlessness. Deep in his two hearts, Psamtic felt as if the fortification effort couldn't be stopped. Walls were built, soon rising hundreds of metres, before culminating at sizes that could stand the comparison with the Imperial Palace.

All of this, his mind could accept.

But when a dark ziggurat flew over the still incomplete fortress, Psamtic had no explanation.

The structure was beyond enormous, easily larger and having more tonnage than a Battleship.

And yet, it was flying, flying with nothing but columns of smoke of putrid black-purple colour to stand against the laws of gravity.

This ziggurat felt like something deeply unnatural...something confirmed by the fact every time he looked at it, Psamtic felt his organs churn in unease.

The ziggurat left in all celerity after several minutes; as if it had only come to inspect the progress of the work done by the skeletons...something that as far as he knew, might well have been the truth.

And it had provided one answer he had on his tongue for a while. For while the ziggurat had no markings, there had been things dancing in the smoke. There had been symbols: an hourglass, and a skull. And there had been a number.

"It seems," Psamtic grimaced, "the Eleventh Legion has survived...sort of. And now, it is preparing for war..."

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**The Imperial Dungeon**

**The Golden Throne**

**0.127.311M35**

**Primarch** **Leman Russ**

*The surroundings change every time he comes here.*

*This time, Leman finds himself in the middle of a desert.*

*The vast dunes of soft yellow are everywhere, no matter what direction he’s looking in.*

*It is a desert, and there is nothing but sand and more sand.*

*Leman hates sand.*

*He is a Primarch, not a sand snake...or one of the other few animals which are able to survive in these desert conditions.*

*Besides, it is way too hot. The sun is trying its best to fry his brain. He knows it.*

*The Great Wolf is about to howl when the dune explodes, and a titanic worm reveals itself.*

*The maw, the Lord of Fenris has to admit, is so large even krakens would consider it a worthwhile challenge.*

*Russ races away, and when the worm tries to chase him, he jumps into a vicious flanking attack that will target what he hopes to be the weak points of the apex predator.*

*But the air shimmers. The desert has been playing tricks on him, unless the worm is capable of creating mirages on its own. Leman's strike is going to fall short. He tries to correct his jump-*

*And a hand grabs him, lifts him as if he were a young pup, and throws him on the back of the worm like he weighs nothing.*

"*That was reckless of you, my son."*

*Leman recognises the voice, of course.*

"*Father?"*

*The stranger standing on the worm's back does* *not at all look like how his father ever presented himself.*

*Most of his tall figure is hidden by a sand-coloured cloak, and beneath it, there is what looks to be an integral suit of dark grey. In his hand there is a metallic baton.*

*There is no gold, no light, and no visible weapons.*

*Yet Leman knows it is his father.*

"*I really hate sand," the Sixth Primarch growls.*

*The luminescent blue eyes – probably the only thing that are truly identical to some of the appearances Leman saw before – stare at him in amusement.*

"*I will keep it in mind."*

"*Where are we?" He asks. "Sand aside, this doesn't look like any place you ever showed us before."*

"*This place is...an old memory. A memory of when I was younger." The voice loses in potency, but Leman can hear what is spoken, murmur or not. "A memory when I wasn't alone..."*

*Leman feels...ill-at-ease. For centuries, he didn't even think of that. Technically, yes, he has been separated from his brothers for a very long time, but alone? No, he has never been truly alone. He always had part of his pack with him.*

*His father didn't.*

"*This isn't Old Earth, however. I don't remember that world to have ever hosted these giant worms."*

*The Emperor chuckles.*

"*No, it isn't Old Earth...or Terra. It might surprise you, my son, but I travelled a lot when Mankind began to settle on distant worlds across the galaxy."*

*Not for the first time, Leman admits that he knows very little of the man who stands before him. Granted, the son knows more about his father than the combined population of the Throneworld minus the Custodes ever will, but it is cold comfort.*

"*This must have been a dangerous world, then. Unless the planet had someone like your new protégée to control the worms?"*

"*We did not," the lips twitch in amusement again. "I suppose it was a very dangerous world, and yet for a time...it was home."*

*This is difficult to believe...but Leman can sniff out a liar from ten kilometres away, and the words here are unmistakably, painfully the truth.*

"*Home..." and suddenly it reminds him of the loss of Fenris. His home, that he was forced to finish the destruction of. The Spirit of Fenris survived, but in many ways, the loss is still grievous.*

"*You will tell Roboute to give you the planet." The blue eyes stare at him with serenity. "Honestly, that boy makes me despair sometimes. I haven't tried to hold on as* *tightly to my conquests like he does since I was King of Macedon."*

"*Ha! I will."*

"*And you will make the necessary concessions."*

*Suddenly, Leman feels like the young pup brought to the alpha of the pack after having played with the tail of another member too many times.*

"*Concessions?" He asks innocently.*

"*Concessions," the Emperor repeats gravely. "It is part of something called diplomacy, Leman. You should try it sometimes."*

"*I know what diplomacy is, father. I recently showed my best diplomatic skills!"*

"*I must point out that getting my High Lords drunk has not improved their performance." The drawl is neutral, but the irony can be tasted at Titan's range.*

*Leman grimaces.*

"*But I will note that the method was original and successfully avoided political infighting for a time. It even convinced most of the Terran elite to organise big parties to mark the event. So I'm not going to castigate you for that. But as I'm sure you are intelligent enough to realise, this is only a temporary solution. And so we return to the topic of concessions."*

"*I don't like it at all," Leman mutters, before quickly amending* *his words* *under his father's unflinching glare, "I dislike making concessions to some of the High Lords. The Heads of the Administratum and the Arbites should be rotting in a cell before a summary execution."*

*And though he doesn't ask aloud after that, the challenge is clear: why are their heads still attached to their shoulders?*

"*You want to replace them? I wish you good luck, Leman. The replacements would be worse, and far more obstructive."*

*The Primarch of the Space Wolves growls in frustration. Nevertheless, his father answered the question truthfully; it's not his father's fault that he doesn't like the answers.*

"*What I am supposed to do, then?"*

*For many minutes, silence reigns. The ride on the worm continues, across the immensities of sand.*

*There is nothing but the dunes, the hellishly hot sun, and his father seemingly controlling the worm effortlessly.*

"*While many* *High Lords are wastes of my time and yours, several can be relied upon. I contacted one, and she will have the support to force the opposition into a neutral stance...provided you make the necessary concessions and allow your Wolves to change their behaviours in a way that will neatly decrease the complains."*

"*That is going to be a...challenge." Leman does not like certain things he saw among the successors of his Legion in the slightest. Some he has already planned to change, and he knows better than to think it was going to be painless and short.*

"*I'm almost hearing the Captain of the Varangian Guard word for word before I promised him the gold and artworks of my palace," his father replies humorously.*

"*Fine," Leman huffs, "I will speak with your High Lord and...I will listen to what she has to say. But there is your protégée to consider. Weaver is not onboard with-"*

"*I'm having a letter prepared for her as we speak. It will explain to her some of my plans where you are concerned...though the final decision will still be hers. You will have to be convincing when you return to Macragge."*

*Well, Leman can be convincing...hasn't he proved it by doing what was never done before?*

"*Obviously, there is still your punishment to consider."*

*By Niflheim, that was something-*

"*Once you are finished with your duties, you will join Magnus for a week cleaning and tidying up my library."*

*There is relief hearing his brother is alive.* *It doesn't last long, because the words* *'my library' are resonating like an ominous bell of doom.*

"*Couldn't I do something easier?" Leman asks with a mournful tone. "You know, exterminating all the remaining Sons of Horus? Finding you that bottle of liquor you and Malcador were unable to acquire during the Great Crusade? Maybe catching one of these big worms and offering it to Weaver?"*

"*No."*

*The Emperor pushes him off the worm.*

*And Leman is reminded why he hates sand a few seconds later.*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Medrengard**

**Daemon** **Primarch Mortarion**

Mortarion had announced his visit ahead of time.

Judging by the hasty moves of the Iron Warriors manning the titan-sized fortifications, his brother had not bothered informing his sons ahead of schedule.

Mortarion looked around, before deciding that ready or not, he was not going to wait for them. Perturabo would love that, of course. More bitterness flowed into the Death Lord's essence as he descended the landing area he had used to manifest. Apparently, since Perturabo had warned no one of his coming, all those who had been on it had been transformed into a pile of slime and metal.

The Lord of Iron had always been ruthless and prompt to decimate, but this sheer level of disdain was something else, even by the standards of the Great Game...

All around him, Medrengard growled and thundered. Or was it more appropriate to say Medrengard killed and maimed?

The planet was looking particularly horrid to his senses. It was not **Decay**. It was a black mass of fortifications and foundries, of mega-manufactorums and arsenals, of trenches and poisoned kill zones.

Medrengard was the planet-citadel of the Iron Warriors, their incredible arrogance turned into a system of fortifications and murderous industrial complexes. The forges churning out Daemon Engines were so large they could be seen from orbit, and the redoubts were buried so deep that Mortarion wouldn't be surprised to learn some were quite close to the planet's core.

Naturally, on this world where souls were spent by the millions to feed the Warp furnaces, the jealousies ran high.

This was why when the sons of the Fourth ran to meet him, there were over fifty officers of Warsmith rank.

"Lord Mortarion, we have not-"

"**Be quiet, little fly**." The Primarch of the Fourteenth Legion exhaled, and the cloud of poison shrouding him grew larger. "**Save First Captain Forrix, I don't want to hear any of you speaking**."

By the temporary silence that immediately reigned, the Iron Warriors were fast learners. Or perhaps Perturabo had killed so many of them in his mad crises of rage that they had all grown incredibly cautious.

Kydomor Forrix stepped forwards. The nicest thing Mortarion could say was that the years had not been kind to him. There were more scars, of course, but this was not the problem. His soul was...jaded and apathetic. It had not grown to the point it was irrecoverable, but the steps had been taken, and of course Perturabo's charming behaviour was accelerating this issue.

It wasn't Mortarion's problem, obviously. It was still remarkable in its own way for a senior Legion officer to destroy himself so thoroughly without an enemy in sight.

"Lord. We weren't informed of your...arrival."

"**I am here to speak with my brother, Forrix**."

The First Captain didn't flinch, but his glance at the biggest fortress of the entire planet looming in the distance said it all.

"I will lead you to the Iron Palace, Lord. But I do not have the Keys, no one does. If my father does not desire to receive you, the gates will stay shut."

Mortarion nodded, unsurprised by the way Perturabo had cut himself off from the rest of Medrengard.

The rest of the walk was spent in complete silence.

Soon, Mortarion was in front of the main gates, which were so large he had no idea what Perturabo expected to use them for. Maximus Ordinatus or Emperor Titans were not that big compared to the enormous metallic doors of an ugly iron-coloured shade that barred the way.

It went without saying that the gates were closed.

"**Perturabo. I am here. I know you are watching me**."

There were no threats or anything that might be construed as an insult...Mortarion was sure that if he dared utter such, it would be a matter of heartbeats before orders were given so that he was banished from Medrengard.

At last, after a long period that was frankly ridiculous, the Iron Gates opened in a cacophony of growling machines and the thunderous activation of millions of mechanisms.

What was inside was shrouded in darkness, and what wasn't darkness was fire. There were pipes bigger than Mechanicum Forges in their own right transporting viscous substances that contained their fair share of blood and liquefied corpses. There were enormous silvery tendrils that acted as mechadendrites everywhere. Mortarion couldn't investigate more; an avenue had been created for him to advance, and on each side, thousands of Daemon Engines stood guard. A few of them the Death Lord had honestly never seen stride across a battlefield of the Eye...which was maybe for the best, as some were the size of Emperor Titans in their own right.

The Lord of the Death Guard was led through a maze of tanks containing molten lava while rains of chemicals altered weapons. Millions of arms were churned out, half of them discarded for flaws that would have been declared insignificant by all other Legions. There were no Space Marines working here; all the work was done either by remote-controlled silver variants of mechadendrites or the far more numerous Knight-sized automatons.

At long last, his progression ended. He was in a massive atelier, and though Mortarion had the feeling that someone had been here not long before him – there was an aetheric signature that wasn't Perturabo's – his brother received him alone.

Of course, 'receiving' him was practically distorting facts. Perturabo had taken his favourite appearance of a machine with an iron mask, and was presenting his back to him, busy as he was dissecting...what had to be an old Man of Iron.

Mortarion exhaled.

Perturabo didn't turn to face him.

"**Brother**."

"**Mortarion**." The Long War passed, and the Lord of Iron's manners were getting worse and worse. "**Why are you here?**"

"**Hanzo is dead. And the Eleventh has returned**."

"**I know. Why are you here?**"

Few things could shock Mortarion anymore, but this one certainly seeded roots of surprise. Obviously, friendships had faded in the carnage of the Long War. Nevertheless, it was not a good sign Perturabo could react so...so emotionlessly and mechanically to the demise of the brother he had been so close to.

"**I have come to tell you to stop whatever new plan you thought to begin at the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**." Mortarion decided that bluntness was probably the correct strategy. "**Tzeentch's new toy stole Toramino's surviving forces, and your Warsmiths proved totally unsuited to the kind of war that is fought there**."

"**Strong words**," Perturabo grumbled, "**when it was your First Captain who killed Toramino. Or are you going to tell me Typhus has slipped his leash again**?"

Anger filled Mortarion's essence, and bitterness threatened to overcome him.

Mortarion spat ultra-corrosive bile, but decided not to answer the taunt, for that was what it was: a provocation.

"**In this affair, Typhus is obeying his orders in the letter and spirit they were given**."

"**That might be the first time in his life he does so**." Perturabo grunted. "**But**-"

"**Oh stop it, Perturabo!**" Mortarion had patience, but everyone had limits, and his were approaching quickly. "**I have not come to listen to your insinuations about my First Captain!**" It was especially hard to endure when the Fourth Legion's Former Captain was on his way to becoming an apathetic machine of flesh if something wasn't done soon. "**I have come to warn you, brother to brother, that if you continue on that path, you're likely to join Omegon on the planet of rats, screaming anarchic ramblings for the whole Eye to hear**."

Mortarion was filled with bitterness about his fall to Nurgle. But as recent events had proven, it could always be worse, and the Alpha Legion had been on the receiving end of this proverb.

Sometimes it was really better to kill yourself before enduring...that. Mortarion had never liked Alpharius and Omegon, but no one deserved to fall to Anarchy.

This time the Death Lord obtained a reaction.

Alas, it wasn't the one he wanted.

Perturabo turned to face him, and eyes shining with the power of lava and infernal forges glared at him.

"**I,**" the voice was mechanical menace incarnate, "**am not going to succumb to Anarchy**."

"**I'm sure the Hydra said the same thing before Fenris exploded in his face**," Mortarion retorted sarcastically. "**Oh, and I'm sure Lorgar also assured his sons he wasn't going to die. It is really too bad he didn't inform Weaver and Guilliman of that little revelation**."

"**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**."

They were all stubborn in their own way, but Mortarion sometimes wondered if Perturabo had not been formed from pure spite and sheer stubbornness in their genitor's labs.

It was like speaking with a wall...a wall of sheer stubbornness, of course.

"**We will see each other on the battlefield, then**." The Lord of Iron had already turned back to work on more Knight-sized Automatons. "**Do not say I didn't warn you**."

"**Get out of my citadel, Mortarion**."

"**Incidentally, Perturabo, the Iron Palace? Seriously? I thought you would not**-"

And as the words were spoken, suddenly, Mortarion was back before the Iron Gates, and he had to retreat fast to avoid the humiliation of the immense doors slamming shut in his face.

"**Well, I tried to warn you**." Mortarion sighed. That Nurgle had been extremely joyful when he suggested the idea should have told him something. "**The consequences will be on your head**."

**Halo Stars**

**The Ind Cluster**

**Maharashtra System**

**Maharashtra**

**The Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**

**9.131.311M35**

**Typhus** **the Traveller**

"Welcome back, Lord Herald."

"Thank you, Captain." Typhus answered. "I will say it is...indeed great to leave the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods."

"The trials were perilous?"

"The trials were so dangerous describing them as merely 'perilous' is fundamentally untrue," Typhus had known there would be losses, of course, but the seven servants of the Grandfather who had died inside that cursed place were lost, body and soul. And saying this was insufficient to describe the sheer danger of the Graveyard. "And I am glad they are over. Influenza, Plague, Plague, Rot, Death, Rebirth."

The Captain of the Death Guard saluted and let him pass, having received the code agreed upon beforehand.

"I have summoned the *Fetid Blessing*, Lord Herald."

"Good." Unlike the Stormbirds and the Thunderhawks which had been used to land on Maharashtra, the *Fetid Blessing* was a former Titan Lander that Typhus had taken from the blind fools that prostrated themselves before their machines in ignorance. "We are going to need it."

Slowly, but surely, the servants of the Grandfather were moving their prize out through one of the biggest breaches in the Graveyard's walls. In this case, the Iron Warriors' siege-abilities had proven quite useful.

"Lord Herald...is this...a Cadian Pylon?"

The former First Captain of the Death Guard chuckled.

"I understand why you would arrive at that conclusion. It looks a bit like a Pylon...albeit one which is reduced to its base, with the upper portion missing. And yes, this is true Noctilith."

"But it is not a Pylon."

"Indeed not Captain." The moment the Legionnaires were out of the cursed Graveyard, macro-engines could take the relay of the Grandfather's blessings, and many of the Death Guard's Chosen collapsed in exhaustion. "The Noctilith around this...this not-Pylon, is merely a shell to ensure that it can keep what is inside prisoner."

"I suppose it is vital to keep it prisoner for as long as the plan calls for?"

"Yes, Captain. I couldn't have said it better myself." Typhus studied his prize, and was satisfied to see no attack had managed to bypass his escort's vigilance. "I will return to the *Terminus Est* using the *Fetid Blessing*. The artefact needs to be warded seven more times. Once that is done, I expect the War Council to wait for me, and any new messages of the Death Lord to be deciphered and waiting for my eyes."

"I will warn the other Captains, Lord Herald."

"Tell them," Typhus gurgled in satisfaction, "that we have won a great victory against *all* enemies of the Grandfather today."

"Blessed be Decay!"

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Morwen System**

**Morwen VI**

**8.132.311M35**

**Magister** **Immaterial Nouakchott**

As a specialist in the noble field of studying and acquiring millennia-old artefacts, Magister Immaterial Nouakchott had always preferred animals when they were long dead.

That way, he could study their skeletons in peace.

Unfortunately, the pests that had decided to invite themselves to Morwen VI were alive and aggressive.

"ANARCHY! Glory to Malal!"

"Glory to the Great Mutator," and Nouakchott blasted apart the head of the vermin which had just dared challenge Great Tzeentch, along with four others. The Aether Ray spell was perfectly tailored for this sort of rat eradication.

"Lord Magister! I am afraid the defences have been breached!"

"No! You think?" His sycophant subordinate was extremely lucky manpower was so limited on the ground, with most of their reinforcements busy clashing with the Khornate fleet in orbit.

By an extremely untimely coincidence, all sides had asked for reinforcements...and they were now all arriving at roughly the same time, resulting in the joyous chaotic melee of a lifetime kicking off kilometres above their heads.

It shouldn't have been too problematic, but alas, there were also the giant rats to take into account.

"The Spires are ready?"

"Yes, Lord Magister!"

Nouakchott made a few quick calculations, as he always did. In this case, it was the knowledge and secrets he had claimed before the enormous warren hole opened and Morwen VI began crawling with rats and other fanged vermin, against the wrath of Malicia, when the Destiny Unwritten would learn that he had abandoned his fortress without orders.

In the end, Nouakchott decided the secrets and lore would have to be enough.

And besides, the Magister thought as he incinerated two rats trying to disguise themselves as Death Cult assassins, the fortress would not last long anymore, no matter how arduous his efforts at defending it.

"Good. We leave."

"But Magister, the Southern Expedition has not yet returned!"

"We have hundreds of thousands giant rats encircling this fortress, and plenty of infiltrators inside our walls, and you're worried about the Southern Expedition?"

In hindsight, Nouakchott shouldn't have dispersed his effectives so much, but Tzeentch had not blessed him with precognition, alas.

"We leave this site." Nouakchott repeated. "The knowledge we gained will be sufficient to avoid the wrath of the other Magisters. Besides, it is their fault their reinforcements arrived so late, and are nowhere to be seen to defend our fortress in this desperate hour."

There was nothing else to be said, and in an operation that had been repeated an astounding number of times, his forces withdrew in a semi-disciplined manner, massacring thousands of rats as they made their retreat.

Soon enough, the Evacuation Spires were ready, all the valuable personnel having been evacuated aboard them.

Nouakchott used the opportunity to lay several Grand Mutation Curses onto the rats. It was a meagre satisfaction, but as the Spires began to rise, the Magister Immaterial figured this would at least make an adequate vengeance. The tide of vermin that had dared storm his fortress fell into confusion, and that was before the Spires' crystalline batteries wiped out the citadel.

"A good deed done," the Q'Sal Exile allowed himself to smile, before frowning as his Spire gained altitude. "By Fate and Sorcery! How many rats are there?"

Nouakchott had thought he had made a nice dent in the ranks of the rats. But as the plains of Morwen VI were revealed to his sorcerous sight, it was clear he had merely been slaying the vanguard of an endless horde.

"We don't see the presence of the skeletons, at least, Lord Magister."

"That's something to rejoice over, yes. The rats are problematic, but they die like everyone else. We were in insufficient strength and-"

Nouakchott closed his eyes, as without warning, Morwen VI's atmosphere seemed to convulse in flames. Then after a few seconds, there was a pillar of crimson light.

The Magister Immaterial shivered. What by a thousand artefacts was that?

Moving before one of his nine-blessed mirrors, Nouakchott murmured nine words before giving his instructions.

"Show me just what was responsible for the last powerful interference."

The mirror obeyed, and the Magister Immaterial saw...blood.

Rivers of blood.

Lakes of blood.

There was so much blood.

The giant rats' corpses were seen in so many numbers there was no way to count them, and with each crimson flash, there seemed to be more created, and the blood flowed in eruptions of red fluid.

No, no, these were not 'crimson flashes'.

Nouakchott manipulated his mirror, and sure enough, a scarlet figure was revealed, wielding two short blades at an impossible speed.

Yet for all his attempts to slow down the flow of images, the servant of Tzeentch wasn't able to slow down it enough for the Khornate murderer to appear in a way that was stable and good for his long-range study.

He...no, the figure was feminine...she...she was simply too fast.

How could anyone be so fast?

How could anyone be so powerful?

The world of Morwen VI was before his eyes, and to his shock, the blood was spreading across tens of kilometres.

The blood of millions of rats was spilled in a succession of murders that were-

The thoughts inside his head arrived at a very unpleasant conclusion.

"We must get out of this system as fast as possible. This is a damned ritual. That is why they waited most of a day before deploying. They wanted to be sure there would be enough bodies on the planet to spill the amounts of blood required."

"Yes, Lord Magister. But the other Magisters...they say the warships of the brutes are trying to form into eight groups. We wondered why they would divide their strength at this crucial moment, but-"

"But it makes perfect sense if their intent is to turn this planet into a ritualistic slaughterhouse."

"Why by the Great Mutator would they do that, Lord Magister? They already have this monster!"

"I don't know,' Nouakchott admitted.

Morwen VI had never been a beautiful world. You had to mutate to live here – something the rats had compensated for by sacrificing an ungodly number of their own to achieve the same feat.

But now it was nothing but grand butchery on a planetary scale.

Millions of beasts and lifeforms unfortunate enough to be caught here when the monster made her grand entrance were exsanguinated in a terrifying campaign the likes of which no one had seen in millennia.

And the only thing the servants of Tzeentch meaningfully could do was run and save their lives.

They were simply too weak to stop the murderous onslaught.

"I don't know, but I suspect we are not going to like the answer when we will find out."

**The** **Blood Muse**

The two-tiered ziggurats had not been meant to be opened, but an ocean of blood carried power in it.

Blood was Life. Blood was Power. Blood was Destruction.

Blood was the Key.

This realisation could have brought some feeling approaching weakness, if the opposition wasn't so *weak*.

Yes, they had provided the blood she required, but honestly, close to two billion rats, and save a few of their sorcerer-shamans, none of them had seen her coming.

Anarchy might be a rising Power of the Warp, but for the moment, it clearly preferred quantity over quality.

And the quantity was severely lacking.

Hekatii cleaned her blades as the servants of the Lord of Blood rose from the lakes of blood to participate in the massacre.

"I am going into this ziggurat," announced the crimson-haired Aeldari, giving a disdainful glance to the blood-skinned monsters charging out of the Warp portals opening all across Morwen VI. "Make sure no one follows me."

"**Yes, Blood Muse**."

The former Apprentice of the Queen of Blades had her doubts they were going to be successful; the skeletons of the King in Yellow were still there, biding their time until they saw an opportunity. Hekatii was not naive; the armies of the dead had retreated far too quickly when the rats burrowed into reality and threw an army into the fray out of nowhere.

But as she had learned in the Empire of a Billion Moons long ago, for some Lords, it was the loyalty which mattered. The orders had been given. They all had to obey, happy or not.

The interior of the ziggurat, naturally, was filled with traps.

The Builders had tried to protect what they believed to be their afterlife with their best defences, and now that the metallic alloy had been compelled by the Power of Blood to reveal an entrance, they were activated.

If you did not have the reflexes of a moderately average Aeldari, they could cause some problems. There were metallic arrows whose points were made from incredibly radioactive ores. A multitude of paths led to nothing but hundreds of miniature abysses, and swirling inside these precipices laid not mere spikes of metal, but devices which were made to release an artifice able to shred flesh and metal on the molecular level.

Several times, the chambers she passed through had no air. On other occasions, the trap was the ceiling immediately falling on the occupant of the room while the doors were sealed.

The Builders had really wanted to be left alone in their cherished afterlife.

It was too bad for them Hekatii was here.

Correction: it was too bad many beings were here, able to break through their defences.

For when the Queen of the Arenas entered the immense and near-empty cavern that was at the heart of the ziggurat, it took her half a heartbeat to see she was not the first to arrive.

There were thirteen of the 'undead Astartes'.

Even if their armours had not been this tasteless grey, it would have been child's play to recognise them for what they were.

The best word in their own language to describe them would have been...*repulsive*.

They were not Pariahs. That much Hekatii was sure of. But they were nothing like the species they had been when they were breathing. There was something left of their souls...thin, fragile, flawed...as if someone had tried to replace their souls with artificial ones, but fumbling in the dark while ignoring every lesson the Aeldari Empire had ever learned about soul-forging.

Twelve faced her, while the thirteenth raced to reach the only source of the light lying at the top of the dark stairs, the very heart of the ziggurat.

Three heartbeats later, the twelve were destroyed. Hekatii was not the Queen of Blades, but killing things so weak spiritually was so easy she wouldn't even call it 'practice'.

The thirteenth tried its best to accomplish its mission...but its inelegant 'chainsword' was blocked by her blade negligently a good distance away from the light...which revealed itself to be...a giant hourglass?

Hekatii giggled.

"Ah, the mystery is no more."

The undead warrior removed his chainsword and tried to take several steps back. The former High Priestess of Khaine let the animated corpse do as it wished; many answers had been provided by a mere glance.

"*You are ignorant*."

"Really?" Hekatii raised an eyebrow. "Because I had a theory before coming here. You see, the Builders were very focused on keeping their souls in the Material Plane. I don't blame them; if you don't have any Gods to protect you, the Warp is a very unpleasant place to plunge your soul into."

"*Your theory is false*."

"They were so afraid of what's coming after they gave their last breath," the Blood Muse smirked while completely ignoring the words of the skeleton, "that they used one of the first symbols young species use to measure time: the hourglass. For if it measured time, it could also measure the time they had to escape the claws of the predators waiting for them in the polluted soup that the Old Ones created with their mistakes."

"*Ridiculous. Praying to an hourglass will achieve nothing*."

Hekatii slightly inclined her head in agreement.

"Yes, that goes without saying." It hadn't stopped more species than she could possibly count from trying that course of action at one point or another of their existence. "But the hourglass is the symbol and the container. It is powerful, but hardly sufficient by itself. But what if you replace the sand of the hourglass with something else? What if it's still sand...but sand of a different kind? What will happen if you grind Noctilith into a powder, imbue it with the power to keep the Warp at bay, and then pour it into special hourglasses? This is what your master learned from his previous explorations in the ruins of the Builders, isn't it?"

Hekatii closed her eyes.

Predictably, the animated corpse attacked.

Her counter pulverised the lower part of its body, armour and non-armour.

The crash was loud, but not enough to hide the snarl of anger.

And when Hekatii reopened her eyes, the light shining where there should have been eyes told her the Usurper of Death had decided to speak to her in person.

"*The new slave of the War Pretender*," for all the feigned detachment, there was a large dose of hatred in that voice. "*You are rapidly becoming an annoyance*."

"Only an annoyance?" Hekatii bared her teeth, throwing her blades into the air. "Disappointing. I will have to step up my game, then."

The death rattle which followed...it took her a moment to realise the thing using the skeleton as a puppet was *laughing*.

"*You are not going to step up anything, foolish long-ear. You are merely a sacrifice the War Pretender uses in its desperate attempt to locate me. Go back to your bloodbath. Tell him I will come to him*."

"Or I will come to you."

"*No. In the battle to come, you fall to the Red Angel, arrogant Muse of an extinct Empire*."

The skeleton began to burn in purple flames, and there was soon nothing left of it.

Hekatii turned around to look again at the hourglass forged by the Builders.

"I'm really beginning to hate you, King in Yellow." The blood-haired Aeldari complained. "Especially when your words make sense..."

**Approaches of the Malfi Warp Crown**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**8.135.311M35**

**Captain** **Boros Kurn**

"The situation has not improved in your absence, Warlord."

In fact, it had deteriorated considerably. 'Not improved' was one of those charming understatements he had learned by frequenting too much with Tzeentchian sorcerers.

"Yes." Malicia had not donned her helmet in her private quarters, and her displeasure was evident. "It's bad enough the King in Yellow seems to be able to conjure millions of skeletons from out of nowhere, but now the rats have decided to join in this chaotic melee. I'm ready to bet a few thousand priceless artefacts and books the insane vermin have developed a travel method making them capable of jumping from one Warp Storm to another."

This was indeed exceedingly bad news. There were so many Warp anomalies in the Calyx Hell Stars right now that the self-proclaimed 'Skaven' could pretty much go wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

Thankfully, there was a massive exception: the Malfi System and the surrounding area of space. This was something he repeated aloud, and received a nod in return.

"It's true Malfi is safe, as are our most important planets," the Warlord-sorceress conceded, "but wars are not won by staying on the defensive."

Boros was not going to say Malicia was wrong on that point; the Sixteenth Legion had won most of its wars during the Great Crusade by decapitating the opposition, with the greatest triumph of these tactics employed during the Ullanor campaign.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked as the ruler of Malfi seemed to be unwilling to continue the conversation. "Should I take command of the forces which escaped Morwen VI, bolster their strength with a few warbands, and counterattack? The butchers seem to be withdrawing to their bloody worlds. We can reconquer Morwen VI."

"**That would be extremely stupid of you**," Boros couldn't repress a shiver hearing that voice. The *sword* was on the sorceress' table, and purple flames danced on the black metal...assuming it was really metal and not something horribly worse. "**Morwen VI is a lighthouse of blood and skulls. As long as it is active, trying to conquer the planet will convince the Red Angel to pay you a little visit**."

For once, it was not the sheer evil of the voice which made him ill-at-ease.

"*Angron* is coming here?"

"He is." Malicia, reassuringly, had a facial expression adequate for these circumstances. "I was pretty sure the Lord of Skulls intended for the *Conqueror* and the other berserker maniacs to fight this war alone, but the existence and ambitions of the King in Yellow have changed that."

"That is not a force we can stop...I doubt we can so much as slightly slow down the rampage of that monster, and that's assuming he is alone and unsupported."

"I agree. The gladiator-slave is a force of slaughter quite beyond us at the moment." Malicia gave him a thin smile. "Thankfully, the Red Angel is not here yet. Morwen VI was the first sacrificial bloodbath. They need seven more."

Boros Kurn loudly snorted.

"I have seen the report your Magister Nouakchott sent. The female monster who engineered the bloodbath is worse than a fallen Primarch, in her own way. At least with the Red Angel and the others, you will be able to see yourself die. With that one, you are unable to see death coming for you."

"Hmm...I should have given more details. The summoning requires eight different rituals, Boros. There needs to be eight different planets, obviously. The sacrifices require eight different enemies of the Skull Throne: at Morwen VI, it was the giant rats which drew the short straw. And alas for the Blood Rose, you can't order the same monster to perform the deeds eight times. It has to be done by eight different worshippers of War and Blood."

This was a bit more reassuring...but not as much as a reassurance as he would have preferred to have.

"You want me to locate and disturb the ritual sites?"

"No, I want you to kill the enemies who try to break our convoys and warbands journeying to the Halo Stars." His surprise must have been more obvious than he thought, because Malicia snorted in amusement. "I need Noctilith, Boros. I got more than I thought possible from the Ymga Monolith, but my initial plans weren't conceived to deal with a Daemon Primarch. I need more Transmutational Changestone, and that means more Noctilith."

"I will need the Iron Warriors and the ships you requisitioned."

The sorceress didn't hesitate.

"Take them. But I want results, Boros."

"**Don't worry**," the Black Blade of Antwyr piped up in a false honeyed voice, "**whatever she does to you if you fail, I can guarantee you it will be less painful than having the Red Angel maim your soul**!"

Boros looked at Malicia...who gave a shrug.

One could only hope that at the end of this campaign, they wouldn't need this loudmouth of a daemonic weapon anymore...

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Luxury Space Station *Delights after Duty* – orbiting around Pluto**

**0.136.311M35**

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

It was a nightmare.

It had to be.

The Administratum couldn't arrest him here, there were laws against it!

Wait a minute, since when did the Administratum recruits have Power Armours?

"This is a misunderstanding!"

"I told you he would do that."

"It's not difficult, they're all saying it."

It had to be a nightmare. Joost was just having a nice holiday until everyone of importance forgot his existence and he could return to Mega-Hive Cajun and his duties!

They dragged him out of one of the Saturnine Salons of the *Delights after Duty*, and the nightmare suddenly became all the more horrible.

It was here.

The enormous spider of his nightmares was here.

"We found him, Adjutant-Colonel!"

"Thank you, Sister Claire!" Oh good, it really was a nightmare. Spiders didn't talk, after all.

And they generally didn't look like they had taken a bath in gold paint either.

It was a nightmare.

"Ha! So you are the one who thought denying my Mistress her rightful due was a good idea? No one is beyond the reach of the Swarm!"

"I want to wake up!" Joost shouted. "I don't know which drugs you have poured in my drinks last night, but-"

"HOW. DARE. YOU?" The eight eyes of the arachnid were now so close there was no option but to look. "I have slain heretics in the name of the Webmistress for far lesser reasons than that! Apologise! Immediately!"

"This...this isn't a nightmare?" The Lord of the Adeptus Almitas babbled. "This is real?"

To his relief, the spider huffed and slightly retreated, leaving one of the red-armoured women to answer in her stead.

"We are very real, Adept-Primus. And in case you want a more detailed explanation, the Adjutant-Colonel and our protection squad arrived on the same ship as Lord Leman Russ and the Custodes."

Ah...oh by every pile of vellum ever buried in the archives of Holy Terra. It was real. It was not a nightmare...and the spider was here, it wasn't a hallucination.

"Fine...fine..." all his attempts to find some assurance faltered and died each time his eyes fell upon the spider. Why the hell was this spider so big? "What is the reason behind this odious aggression? I am the Adept-Primus of the Adeptus Almitas!"

"Don't play innocent!" the spider barked while pointing one of its massive legs straight at his head. "I can list hundreds of points proving you have been engaged in a gross dereliction of duties! In addition to which, as I said before, you are trying to deny the Webmistress her rightful due!"

"Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert," the red-clad woman with what looked to be black-dyed hair explained. "Lady Weaver, Her Celestial Highness, Angel of the God-Emperor. You may have heard of her."

Holy-

This was one of the Living Saint's servants?

That was...what kind of oblivion was the galaxy going to? Giving weapons to spiders was just insane!

"Yes!" The arachnid didn't jump in joy at hearing the name of her 'Mistress', but she wasn't far from it. "Last chance, lazy Adept! Go back to your duties immediately, pay the bounties the Webmistress earned fair and square, and all will be well!"

"I am the Adept-Primus of an independent Adeptus!" Joost retorted, his pride finally regaining enough strength to dominate his fear. "If you are really a servant of the Living Saint, then you are part of the Imperial Guard! You have no power over the Adeptus Almitas!"

The spider...chuckled? Or at least, that was the sound it made him think of on the spot.

"That argument was anticipated! You may not be aware of it, Adept-Primus, but I wasn't the only great servant of the Webmistress to be given the honour to visit Terra! One of my sisters did too!"

Joost really, really didn't like where this conversation was going.

Unfortunately, his bad feelings were more than justified a second later.

"By a strange coincidence, my sweet sister found out an Inquisitor just wanting to conduct a surprise inspection of the Adeptus Almitas! Naturally, as she is a loyal Administrator of the Swarm, her first action was to offer her services so that the bureaucratic inspection could be conducted in a timely manner!"

Joost shook his head.

"It..." he cleared his throat and tried not to shake...too much. "It could be a bluff on your part."

"It could be." The spider agreed cordially. "So my sister decided to give you the message that the gumbo soup is particularly delicious, especially when we have this delicious meat as appetiser."

This may not be a nightmare by the definition of the word, but Joost was really approaching the point of 'unrelenting disaster'.

"Well, congratulations. You hold all the cards." Joost gave his arachnid tormentor a bitter smile. "Have you come to gloat?"

"We need an Adept-Primus to approve the bounties." Weaver's servant...grumbled? "The Inquisitor already arrested fourteen incapables of yours who were involved in various conspiracies of embezzlement. Fortunately for you, apart from your dereliction of duty spent on hyper-long holidays, my sister has not found any sign of treachery, heresy, or fraud that demands we separate your head from your shoulders. Joyous conclusion: rejoice, for you can serve the Webmistress!"

Joost was almost smiling...before he remembered what would happen if he did indeed approve the release of the enormous sums that were falling under the purview of the Adeptus Almitas.

"I...I'm sorry, but I can't do that. If I do...Xerxes Vandire will order my death. And...I'm...your Living Saint is on the other side of the galaxy. There is loyalty to one's duty, but-"

"Loyalty to the Webmistress is its own reward!" the golden spider proclaimed grandiosely before continuing in a defensive tone when the red-armoured women gave the arachnid a strange look. "What? The Dark Angels have a certain proverb; I just changed it to its natural conclusion!"

"Err..."

"Anyway! If security is just your concern, be reassured, Adept-Primus! The Webmistress will ask for the permission to station a regiment outside your office, so you can fulfil your duties in complete peace!"

Joost Harpagon groaned in despair. How did one explain that by doing so, the thousands of mid-ranked Adepts of the Senatorum Imperialis were going to ignore his existence until the End of Time, and possibly beyond it? If the Almitas was seen so brazenly siding with the Astra Militarum, all his bridges were burned!

And yet, there was the Inquisition at the gates, and Xerxes Vandire may kill him on principle anyway.

Joost sighed in defeat.

"Just tell me what I have to do..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nephilim Sector**

**Argovon System**

**High Orbit over Hishrea**

**Ambition-class Cruiser *Saint's Gift***

**5.141.311M35**

**Rogue Trader Lady Foronika Argovon**

"Out of pure curiosity, Lady Rogue Trader, where does the word 'Hishrea' come from?"

Foronika blinked and stopped contemplating the magnificent pict-vids that were transmitted to her bridge.

"It was the name of the old winter manor of my family, before we were forced to sell it," the new Governor of the Argovon System answered honestly. “I think it was named after an ancestor of a secondary line who made his fortune selling furs of some exotic animals, but as we sold it with all the paperwork, I am not completely sure."

"Ah," the Nyxian Colonel nodded thoughtfully before continuing, "you must have really hated it, to give its name to this planet."

"I did not hate it," Foronika vigorously denied. It was just that she had never understood how sane humans could tolerate living where sub-zero temperatures were common and snow made your life miserable in short order.

The officer chose to not comment further, but his smirk proved he was definitely thinking it.

"But I have to admit, Colonel, I named this world Hishrea before being given a complete analysis of what was waiting for potential settlers. If I had, I may have chosen something more suitable. 'Helwinter' or something equally blizzard-related might have delivered an adequate warning."

Foronika was not going to deny Hishrea was beautiful from orbit: it was all blue and white, and the vids one took from it had their places in artists' galleries.

Hishrea was a world that was very far from the local star. In fact, among the worlds she was now legally the mistress of, it was the planet which was the furthest away from it.

As a result, it was locked in perpetual winter.

One might think that was the end of the difficulties. It was in reality just the beginning. Eighty-five percent of the world was covered by oceans, and not only were they tens of kilometres-deep, the megafauna living inside them was as varied as it was enormous.

The mountains and the other uneven terrain that was not part of the oceans weren't any less dangerous. Thermal vents at first had given promising opportunities, but the Nyxian veterans Her Celestial Highness had loaned her had rapidly dashed her hopes: the warmth attracted many beasts, including entire colonies of little carnivorous creatures that had been promptly called 'frostwyrms'. When they came at you in groups of one or two dozens, a guardsman could easily kill them without problem, but the first scouting attempts upon their nesting sites had revealed millions of them. A massive orbital strike had been needed to cover the guardsmen's retreat.

"Why not change the name, then?"

"Theoretically I can, Colonel. But the Administratum is in obstruction mode about everything these days, at least whenever my name is mentioned."

"Ah."

"So when I choose a name, I'm stuck with it, impossible to change. The Argovon System is the Argovon System. And its planets are Prospectium, Salonika, Argovon, Basileia, Iago, and Hishrea."

"I see." The Nyxian officer placed a hand on his unkempt beard. With all the exploration 'adventures' the guardsmen had made on the Death World below – and yes, Hishrea was a Death World – even veterans were in need of serious rest. "Well, you have a promising list of settlers for five out of six planets, at least. As for Hishrea...I want to be optimistic, but you are going to need some hardy settlers for this one."

Foronika turned her head...before grinning.

"You have no confidence in Her Celestial Highness' bureaucratic skills?"

"Oh no, I have absolute confidence in Lady Weaver," the Colonel assured her. "I think, Lady Argovon, that you are a bit too optimistic about the speed with which an Astartes Chapter can be permanently deployed here, but I have no doubt the Space Marines will come. So far, your projection for fifty thousand tonnes of Noctilith mined on Prospectium this year seems to be on a good course...and most of the mineral wealth of this system is completely untapped. If the Imperium has to station a thousand Space Marines and keep them battling all the Necron subterranean hideouts in the Sector for a thousand years, then that is exactly what Her Celestial Highness and Holy Terra will order them to do."

The veteran of Commorragh shook his head.

"But Space Marines, no matter how sympathetic, are not going to help the settlers. They can defend a Fortress and provide some protection when the colonists live inside the walls, but outside, the men and women of Hishrea will be on their own. And I have spent enough time here to say that every day on this ice ball is a battle of survival."

The man definitely had a point. And if Hishrea had nothing valuable, Foronika was honest enough to admit she would have barely glanced at the planet and turned all her attention to the rest of the system. But Hishrea was rich in resources. Noctilith and other rare ores and gas elements were in such quantities in the mountains that the cogboys had been able to discover them within mere minutes of starting their survey.

"Well, I suppose we will have to wait and see. Let's just hope the Space Marines won't have an aversion for furs and cold, because this is what awaits them on Hishrea."

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Inner Sanctum of the Imperial Palace**

**0.143.311M35**

**Primarch** **Leman Russ**

In his absolutely not humble opinion, Leman believed himself to be a good judge of character.

No, he wasn't right every time. In fact, as he often admitted to his father during the Great Crusade, the Fenrisian Primarch was right so often that the times where he was wrong tended to result in big problems.

Still, the Lord of the Vlka Fenryka had only met the High Lords during the three hours of his superb and daring festivities. The only ones of the High Twelve Leman was really confident about were the Heads of the Adeptus Arbites and Administratum.

And yes, it was a confidence they would look better with their heads placed on spikes while the bodies were thrown to whatever starved animals lived in the Underhives of Terra.

The others?

Unfortunately, he would need more time. They were very different people, these High Twelve, and Leman was alone to face them. He couldn't study everyone and everything all at once.

This was good for his ego, because when the Grand Mistress of the Ordo Assassinorum entered, Leman knew everything he might have assumed about her was totally flawed or flat-out wrong.

The 'Grand Mistress' of the festivities had been an elegant blonde, who had so many toxin vials on her person that it screamed 'Venenum' without trying. She also looked like she was the second or third to succumb to his charm.

Now? The female assassin was at least fifty centimetres taller, and the blonde hair had been replaced by an impressive black mane. The aristocratic dress which had been full of laces and outrageous decorations was no longer in sight. It had been replaced by a glossy black robe that had so many common points with synskin that Leman Russ just knew it was a variant of it...leaving the shoulders exposed was a genius move, as it allowed the metallic necklace and few silver devices visible to activate to their fullest effect, whether to spy or to kill.

But aside from two identical bracelets and the necklace, there wasn't much variation of colour. The hair was black. The shiny, glossy dress espousing each and every curve she had was black. The high heels that hid long and dangerous blades were black. The female assassin had gone so far as to use black lipstick to make sure there was no disruption of the theme.

This went rapidly to the second rank of his preoccupations, as suddenly, the air was filled with something that smelled like fur and pleasure; his two hearts began to beat faster...and Leman snorted.

"Pheromones. Really?"

The Grand Mistress of the Officio Assassinorum gave him a satisfied smile.

"Our artificer-chemists worked hard to develop them...and sometimes, they have some effects on specific Astartes gene-lines."

The black-dressed assassin approached him fearlessly, until she was sufficiently close to touch him...which she did, and by all the attacks which immediately assaulted his senses, it seemed the Grand Mistress had decided not to limit herself to pheromones. The lipstick was probably an aphrodisiac too. The other perfumes were...capable of creating some other reactions, perhaps for Astartes who loved being on the receiving end of a lot of pain.

Leman Russ smiled wolfishly.

"But it seems that what is deadly against Astartes has no effect against a Primarch," she finished, withdrawing her hand elegantly...as if Leman hadn't noticed that there had been long 'claws' ready to appear and extend the length of her fingers.

"Oh, I wouldn't say it has no effect," and on this, Leman moved...and for the first time in many, many years, the Primarch deeply kissed a beautiful woman.

By the way she moaned, Leman had to say that his technique, while a bit rusty, still had some good days in it.

"I should kill you for that," the assassin remarked when he stopped the kiss.

But her voice was lacking the passion which was supposed to be paired with death threats. Though it wasn't lacking a different kind of passion...so he kissed her again.

And this time she really returned the favour.

Of course, the Grand Mistress also activated her claws a heartbeat later.

And both the pheromones and the aphrodisiacs were ramped to an entirely new level.

"*He* warned me you could charm your way out of any situation, but I thought Primarchs had no interest in carnal relationships."

"Most of us don't have any interest in it," Leman grinned, not caring that the metallic talons were so close to his throat, "I think we all had that part of our legacy locked away, and *He* intended to unlock it when we were grown men...when *He* could trust us fully. But with us dispersed across the galaxy...some unexpected things happened."

"You're a barbarian, and yet you are so much more." The voice was suffering from his natural Primarch aura, but she was clearly keeping most of her cohesion.

"I could do the same about you...Callista."

The High Lady representing the Officio Assassinorum withdrew her claws, and opened her mouth. The invitation was clear. The two kissed again. This time they made it last...and Leman knew his inner beast was beginning to feel satisfaction, much like hers did.

Seconds later, Leman carried her effortlessly to the sole enormous couch of the room that could possibly handle his weight. When he stopped moving, Callista de Sarcamore was sitting on his lap, watching him with eyes that were downright predatory.

"Eight voices are in favour of your motion to create an Astartes Armoury World," the Grand Mistress of the Officio Assassinorum began, changing the subject and continuing smoothly like she was doing it with a Primarch's every day. "It would be better to have ten, in order to strangle several problems before they can appear."

Well, his father had warned him there would be concessions to be made.

"Please list the conditions."

"The Inquisition wants a Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Astartes to monitor the storage facilities of Macragge. In fact, the Representative is pushing for this 'special inspector' to have bureaucratic control of the Armoury."

"By bureaucratic control, I suppose the implication is monitoring and counting everything that enters and leaves the Armoury?" Leman asked to be certain. The black-dressed assassin nodded. "I have no problem with it."

Evidently, it was not the last condition. But then the Sixth Primarch was not naive; he had never expected there would be no opposition.

"The Imperial Navy will not vote in favour if the Armoury includes starships." Callista de Sarcamore continued. "They are willing to make an effort and tolerate Thunderhawks and the like, but if something has a Warp Engine, it is forbidden. As far as they are concerned, this is non-negotiable."

There were about forty more amendments. Some were acceptable, some were quite outrageous and Leman bluntly said 'no' every time they were spoken. By the way the Grand Mistress smiled each time he did it, the identity of the High Lords behind those ideas was not difficult to guess.

"That should give you the ten voices you seek."

The dangerous assassin placed her head against his armoured chest, and for a second, she really appeared to be a tired and exhausted young woman...and as Leman used his charisma and knowledge of women's bodies once again, the Primarch acknowledged that Frostlions and other big felines, ultimately, were excellent totemic animals for the female assassins.

"And in exchange, what do *you* want?" This feline had sharp claws, and it wouldn't do to forget it.

"I want *you* to stop the legion-building your sons have been at the forefront of," the young-looking assassin murmured, her black lips approaching his once more.

"By my standards, it is barely a Legion." Leman replied very honestly. "I have done my best to track all the Great Companies, special hunts, and other attachments while my ship raced to Terra. There are five thousand or so of my sons left. It's five times the size of the Chapters my brother codified with the Codex Astartes, I know. But let's not pretend it's an apocalyptic threat to the Imperium."

"But your sons are wild...Leman." Callista pointed out softly, placing her hands on his shoulders. "They don't obey orders, whether they come from Terra or Ophelia. They aren't part of the Imperium. They don't want to be part of the Imperium. And when they wage war, they generally make no effort to coordinate with the Imperium or limit the scale of the collateral damage they cause."

The worst part of this seductive approach was definitely that the female assassin wasn't exaggerating.

"I have heard many things I am very displeased about...Callista. But that is exactly why I don't want to disperse my sons across the galaxy just yet. They have many wrong lessons in their heads. Breaking the Legion – and yes, the Sixth Legion never truly ceased to exist – will release them into different Sectors in insufficient strength to wage wars...and with no incentive to cease what you and the other High Lords find problematic in them."

"I know. *He* knows." Leman sighed internally. A proposal was coming, and he knew his father was behind it. Oh, the general idea had certainly originated somewhere in an assassin's mind, but if his King had not given his full approval and changed some aspects of the plan, he was ready to build a Prospero pyramid on New Fenris...a full-scale pyramid.

"I was under the impression an Astartes Founding had just taken place before the...Traitor's Black Crusade."

"Indeed. That's why the Officio Assassinorum is in favour of selecting one of your Great Companies to serve as the training cadre for the new Chapter, prepare it for a period between one and two decades, and then let them settle on a new homeworld where they will truly forge their own history and cease to be the Sixth Legion."

It was...clever...as expected of his father, really. The 'one or two decades' would not only be incredibly useful for the Mechanicus to prepare the support base for the new Chapter, it would also allow all the watchers to spy out the 'training cadre' of his sons and judge if they were good material or not.

It was clever.

It was painful too.

For while the words 'select one of your Great Companies' might seem innocent, they really weren't. Leman wasn't stupid. When the first Great Company would leave the Macragge System and officially cease to be part of the *Vlka Fenryka*, there would be incentives to do the same for a second over the next twenty years, then a third...

It wouldn't be a Founding as the Ultramarines and the others did, tens of Chapters presented in a single location at the very same time. It would last, in all likelihood, several centuries. But if the great fear of the High Lords was Legion-building, then in twenty years his sons would have recovered from the atrocious losses suffered against the sons of Lorgar and the other Traitors.

In other times, they might not have recovered so quickly, but Leman was here, alive, able to give his genetic patrimony so that new gene-seed could be created, and their new homeworld, while emptying, had far more potential recruits than the original Fenris ever did.

"I am willing to accept these terms."

Callista de Sarcamore this time initiated the kiss. Leman knew better than to think it was his charisma that was responsible this time.

"However, I want a veto right over the homeworlds of these potential Chapters." It was out of the question to send his sons to worlds where the most dangerous thing was a grox, or some kind of Hive World on which wildlife had long been rendered extinct.

"A solution has offered itself. Lady General Weaver recently made a request for an Adeptus Astartes Chapter."

This time, Leman didn't see a reason to hide his surprise.

"I was under the impression, backed by the Lady General's own words...that further Chapters in the Nyx Sector were not seen as a high priority."

"It was not for the Nyx Sector. The stellar system in question is part of the Nephilim Sector. While the rediscovery has been recent, several companies of Blood Angels Successors and at least two kill-teams of the Deathwatch have already been forced to intervene regularly there, as numerous Necron tomb-fortresses were located during mining operations. The situation has been handled perfectly, but all these Astartes can't stay stationed there for years to see if there are any more Necrons waiting to wake up."

Yes, in those circumstances, asking for a Chapter to settle in the system was logical. And it had to be one of the systems the Noctilith was mined from. Weaver would not have made this military effort otherwise when she couldn't count on help from Roboute's sons.

"This tale is beginning to interest me. The planet-"

He was forced to stop, as the Grand Mistress placed a finger on his lips.

"That is enough for today...Leman." The voice of the Callidus assassin was seduction incarnate as the words passed her black lips.

\*\*\*\*

"*So your humour survived, after all."*

"*I've never pretended otherwise, old friend."*

"*Sometimes, I think I should have urged you to relax far more instead of pushing you to accelerate the schedule of galactic reconquest. The son has inherited quite a few things from the father, in the end. And yes, that* *was a direct reference to THAT incident."*

"*It was in the twentieth millennium, Malcador. Are you going to remind me of it every century?"*

"*Yes."*

"*You're incorrigible."*

"*And you were far funnier to be around when you tried to charm your* *way through an army of female assassins, my friend."*

\*\*\*\*

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan Secundus**

**2.143.311M35**

**Regina** **Wei Cao**

"And with the Mechanicus no longer having a problem with the Necrons, the Noctilith mining on Prospectium is finally proceeding as per the plans." Wei smiled. "Of course, that means your sisters will have to cure the Titan-Moths of their legendary laziness before my wife returns."

"We will motivate them, I swear it, wife of the Webmistress!" The Adjutant-Spider promised.

Wei chuckled. The enthusiasm of the great arachnids never ceased to be refreshing.

"Do you want to send another courier ship to the Webmistress?"

"No," the Regina replied without hesitation. "There are many items of good news these last several days, and the number of courier ships we have is very finite."

"But we can't exactly send this critical information via Astropath. As the Webmistress ordered, we mustn't reveal the location of the Noctilith quarries."

"I think," the wife of the Lady Nyx began carefully, "the secrecy we intended for several planets won't work. I know why my love gave these orders. But with the Administratum working against our interests in the Nephilim Sector, it isn't going to be a long-term option."

Arguably the Nyx Sector had an even worse problem with the upper leadership of the Adeptus Administratum, but with Taylor being the Sector Lady and most of the important Planetary Governors on their side, you could find loopholes. The majority of the citizens living in Nyx or Wuhan were not aware of these political troubles, proving the Nyxian methods had met great success.

"Should I make a new request when it comes to the Adeptus Astartes, then?" the Adjutant-Spider inquired.

"No," Wei shook her head. "At least not this year. I'm pretty sure my wife or someone else is going to find a solution before we give her a triumphal welcome here."

"We will do our best for the Webmistress! And yes, it's possible the problem will be resolved by other parties. The Webmistress will soon translate into the Baal System, if she didn't already do so. And there is a Great Conference that will take place at Macragge, with the Primarchs attending!"

Wei nodded with a serious expression on her face. Deep inside, however, the Regina of Wuhan was giggling.

Several Primarchs had returned. Not a single Primarch. Primarchs, plural. A Black Crusade and several abominable xenos horrors had been annihilated. Archeotech treasures and great bounties had been claimed.

Taylor had really done the impossible again.

Of course, Wei knew better than to think it had not cost her. Her wife's letters were not detailed enough to give a perfect picture of what had happened, but they had been more than enough to clue her in that this military campaign had been extremely bad. Her Basileia would need all the support and comfort Wei could give her when she returned, which hopefully would be the moment this 'Great Conference of Macragge' was over.

"Indeed." And while the praises of the Adjutant-Spider – always centred on a single being, of course – were amusing to listen to, Wei couldn't spend hours doing that today; her presence was required for the inauguration of a new shipyard in orbit of her homeworld. "Changing the subject, Adjutant-Captain. What do you think of the last request?"

It was a sign of the subject's importance the golden spider didn't answer immediately, instead tapping on the device several Tech-Priests had worked upon to facilitate the data-acquisition for eight-legged arachnids frenetically.

"I don't know where to look, wife of the Webmistress! After all, the assassins who try to challenge the Swarm in the heart of the web aren't allowed to write competency reports!"

Something the spider seemed to find problematic, now that she had the time to think about it.

"But we have a squad of Heracles Warden Space Marines currently training somewhere in-system," the Adjutant-Captain continued after making a number of astrographic calculations. "Do you want me to contact them?"

**Somewhere in the depths of a Wuhanese Hive**

**Si Yu**

Si Yu had no regrets.

If she had any in the first place, she wouldn't have chosen to murder people. And to be sure, the work had been exhilarating. For too long the nobles had been content to ignore them, but now that many were poor, they couldn't afford vast armies and state-of-the-art defences to protect their haughty lives any longer.

Moreover, Si Yu was getting paid to kill the blue-blooded bastards. And the pay was good. She didn't have to go to a badly lit shop and eat years-expired gruel. Though to be fair, the quality of the food stores had improved in the last years. You had to go really deep into the Underhive now to be served food that was properly disgusting.

Too bad her money wasn't going to be of any use to her now. That was the problem with Throne Gelts:they didn't go with you when it was time to be judged by the God-Emperor. It was kind of fortunate, Si Yu recognised, because otherwise all nobles would be greeted with a pat on the head. That way there was the tiniest hope the blue-blooded wastes of space were punished for their crimes.

The young assassin forced herself to stay calm. There was no other living being but her in this dark interrogation room, but there was a thing of metallic feathers and cogs. Si Yu knew what it was: a servo-owl, the winged spies who were replacing the antique skulls. The demand for them was so high that in most of the Hives, servo-skulls were still the norm, but there were more and more of them as the years passed.

The door opened.

Si Yu tensed, for this was not the Arbites she had expected.

Not unless the man had found a way to transform himself into a giant...

The Wuhanese teenager swallowed heavily. Everyone had heard of the Space Marines, the blades of Her Celestial Highness. There weren't supposed to be any on Wuhan, but the battles they had fought in the Living Saint's and the God-Emperor's name...they were legendary.

The assassin studied the armour, trying to guess the Chapter the warrior belonged to. Unfortunately, the enormous Power Armour was painted in a sort of brown-black camouflage which told her nothing of value.

"Name?"

"Mai."

The Astartes immediately stared at her with a strength that pierced her mind and convinced her for a few seconds to stop breathing.

"Assassin," the Space Marine began in a tone that make it sound like he was about to discipline a five-year-old, "the noble you just killed was under the surveillance of the Ordos of the Holy Inquisition, for he was suspected to be a spy for Traitor parties operating outside this Sector. While we had enough evidence to execute him, decision had been made to let him live so he could lead us to his allies and accomplices. He was not supposed to die with a poison-covered dagger thrust into his right eye."

Si Yu winced...and cursed deep inside. If what the Angel of Death said was true, she had screwed up...in a monumental manner.

"Several parties have had to accelerate important operations. Many of these parties are important men and women who don't like winning half-victories against the enemies of the Imperium. I obey them, and am in no mood to hear your lies. Name. *Now*."

"Si Yu. Professional assassin...but you already knew that."

The questions began. The young killer did her best to answer them. Most of them were about the nobles she had eliminated in recent weeks, with one or two exceptions.

After what had to be a good hour, the questions stopped. Si Yu noted that while there was a data-slate on the table separating them, the giant had not a single time shown the desire to take notes.

"This may be useful in salvaging something." The declaration brought some relief...some hope...no matter how ridiculous it was. Everyone knew what fate awaited assassins if they were caught. "Now the question is how to deal with you."

"I don't suppose you are willing to release me if I promise not to do it again?"

The Angel of Death snorted, but there was no humour on his face.

"You will kill again. They always say they won't. A few, a very rare few, try to keep their promise. It works so rarely in the end that nobody bothers giving your profession a second chance."

She had thought the same...and it was a reassurance, in a certain way, to know the giant warriors weren't imbeciles.

"I am going to die, then."

"Tomorrow, fifteen girls like you, all involved in murders that have targeted several characters of importance, will be led to the execution square. And you will die."

There was no sympathy. But there was no gloating or other arrogant statements that she deserved it either.

Still, there was something strange. Si Yu believed herself good, but she was not so arrogant to believe her successful career terrified the nobles and administrators at the top of the food chain. Most of her targets had been killed because they had suffered financial misfortunes and weren't as protected as they should be.

"There are...rumours that, sometimes, assassins are permitted to join the Penal Legions," she mentioned carefully.

"Some of these rumours have a shadow of truth to them," the Angel of Death confirmed slowly. "But they aren't offered to you."

In some ways, it was a relief. The same rumours had mentioned the life-expectancy of someone in the Penal Legions on the battlefield was less than one hour from the moment you were ordered to charge.

In another way, it was nerve-wracking, because if this wasn't the offer, what was the fate awaiting her?

"There have been orders coming from places that you have no business to know. Suffice to say, we have been instructed to find assassins and judge if they can still be used as loyal blades of the Golden Throne."

Hope blossomed back in Si Yu's chest.

"And assuming I can...convince you?"

"Officially, your life will end tomorrow. But another assassin will take your place in the execution square."

The Space Marine observed her again with this 'piercing' gaze.

"Let there be no mistake. It is entirely possible you will still die before the end of the day. The first test will take place tomorrow afternoon. It will be a purity test. If you fail, I assure you that your demise will be so excruciating you will deeply regret not choosing the rope or another form of conventional execution."

"I worship *Him*," Si Yu hissed defensively. "I am not a heretic."

But now she thought about it, she had not entered a church of the God-Emperor this year. At least she had assassinated no one in a holy sanctum. That had to count for something, right?

The Space Marine didn't seem impressed. But then, that was to be expected. She was an assassin; he was one of the Emperor's Angels of Death.

"We will see. The tests are going to be thorough and painful. Many will come after the first one. They will test you in a very taxing manner. And whatever happens to you, you likely will never ever return to Wuhan or any planet of the Nyx Sector."

They wanted assassins; that was the message behind these sentences. The identity of the order-givers was mysterious, as she doubted a Living Saint had any use in mind for them. Still, it must have been approved at very high levels of authority, for Space Marines to be involved.

But did it really matter? Si Yu didn't want to die tomorrow. And there was really no one that would mourn her. Her parents were long dead, and whatever relatives she had left were complete strangers. No one would grieve for her. True announcement of execution or not, the young assassin was already dead to every Wuhanese who knew her.

"I am determined to successfully pass those tests...Lord Astartes."

For the first time, a smile appeared on the giant's face.

"I am no Lord, assassin. And the first test begins now. Why should I let you take the purity test?"

Si Yu recognised the challenge, and began to speak.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**High Orbit over Holy Terra**

**Battle-Barge *Allfather's Honour***

**0.145.311M35**

**Great** **Wolf Hakon Krakenslayer**

Despite what the Blood Claws often said when they believed he was out of earshot, Hakon had not survived all his battles by being as subtle as a Thunderhammer. Sometimes, you had to be cunning to defeat the foes of the Allfather. Most of the time, it took a Great Wolf's gaze to discover the critical weaknesses of the cursed spawns they were battling.

All these centuries of war had proven really useful.

Hakon didn't need them to know that when his father ordered the feast of a lifetime to be prepared while they went to have a private conversation, it was not going to be congratulate him...had this been the *True* Great Wolf's intention, it would have been done in front of the two thousand Vlka Fenryka who had rushed to be present aboard the *Allfather's Honour*.

"Are you angry, my Jarl?" Hakon asked.

"No," at least the growl which came after was...amused. "I am not angry. I am...disappointed, *Krakenslayer*."

Hakon sniffed. He had been young when he pursued the name. And of course the Fell-Handed had informed the Primarch of all the stories that he had been involved in.

"Whatever the Venerable Bjorn said...the sagas have been a bit exaggerated."

"As all sagas are," the Lord of Fenris replied. "But there is something the sagas did get right, unfortunately. Twice home was attacked. Twice Bjorn defended it. Twice the Great Wolf was not there to defend Fenris and the ancestral halls."

Hakon didn't speak. What could he say, truly? That he had rushed to Fenris as fast as he could? That the battle was long over and Fenris gone by the time he arrived? It was the truth, and yet even to him the words smelled like carrion.

"I should have been there." The Great Wolf admitted when it became obvious his father wasn't going to speak first. "I was blinded by the sagas and the thirst to prove those scribblers and politicians wrong about us. I should have been there, defending the Fang."

"Fighting at Cadia would have been acceptable too." His Sire growled.

"Err...many wolf-brothers were at Cadia, Jarl."

"Two Great Companies were, Krakenslayer. And that's exactly the problem! Direbear had most of the elements of two Companies to defend Fenris. Wolf Lords Dragoneye and Steelhead were at Cadia. The other Great Companies were dispersed across three Segmentums!" The next growl was definitely filled with annoyance. "Do I need to teach everyone from the Long Fangs to the Blood Claws what concentration of firepower means?"

Hakon growled...with shame.

Because no, he hadn't forgotten, but it had been a long time since the pack had fought together. The Great Companies of the Vlka Fenryka had always been carving their own sagas on different battlefields, great sagas had been sung, and the only moments most of them were gathering as the entire pack was during the feasts.

"This won't happen again, Jarl."

"You are right, my son. But not for the reasons you imagine."

The Great Wolf was pleased by the 'my son', as it was the first time his father recognised him as such.

The rest of the sentence immediately doused whatever good feelings had been created. And this cast a new winter light upon some things. There were problems he had believed a Primarch would solve in a heartbeat. Suddenly, Hakon was far less confident about them.

"The...the Inquisitors captured five members belonging to the Blue Moon's Company. And they refuse to release them. They seem to have failed...the Aethergold test, or so they pretend."

"I've heard about it." His father paused for a very brief moment. "They are all dead."

"WHAT?" The unflinching stare of a Primarch was directed him. "What...father?"

"The test of the Aethergold is very simple, my son." There was no humour or amusement left in Leman Russ' eyes. "You touch the crystallised power of Weaver, the very power of the Allfather's Sacrifice. If you are uncorrupted by Chaos, you pass it without problem. You are corrupted, you die. And now that I think about it...who was the imbecile that let them wield Traitor weapons? When we fought against my treacherous brothers, I made it clear that they had to be purified ten times in the fire and the ice of Fenris first, then the Rune Priests and the Wolf Priests would check the weapon and vouch for its safe use!"

This was indeed the rule, but several great Companies had been far away from Fenris for many winters...and the young pups of Torben Blue Moon's Great Company had taken a lot of loot from Cadia's battlefields.

And with Fenris gone, they hadn't been able to purify it in any way...

"But we can't-"

"Olav Direbear and every son of Fenris who survived Macragge passed the test in front of Weaver before I left, Hakon Krakenslayer. None burst into flame. A few young pups were disoriented, and will be on chore duty for a century, if not more. But none died. Is it clear?"

"Yes." None of the Vlka Fenryka of Direbear had been revealed to be corrupted. "Yes, my Jarl, it is very clear."

There was a second growl of annoyance.

"For all my sons' sake, I want it to be the truth," the Wolf King declared. "I do not want to resurrect the Consul-Opsequiari. But I will if the discipline continues to be atrociously lacking and stupidity reigns in the ranks."

"I..." Hakon hesitated. "I didn't listen to all the tales, what are the Consul-Oopsisomething?"

"The disciplinary corps my Legion had during the Great Crusade," Leman Russ answered bluntly. "They had the right to execute battle-brothers with impunity if they dared to ignore or disobey their orders in any way."

The Great Wolf was not ashamed to say he felt something very cold seep into his Vlka Fenryka bones. Their father was really, really disappointed with them.

"Will the Rout survive if we obey the *High Lords*?"

"The Rout will survive because we obey the *Allfather*, my Emperor, my Sire...my Father. And if I have to force you to listen to me read the *Codex Astartes* to teach of you a few times, then by the icebergs of the Worldsea, that's exactly what I will do!"

"The Codex Astartes? But it smells predictable just by looking at it, father!"

Leman Russ barked in laughter.

"I eagerly await the moment when you say that where the sons of Guilliman can hear you, my son!"

**High Orbit over Holy Terra**

**Apocalypse-class Battleship *Thunder of the God-Emperor***

**Lord** **High Admiral of the Imperial Navy Rabadash y Byng el Calormen**

"Well," Rabadash muttered, giving a last look to the image of the *Allfather's Honour* before turning away, "it seems the conditions of the Officio Assassinorum have been accepted. The cargoes that are transferred to the Battle-Barge are essentially food and drinks, and another Battle-Barge is on its way to Mars so it can be repaired."

"Yes, my Lord. I wonder how the new High Lady managed that feat."

"In all likelihood, a few good threats and the backing of the Custodes," the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy replied. "I don't care really much, to be honest."

To be honest, Rabadash would have preferred the Primarch didn't come here in the first place, but if the worst damage was the two days necessary to recover from the Primarch's 'party' – even in his youth, he had never dealt with such a terrible hangover – then he would grit his teeth and accept it. It was far better than all the alternatives he could come up with.

"For the record, my Lord, two-thirds of the other Chapters that are currently present are busy refilling their Bacta stocks at the *Phalanx* as we speak, or negotiating several warships' repairs with the Mechanicus. Barring any major crisis, the majority of the Space Marines that aren't Space Wolves will have left Sol within two standard weeks."

Rabadash would have preferred for the barbarians to be included among those numbers, but this was alas impossible. Many of the Fenrisian survivors' naval assets were in dire need of resupply, courtesy of their military infrastructure being annihilated by the Traitors' assault. And as Mars had never supplied the Space Wolves in any significant manner since the thirty-first millennium, there were a lot of logistical problems to deal with.

"Good. As long as their numbers are limited and they stay in their ships and stop creating more headaches, they won't be our problem."

And in a few decades, the *Legion* of the Space Wolves would finally be no more, something that would likely result in plenty of toasts from every member of the High Twelve.

"I suppose that leaves *our* problem, then." The grimace was not feigned in the slightest. "I know the Justice Board hasn't finished deliberating, but there are no more than forty hours left before they are forced by law to make a statement. Where is it going?"

"They are going to push the Court-Martial for Ormuz Vandire, my Lord."

Rabadash grimaced. That was a whole mountain of problems he didn't need. But then Admiral Ormuz Vandire wasn't likely to negotiate some sort of compromise, given that any acknowledgement of his incompetence would lead to a Commissar blasting apart whatever he had in his head.

"The charges?"

"Articles 26, 27, 28, 55, and 687 are the chief points of accusation."

That promised to be...interesting, and not in any pleasant sense of the term.

Article 26, in blunt terms, demanded that any officer who didn't prepare enough for a void battle, or who did not sufficiently encourage his officers to fight courageously answer to the God-Emperor for his lack of vigilance and leadership. If an officer was convicted because the Judges agreed the preparations had been insufficient or the fleet's morale poor, the only sentence was death.

Article 27 dealt with the disobedience of an officer. Namely, the officer dragged in front of the court had not obeyed the order of his superiors, whoever they might be, failing to stop the enemy in a timely manner. If you were guilty, the sentence was death.

Article 28 demanded of every officer that they had to do their utmost to destroy the enemy. And yes, the Court-Martial agreeing a Captain or an Admiral had failed to do so meant death for the guilty.

Article 55 was not as bad...theoretically. It dealt with an officer who 'neglected the duties imposed upon him'. The sentence a Court-Martial could hand upon someone was incredibly variable as a result.

And Article 687 was about the prosecution of all crimes which were not listed among the first six hundred and eighty-six articles. Here too, the sentence was variable.

To summarize, out of five articles, there were three which were automatic death sentences, and two which could be, depending on the gravity of the charges everyone could agree on.

It did not seem like much, but in general, few officers were ever dragged in front of a Court-Martial for more than five violations of the Navy Articles. In general, the Commissars made sure you were executed on the spot for treachery or something else before it became necessary to select Judges.

"I see." That explained why Xerxes Vandire was busy using a century's worth of political favours to save his son. "The Judges?"

Officially, the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy was not supposed to be given that information. Unofficially, with the political earthquakes this affair created, everyone who mattered was aware Rabadash was giving his utmost attention to it.

"As you know perfectly well, my Lord, the selection is done impartially among the Navy officers who can reach Holy Terra in time. Obviously, as Ormuz Vandire was recently promoted to Admiral before being sent to Cadia, the candidates must at least be of Admiral rank, and of higher seniority than him."

"I am no longer an Ensign!" The annoying retort didn't please him. For such a useless preliminary remark, that meant the random draw had been very bad. "I want to know the names we are dealing with."

"The highest-ranked of the Judges will be Lord Admiral Benjamin Rath, of Battlefleet Tempestus."

"Hmm..." Not a bad choice. Rabadash didn't know a lot about the man, but he was a fighter, and a stranger to the politics of Battlefleet Solar. "Well, what I know about him makes clear he will try to keep the other Judges in line."

A strict stare was a clear invitation to continue.

"The second Judge is Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum."

The Lord High Admiral grimaced.

"That ambitious bastard," that was all the remarks he permitted himself, even here, in his private quarters. Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum was young for his rank. He had several victories under his belt, and conducted a successful purge of heretics during the Black Crusade. He was popular among the officers' ranks of Battlefleet Solar. There had been several rumours he owed a few favours to Clan Vandire for accelerating his promotions in the last decade.

And most problematic from Rabadash's view, Rudolf von Goldenbaum was very ambitious.

"Next is Lord Admiral Thomas von Stockhausen."

That one was a familiar name too. Thomas had been one of his subordinates, and a brilliant officer when it came to the defence of several vital Navy shipyards and major orbital facilities. Unfortunately, Rabadash also knew very well that in politics, his support went to the side who could offer him all the comforts he enjoyed so much. And Stockhausen was very old now.

"This is all the Lord Admirals chosen. Stepping down in rank, we have High Admiral Helga Lansung."

In his thoughts, Rabadash wondered how many grimaces he was going to make before this listing was over. The Lansung Dynasty had given so many Lords and Lady Admirals to the Imperial Navy that naming them all would take several hours. And they had given the Imperium several High Lords. Sometimes it had ended in disaster when their ambition overrode their strategic skills, but many times they had solidified their already huge powerbase.

"There is Admiral Karl Gustav Kempf...of Battlefleet Cadia."

"By the Golden Throne, has this list of Judges been chosen deliberately to give me the biggest headache possible?"

He didn't know Karl Gustav Kempf. But over a hundred senior officers of Battlefleet Cadia had vocally demanded the head of Ormuz Vandire, and the mood grew increasingly bloodthirsty the closer you got to the Cadian Gate.

Maybe Kempf would be an exception. But his Admiral's instinct told him 'no'.

'And last, my Lord...Admiral Miranda Lawson of Battlefleet Solar."

Rabadash sighed.

"I suppose it's too much to hope we have *another* Admiral named Miranda Lawson who isn't in command of the Naval Yards of Jupiter?"

"Err...yes, my Lord. I mean, she is the Admiral Lawson you just mentioned."

"An Admiral who is incredibly famous for the hatred she feels for Lord Admiral von Goldenbaum."

The hatred was so well-known, in fact, that the personnel of the Navy in charge of organising the important receptions generally tried to invite one Dynasty or the other, never both at the same time. And when they couldn't avoid summoning the two at the same hour and location, extreme precautions were taken so that the two stayed *at least* a kilometre away from each other.

The two of them being Judges in the same room...it was going to end very, very badly. And as a responsible man, there was only one order he could give.

"Change the Judges. We have the right to cancel the selection and try again twice, if we believe the impartiality of the Court is going to be a problem."

"My Lord..." a data-slate was presented. On it, there was a long list of names. Names that made him freeze on the spot. "This is the third selection...and by far the least politically explosive of the three."

"There really are days when you prefer a violent battle with the greenskins..."

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**East of the ruins of the Pharsalus Line**

**2.147.311M35**

**Chapter Master Aeonid Thiel**

While the plains' corruption had been cleansed by a vigorous bombardment of golden light, there was no denying that everything north-east of the Pharsalus Fields had been utterly destroyed.

As such, it was a good place to organise a real-life test of the Sphinx artillery guns.

And, Aeonid acknowledged as ten of them thundered over twenty times each, it was indeed an impressive weapon.

The targets were between forty and fifty kilometres away, but the accuracy achieved by each gun was of ninety-two percent hits dead-on target. None of the special ammunition extending range and fire-control was used; those were the same shells that had been used by the millions on every battlefield from Tigrus to Ultramar.

"Thank you for the demonstration, Colonel," the new Chapter Master of the Ultramarines told the Andes Colonel who had agreed to come here and conduct the 'test'. "Your crews make the Imperium proud."

"We're trying our best, Chapter Master." The officer answered after saluting.

Aeonid nodded and after a last examination of the procedures, marched to join the two other Space Marines who had been watching the same test, albeit from the top of what had been a ruined wall – last testimony that Traitor Titans were better stopped by loyalist Titans.

"Your opinion?"

"I like them," Wolf Lord Olav Direbear bluntly declared, as Aeonid had known he would. "I like them a lot! There is only one problem..."

"Yes?"

"The name. Sphinx really feels too Prosperan. Aside from that, this is a fine artillery battery we have there!"

The new Chapter Master shook his head. Of course, trust the Wolves to think the name was the big problem when everything else was fine.

"Captain?" He turned to the other Space Marine.

"I've no problem with the name," Clodius Bassanius, Captain of the Aurora Chapter, assured him with a smile. "And I agree with the Wolf Lord, this is a fine gun. The fire-control is excellent; as long as the shell stocks hold, these guns will slaughter everything at a distance of over forty kilometres, and the only way for an enemy to avoid that is to fortify a world like the Traitor Fourth. Since in general the Imperial Guard regiments don't make a habit of hunting the Iron Warriors in their own strongholds, this isn't that much of a problem."

"But?" Aeonid didn't know the Auroran very well, but all Ultramarines who had fought with him insisted he was a perfectionist.

"But for an Adeptus Astartes Chapter, the lack of an autoloader is a significant drawback. Hit-and-run tactics are still possible, the Sphinx can send five shells in a minute before leaving its firing position, but the users still need to leave the howitzer and expose themselves."

"Many of the existing guns we have share the same weaknesses, cousin," Olav shrugged. "And they can't store fifty shells before needing resupply."

"I know," Clodius answered neutrally. "But like I said, the lack of an autoloader is a problem. Especially when the Mechanicus clearly developed a reliable one for the Khan tank."

"Any reason for this paradigm?" Aeonid inquired.

"Nothing's been actually confirmed, but the Andes artillerists have a theoretical: the Magi Dominus in charge of the project were too eager for the good of the guns. They presented a superb auto-loader, which had all the military capacities one might want...and it was so over-engineered that when it jammed or broke, the gun became completely useless. Second theoretical: these creations, as we know from long experience, tend to jam or break far more frequently than cruder and simpler devices."

Practical: Lady Weaver or one of her Generals had decided that in the end, no autoloader was better than a non-functioning autoloader. Given the performance of the Sphinx guns at Macragge and on other battlefields, the son of Guilliman knew this had not been an illogical decision.

"Your recommendation?"

"Oh, we are going to produce it," Captain Bassanius assured him. "We are armoured assault specialists, we aren't going to miss an opportunity like this to increase the firepower of our mobile artillery arsenal!"

The Auroran eyes grew more contemplative.

"Did Lady Weaver or her draconic deputy say anything about template sales, Chapter Master?"

"No, the last meeting that was organised wasn't about artillery." Aeonid informed his fellow son of Guilliman. "You want to produce the Sphinx guns on Firestorm?"

Said by another Chapter, it would have been arrogant, but Firestorm, homeworld of the Aurora Chapter, was literally covered in macro-manufactorums and other industrial complexes. The Industrial World was able to provide all of the vehicles and heavy weaponry the specialists of armoured assaults used year after year.

Clodius' lips twitched.

"I don't know if we will call them Sphinxes...if only to preserve the delicate sensibilities of a few Space Wolves."

Next to him, a certain Wolf Lord growled.

"But yes, I would prefer the artillery guns to be directly produced in Firestorm's manufactorums, if feasible. We can likely build them within a few years; there were quite a few debates about stopping the production of towed Basilisks in the last decades. The Sphinx is certainly the answer we of Firestorm were seeking all along. Self-propelled howitzers are the practical future; they are mobile, armoured, and accurate."

"Why not buy them directly from the Spider Lady?" Olav Direbear asked with curiosity.

"Industrial capacity," the Auroran answered. "The Brothers of the Red didn't hide that Nyx is expanding fast to meet the high demands of the Imperial Guard. I've no doubt Astartes Chapters would get a high priority, but the Guard never has enough artillery for all its campaigns; we might need years of waiting between each fulfilled order. But if we have to buy a few thousand guns to get the template and the rights to produce it in mass, my Chapter Master will likely support it. There might be a few changes needed for Astartes use, but the Sphinx is a fine piece."

"Archer," Olav Direbear grumbled, and the two sons of Guilliman turned towards him. "'Archer' is a better name than 'Sphinx'."

"I see the sons of Russ have their priorities straight. What would we do without them?" Aeonid joked.

"You would shout 'Courage and Honour'," the Space Wolf didn't miss the repartee, obviously. "And refuse to savour every good thing life gives us."

Clodius Bassanius snorted.

"The Primarch preserve us from what 'good things' your Companies want us to emulate! I think that is everything I wanted to say about the artillery batteries for now."

"Yes, let's change the subject to something even more interesting," Olav bared his teeth, "the tanks!"

If anything, the Auroran didn't seem to share the enthusiasm of their 'friend of bears' cousin.

"It's certain categories of tanks which are the problem. For the light tanks, the Predator is fulfilling the needs of the Adeptus Astartes perfectly. Thousands are built every year; multiple variants exist that allow it to adapt to different types of battlefield; and it remains a design easy to repair provided the Techmarines have the spare parts for it. But as the fighting here and elsewhere proved recently, the light tank isn't the problem. The trouble is with the Main Battle Tanks and the Heavy Tanks. Even at Firestorm, production of Land Raiders is more handcraft than true mass-production."

"Oh? That's all? Well, I have a solution to your problem!" To say Clodius gave an unimpressed expression hearing the Wolf's boast was understating things mildly. "We resume the production of Sicaran Battle Tanks. We order thousands of Sicaran Tanks. Surely there's a Forge World or two who remember how to build them, right?"

The two sons of Guilliman looked at each other. This was...not a bad idea at all. The Sicaran had been a common sight during the Great Crusade. And their Accelerator Guns had been really appreciated by the Astartes of all Legions. Aeonid didn't remember whose Forge World had been in charge of the main production, but it certainly had been destroyed during the Heresy, for the supply of Sicarans had never recovered after the Scouring was declared over.

"I think it is definitely something worth exploring," the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines conceded. "And since our ancient weapons of the Great Crusade were mentioned, there are other things we might benefit from bringing back, assuming of course the industrial expertise exists. "I've seen our Salamander cousins use a few Fellglaive super-heavies, and the Kratos could also deliver a lot of firepower..."

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Ramilies-class Starfort *Pax Imperialis***

**0.150.311M35**

**Admiral Ormuz Vandire**

Ormuz wanted to glare at the insolent plebeians crowding the hall.

It was bad enough the Court-Martial had been convened, but he had thought that at least there would be no public.

Instead, the imbeciles of the Admiralty had decreed there would be no *civilian* public. A week ago, it had been decided that no one below the rank of Lieutenant was to be anywhere near the *Pax Imperialis'* gigantic hall in which the Court-Martial was to be held.

Ormuz dearly wished they had forbidden all these plebeians from attending. Admirals of Battlefleet Sol and the Core Worlds of Segmentum Solar had better things to do than watch judicial proceedings all day, but that was why they had sent the junior members of their staffs.

Thankfully, no room in the vast structure of the *Pax Imperialis* was big enough to equal a sports stadium. There couldn't be more than a thousand seats, and those included everyone's seats: the Judges', his lawyers', and those of the many men and women whose presence was required by the Lex and the Codes of the Imperial Navy.

Ormuz wished there was no one. At this moment, he wished for the Judges to arrive, declare him innocent, and for everyone to leave, preferably with several Lieutenants seething, the plebeian lackeys knowing they had now to inform their masters of their plans' failures.

But it wasn't going to happen. All the lawyers his father had sent to defend him had made that clear.

And unfortunately, it made sense. If his innocence was announced in the first seconds, no one would have bothered with a Court-Martial. That was the bad news.

On the other hand, they clearly didn't have enough to shoot him without organising this farce. Otherwise the Commissars would already have done it.

Ormuz shivered inside when, as the thought crossed his mind, four black-clad members of the Commissariat showed up and went to stand on each side of the long table which was soon going to be filled by the Judges. The member of Clan Vandire had always deeply disliked the trigger-happy skeletons of the Commissariat, but now their mere sight gave him the urge to shoot one.

"All rise for the Honourable Judges!"

They arrived one by one.

Normally, that was not supposed to happen. They were supposed to arrive in a neat and disciplined column, not only to show their support of Navy Justice, but also because it showed the other Adeptuses that yes, the Imperial Navy was united.

Ormuz wanted to believe it was his good luck. Unfortunately, he knew enough about the workings of Battlefleet Sol to understand it had more to do with the internal feuds of Battlefleet Sol than anything he might do.

"The First Honourable Judge, Admiral Miranda Lawson, of Battlefleet Sol."

Most of the people in the room were familiar with the name and the woman behind it. Tall, athletic, with long black hair, Miranda Lawson could have passed as thirty as she entered. And yes, Ormuz was ready to admit in the privacy of his own mind: she was beautiful, and did not look at all like rejuvenation treatments had been used on her. Yet they had, for she was more than a hundred years old. Daughter and granddaughter of Lords Admiral, the woman came from one of the greatest dynasties of Battlefleet Sol. And when she had been sent to Jupiter in order to mobilise tens of thousands of capital ships so that the Black Crusade met a wall of adamantium and guns, the work had been so superlative it had almost made everyone forgot her habit of killing several officers in duels.

But when you watched in her 'natural element', Miranda Lawson was frightening...and unfortunately, Ormuz could see it today. It was like a cube of ice had decided to take female appearance. There was something inhuman lurking behind these dark eyes. The white-black uniform – the relic of ancient Jupiter traditions that had been allowed to endure – looked incredibly sinister on her.

"The Second Honourable Judge, Admiral Karl Gustav Kempf, of Battlefleet Cadia."

Ormuz didn't really know if Lawson would vote to execute him. It all depended on von Goldenbaum. If the Lord Admiral voted in favour of acquittal, then the cold-blooded woman would vote for his death, but at least the member of Clan Vandire could console himself it wouldn't be personal.

But the way the eyes of Kempf focused on him told everything there was to know.

Kempf was going to vote for death. He was from Battlefleet Cadia, and like all of his band of brutes, he had done his best to stab the reinforcements of Solar in the back. Not a thank you for all the Battleships that had been brought to the frontlines, and an entire Hive's worth of recriminations and complaints.

If it had been up to him, Ormuz would have let a few billions of Cadians die, just to teach them a salutary lesson before claiming the great victory he was due.

Yes, Kempf was a brute. He was the complete opposite of Lawson, amusingly. His shoulders were enormous; for all his attempt to present himself in his best appearance, his dark brown hair was very unkempt, and honestly, the nose...the nose! It looked like it had been broken at least three times until it was inflated like a large balloon. If there was a contest of ugliness spontaneously declared, Kempf stood more than decent chances to win it.

Alas, he was still senior to Ormuz...and thus could be one of the Judges today.

"The Third Honourable Judge, High Admiral Helga Lansung, of Battlefleet Sol."

After a representative from the Lawson Dynasty, they had the Lansung right after.

Ormuz wished to say that it was a pleasure, but it would be a bold lie.

She looked more human than Lawson...and the two completely ignored each other. That wasn't exactly a surprise. In looks alone, they had nothing in common. Lansung had opted for short brown hair, and it was clear that she had gained weight since her last deployment thirty years ago. The Power Sword that was tied to her belt appeared to be mainly for parades and galas, given how ridiculously impractical it looked – seriously, there were way too many gemstones carved into the hilt for it to be otherwise.

Bad sign or good sign? There was an expression of utter boredom on her face as she took her seat.

"The Fourth Honourable Judge, Lord Admiral Thomas von Stockhausen, of Battlefleet Sol."

It would have been bad for him to laugh, but the urge was there.

Half-bald, old to a point the rejuvenation treatments were having ever-diminishing returns, von Stockhausen looked like everyone's favourite grandfather who had suddenly decided to drop by in order to solve the family's problems.

Thankfully, he was on his side.

"The Fifth Honourable Judge, Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum, of Battlefleet Sol."

Having never met him before, Ormuz didn't know what to expect.

When his eyes fell upon him, he couldn't believe his eyes.

*That*, his mind whispered to him, *was how a true Lord Admiral should look like.*

The man was tall and muscled, but not to the ridiculous extremes Kempf had reached.

He was in the black uniform of Battlefleet Sol, but the majority of the officers present had it.

There was...there was something *powerful* around him. Not like the accursed psykers of the Telepathica, the witchery of the Warp. It wasn't something that was spread by thousands of whistles and screams from men standing at attention.

Rudolf von Goldenbaum...had a *presence*.

There was something that told Ormuz this man could fight an asteroid with nothing but his fists, and the asteroid would lose.

"The Sixth Honourable Judge, Lord Admiral Benjamin Rath, of Battlefleet Bakka."

If anyone had any doubt about the mutual hatred of the Lawson and von Goldenbaum Naval Dynasties, everyone could be reassured: Miranda Lawson and Rudolf von Goldenbaum were able to lower the temperature of the hall by ten degrees when they glared at each other.

The words in the background continued, but Ormuz was unable to move his eyes away when the dreaded words were uttered.

"The Court is now in session."

His blade, the blade that had been taken from the Zion Ancestral Armoury, was placed in front of the Judges, without its scabbard.

For the moment, it wasn't pointed at anyone, a sign the Court-Martial had not reached a verdict.

Ormuz prayed that in the end, the point would not be pointed at him.

There were words, more words of accusation. Ormuz didn't really try to listen to them. The lawyers had told him he needed to keep his calm, and he couldn't be calm if he was angry because the Cadian Admirals were in a hurry to get rid of him so that their own mistakes were utterly forgotten.

Nevertheless, for all his attempts to ignore them, he couldn't help but glimpse a few of the dreaded accusations. Article Twenty-Six...Article Twenty-Eight...Article Six Hundred and Eighty-Seven...he didn't know that Article, honestly.

"Admiral Ormuz Vandire, flag officer of Battlefleet Sol, you stand accused for your actions in the Cadian System, during which you were commanding a Battlefleet of His Most Holy Majesty, with the Retribution-class Battleship *Intolerant* as your flagship. How do you plead?"

This one, he wasn't going to deny, was the easy part.

"Not guilty, your Honour."

"Let it be recorded that the defendant pleads not guilty."

The next words he ignored.

It was so much buzzing, the Judges gave the word for the prosecution to begin its ridiculous accusations...blah, blah, blah...

Then they began to call the witnesses, and Ormuz couldn't believe his eyes.

There was a Space Marine.

No, not *a* Space Marine.

*The* Space Marine.

It was the same barbarian-brute that had challenged his right to command! It was his fault! This Court-Martial was his fault!

And all Ormuz could do was to remain silent when the words of this...this insolent creature, cut through the hall effortlessly.

"The Admiral was unprepared to face the Traitor Armada."

**Lord** **Admiral Benjamin Rath**

The end of a Court-Martial's first day was always important.

In some cases, of course, it was the first and last day of the Court-Martial. There were rules, but the Imperial Navy wasn't in the mood to waste the time of its senior officers just because the opportunity presented itself.

In three of the many judicial procedures he had presided over during his long career, Benjamin had been lucky enough for the deliberations to end within twenty-four hours of the session opening. The fourth case had been sufficiently bad to make him realise how lucky he had been to obtain a verdict for the three others.

Alas, the Bakka-born Admiral knew today’s Court Martial was one of the worst cases that could drop on the head of a senior officer. One only had to look at the list of witnesses produced by the accusation and the defence. The former had summoned Space Marines and officers hailing from the Cadian Gate. The latter had invited officers of Battlefleet Solar.

Yes, it was a Court-Martial filled with politics. Everyone claiming otherwise was either an imbecile or a liar.

"Your opinions, if you don't mind, my fellow Judges."

"In my opinion, it is extremely clear what we must do." Thomas von Stockhausen's eyes refused to meet his. Really, everything in the old man's behaviour screamed 'evasive' and 'defensive'. "We must acquit Admiral Ormuz Vandire. The accusations are clearly made up by the Adeptus Astartes. And we aren't going to let them dictate anything to the Imperial Navy."

"Coward."

The old eyes immediately pivoted towards Kempf.

"Excuse me?"

"I said 'coward'," the bulky officer of Battlefleet Cadia repeated forcefully. "Somehow, I failed to see you standing up today to demand all the testimonies of the Space Marines be discarded at once. If you have the gall to do it, do it in front of the Astartes."

"The Articles make the procedure completely legal," Stockhausen insisted, "and I ask at once to remove this accusation of cowardice!"

"Or what?" Kempf snorted. "Are you going to challenge me to a duel?"

Thomas von Stockhausen flinched before visibly paling. For good reason, Benjamin had to admit. Admiral Karl Gustav Kempf lacked tact and political influence here, but these issues really didn't matter when one officer faced another on the duelling grounds. Kempf was at least one hundred years younger than von Stockhausen, and no officer of Battlefleet Cadia survived to his current rank without wading through the blood of heretics. If there was a duel, it would be extremely quick, and it wouldn't be the Cadian who would be buried afterwards.

There was silence for some twenty seconds. It was really unpleasant to sit and be a party to it. They were all predators here, and none of them would ever be friends. At best, some of them could be called allies of circumstance. Benjamin knew he would have had no problem having a man like Kempf serving under him, and should their ranks be reversed, serving under him on the battlefield would not cause problems.

But the others...

"Let's not waste our precious time. I have better things to do." Miranda Lawson was the one who broke the silence. "Ormuz Vandire is an incompetent wastrel, and if the surviving Commissars aboard his Battlefleet had any spine, they would have shot him the moment the battle was over. Millions died by his fault. I suppose military skills, loyalty, and intelligence aren't something the Solars of a High Lord can pay for. Let's shoot the grox and send a signal to everyone in the Imperial Navy that no matter how influential your daddy, there's still a moment where all the nepotism in the galaxy won't save you."

"The hypocrisy is strong today," Rudolf von Goldenbaum smiled, and Benjamin von Rath had an instinctive urge to punch the man in the face. He didn't know why...or no, he knew exactly why. The other Lord Admiral's eyes and expression reminded him some of the mega-snakes he had seen in a Tempestus zoo some years ago. "You of all people speaking of nepotism. Your family bought your way out of trouble."

Benjamin had thought he had seen the worst of the glares coming from Miranda Lawson. He was completely wrong. *Now* the black-haired beauty of Sol was glaring, and her gaze was frightening.

"One day I will remove your head from your shoulders."

"You aren't going to challenge me to a duel?"

"What would be the point? We all know you will refuse. The only moment the great Rudolf von Goldenbaum accepts to fight pirates is when they are missing limbs and already disarmed. Otherwise it would represent intolerable risks, no?"

"You have failed to present any evidence of your accusations," Helga Lansung sneered.

The disgust was evident in the expression Miranda Lawson allowed them to see.

"The Lansung tradition is strong, I see."

"What is that supposed to-"

"Apologise!" Thomas von Stockhausen commanded...the martial tone falling completely flat. "You tarnish the honour of Battlefleet Sol with your venomous words!"

The old Lord Admiral had committed a mistake. Now it was his turn to be the one who endured the 'venom'.

"What do you know of the honour of Battlefleet Sol, you coward? You lost the Starfort *Iserlohn* in an afternoon, and your greatest victory was avoiding a Court-Martial in exchange for being sent to the Archives Department!"

"I will see you excoriated for this, Lawson," Rudolf von Goldenbaum promised.

"Why?" Kempf asked bluntly. "She is just saying out loud what every officer of Battlefleet Cadia thinks of you. Most of the time, your cronies confiscate enormous Battlefleets and all the resources that go with them while we deploy wherever the Imperium needs us!"

"If you fought as well as you spoke, maybe so many heretics wouldn't have broken through-"

"ENOUGH!" Benjamin barked. "ENOUGH ALL OF YOU!"

Mercifully, by the grace of the Golden Throne, they obeyed.

"This is absolutely shameful behaviour." The Bakka-born Lord Admiral spoke. He couldn't even demand they formally acknowledge their words had been out of order; even a blind fool would have recognised it as a lost cause. "We are here to decide the outcome of judicial proceedings. And this is exactly what we are going to do. So stop it, here and now. Yes, Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum?"

"Ormuz Vandire is the victim of an odious conspiracy that originated in the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes and is now pursued by deluded officers of the great Imperial Navy. He must be acquitted at once. I vote to clear him of all charges."

"Ormuz Vandire deserves death," Kempf managed to not snarl the words, something that cost him dearly. "Articles Twenty-Six, Twenty-Seven and Twenty-Eight make clear what the God-Emperor expects of His officers, and this...this *Vandire* has fallen abysmally short. He's guilty and for the honour of those fell against the heretics, the verdict must be death."

"Not guilty," Thomas von Stockhausen coughed several times before managing to utter the words. "I vote for Admiral Ormuz to be acquitted at once."

"Not guilty," Helga Lansung repeated, though the female High Admiral looked far less strident about supporting a Vandire.

"Guilty," Miranda Lawson sneered, "and if I have my way, I want it to be painful. If it hadn't been for that incompetent, the Cadians may have been able to inflict them an even worse strategic defeat than they did."

"Ormuz Vandire didn't prepare for this battle properly, and outright failed to adapt to a very dangerous situation when facing it," Benjamin Rath finished. He wouldn't be able to look his officers in the eye if he didn't admit it. "He is guilty, for each of the five Articles the Court brought against him."

And before he said the words, the Lord Admiral knew there was going to be a massive problem.

It was three against three...and there was little chance of any of the Judges changing their vote.

It was a deadlock.

God-Emperor, this was going to be a political nightmare...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Baal System**

**Baal**

**Arx Murus in construction – outer defences of the Arx Angelicum**

**5.152.311M35**

**Aspirant** **Hamilcar**

"This wasn't what I expected after the contests of Angel's Fall-"

"We know!" Hamilcar and all fellow Aspirants answered in a unique chorus.

"Hey, I didn't finish what I wanted to say!"

"We know what you were about to say, Magon!" Hanno retorted hotly. "Now stop complaining and help us dig! We were told very clearly this section had to be done before they called us for the mock battle!"

"What good is it going to do?" The young boy that was the loudmouth of their group grumbled, though he obeyed in the end, taking up his spade anew. "There's a dust storm coming...and this wall is way too big to be protected by mere spades and the other tools we have."

"It matters because the Angels told us it would," Hamilcar replied. "Yes, we aren't doing much work. Yes, we don't have the machines of those strange men in red robes. But we have been chosen. And thank to our efforts, the Fortress of Angels will rise from the sands once more."

The Fortress of Angels wasn't the true name, of course. The true name was...Arx Angelicum.

When he had seen it the first time, Hamilcar had been crushed by the size and magnificence of it. Certainly Baalfora had nothing that could really compare to it.

It had taken him only a couple of days – and their first 'challenge-games' outside – to realise that no matter how big he believed the great fortress to be, there were enormous sections of it which were invisible, buried under the sand.

"I think there's something happening," Hanno whispered to him as they continued throwing the sand away while trying to keep most of their strength for the trials ahead. "The soldiers in dark blue? They looked very excited this morning."

"Don't tell Magon," Hamilcar chuckled. "He's convinced every day there's something important happening."

"Very funny," Hanno rolled his eyes, "you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do."

The secrets of the Angels were well-kept, but there had always been tales and legends about their Fortress. Many things that all Aspirants had seen were never mentioned in the legends. The soldiers, the red-robed strangers...no one had really said anything about them before.

"I think," Hamilcar continued to murmur as they worked as best they could, "that they are new. The Arx Angelicum wouldn't have been buried under the sand like it was if they were here for the time to organise ten trials at Angel's Fall."

"I agree. The question then is 'why now?'"

"That I don't know," the young Aspirant admitted. "But there are a lot of things that don't make sense. They use a lot of men to hunt all scorpions and insect they can find, along with hundreds of Catch Spiders. Why do they want all of them? Those things can't be tamed, and the moment they're out of the cages, they will kill everyone they can!"

The only thing Hamilcar was sure about was that the foreigners were here by the will of the Angels; the masters of the Arx Angelicum appearing to be very satisfied with the things the red robes and the Scorpion-hunters were doing.

"Well," Magon had alas considered a few minutes of silence were too many, "do you want-"

A massive amount of noise stopped him from pursuing one of his semi-amusing rambles.

"By the feathers of Baalfora! Look at that!"

Hamilcar looked. It wasn't possible to do otherwise.

Suddenly, the sky was filled with the winged mounts of the Angel.

They had seen a few of them before, along with thousands of uglier sky-chariots used by the strangers.

But here they were angelic.

And what they had taken for a vast flock of Angels was in reality only the beginning.

They were magnificent. They were painted in multitudes of red, gold, and white.

They were the sky-chariots of the Angels.

Then they landed. There were loud strident noises, hisses that were becoming more and more familiar, and entrances opening where before there had been walls of metal.

And finally, they came out.

Hamilcar breathed out after a few seconds. The stupefaction had at first cut his respiration.

The Angels were here. And there were so many of them...there had to be hundreds, no thousands!

It was a mass of red armours, an invincible angelic host.

Golden lights shone above. More Angels came. Before long they had to land on the sands, for there wasn't enough space anymore on the main plaza usually used for that sort of thing.

"Look at that!" Magon exclaimed. "Look at that! All these Angels...for them to come like that, surely a great victory was won!"

Hamilcar knew before the loudmouth of their party had finished speaking that it was wrong. Or maybe not quite wrong. Maybe there had been a victory, there were so many Angels assembled it was impossible imagining them having lost if they were all fighting together.

But as red banners were lowered in a sign no one of Baalfora would misunderstand, as Angels began to form two columns and many knelt on the red sands, Hamilcar knew what was going to happen long before the golden sarcophagus was revealed to the Aspirants' eyes.

"They haven't returned to celebrate, Magon. They have come here to mourn."

**Arx Angelicum**

**Dome of Angels**

**Heavenward Redoubt**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The Dome of Angels was a marvel Gavreel was going to remember for as long as he lived, and it wasn't because Astartes had a quasi-eidetic memory.

Everything his Lady had tried to create with the Hagia Sanguinala was here in some form. There were pillars in the form of winged angels that seemed to be ready to take flight at any moment. There were flamboyant mosaics that dated back to the Age of the Great Crusade, protected behind shimmering force fields. There was an abundance of gold and rubies. There were thousands of sculptures, many representing scenes of Sanguinius' youth, with the Primarch and the humans around him all represented true to scale.

The Arx Angelicum was hardly defenceless. Like *Skyfall*, the vast orbital docks above their heads, it was a work of art turned to military purposes. And the closer they got to the heart of the Dome of Angels, the more beautiful the artworks became. The defences were more and more exquisitely hidden too, of course.

Yes, the Heavenward Redoubt and every facet of the Arx Angelicum was something the former Dark Angel would remember for the rest of his life.

But it would always be a memory filled with melancholy. And though he couldn't speak for the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard and the Chapters of the Blood, Gavreel was sure it was the same for them.

They were mourning the loss of a Chapter Master. It was done under a dome that was so masterly worked they had the impression of a rain of rubies perpetually falling upon their heads. The sheer amount of effort that had gone into making sure the light of Baal was filtered like this must have been phenomenal.

It was a great honour to be invited here.

It wouldn't bring back Chapter Master Malakbel and all those who had fallen during Operation Stalingrad.

The songs of mourning rose in the air, creating melodies which ranged from the exceptional to the sublime.

The Angels sang because many of them were no longer among the living.

The Angels sang because too much had been taken from them in the last millennia.

The Angels sang because there was a time for melancholia and remembering the dead, and this time had come once more.

But the Angels also sang because these losses had not been in vain, and while there had been death of brothers across the stars, another dawn would rise on Baal.

Many Aspirants were coming to Baal, as selections had been made on worlds that were protected by the sons of Sanguinius. They would in time pass the trials of the Blood, and the Blood Angels would regain the strength that had been theirs.

The First Company and Chapter Master Malakbel would be avenged.

The songs continued, and soon enough, the rhythm and the language were familiar enough so that every Space Marine sang.

Then their Lady joined them.

Gavreel would remember much, but more about the intensity of her voice.

The Sergeant remembered crying.

She cried.

They cried.

And when the songs ended, the sadness and the melancholia had been all poured into the mourning ceremony.

Battle-brothers of the Blood Angels took away the coffin-sarcophagi of their fallen one by one.

In time, the last one which remained was the one containing the mortal remains of the Chapter Master.

Then he was taken away too, the Sanguinary Guard itself escorting him to his final resting place.

The ruby light began to fade.

But they were still here.

They were still alive, and their duty continued. For Mankind. For the Emperor. For Sanguinius. For the memory of all those Blood Angels who had fallen since there were Blood Angels breathing and fighting.

For Weaver.

**The Golden Sarcophagus – the tomb of the Great Angel**

**Lady** **General Militant Taylor Hebert**

As could be expected, the place Sanguinius had been laid to rest had the most sublime artworks of all Baal.

After witnessing the art the Blood Angels kept in the Arx Angelicum, it might have been pretentious to say it aloud.

But once you walked the Eternity Avenue...well, you understood.

Taylor hadn't cried.

The tears she had to mourn had already been shed hours ago.

But the rooms leading to the final sanctum were so beautiful you felt privileged just by looking at them.

And let there be no mistake, it was a privilege. Unlike the Ultramarines, the Blood Angels had not opened it to the potential flows of millions of pilgrims.

A good part of Taylor felt that it had been wise.

The mosaics, the paintings, the representations of the life of Sanguinius...all of the unique artworks were protected from the ravages of time, yet they seemed so fragile behind the glass and the protective fields that you feared a single touch would be too much for many of them.

Yet there was a part of her that wished, no, yearned, for billions to cry, for the tomb of the Primarch was just too beautiful.

As you moved past two monumental angelic statues, you arrived at the golden sarcophagus which gave its name to the tomb-hall.

What could be said that hadn't been said before? The sons of Sanguinius had created something from gold, Baal rubies, and other extremely rare carmine gems of old that would never be recreated...and maybe that was for the best.

They had already buried too many loyal sons of the Emperor.

The light was omnipresent in the sanctum. The Blood Angels had made sure the spherical structure holding the sarcophagus was always bathed in it; the only difference depending on the hour you visited was if it was ruby light or gold light.

It was beautiful. But it was just light. When her fingers had touched the exquisite coffin – for that was what it was, alas – there had been no sensation of recognition. She couldn't feel the power of the Emperor anywhere.

Sanguinius was with his father. He had been there for millennia. The Blood Angels had brought back his mortal remains to Baal, but they hadn't brought back his soul.

"The Sanguinary Guard charged me to tell you that if you want the spear, it is yours. You have the right to wield it."

Taylor barely gave a glance to the enormous golden weapon before shaking her head.

"I am honoured, Gamaliel, by the trust your brothers have in me. But the Spear is so long it just wouldn't be practical."

The *Spear of Telesto* was one of these weapons which felt so attractive you would perpetually fear breaking it on a battlefield. Clearly, this was a false impression: Sanguinius had wielded it countless times without breaking it.

According to the tales, the energy blast that it could unleash vaporised everyone who didn't have the blood of Sanguinius in his veins.

Unfortunately, it remained a Primarch's weapon, meaning that even for extremely tall Space Marines, wielding it would be problematic. The elegant moves Sanguinius had used to claim the lives of countless enemies would be denied to an Astartes.

And Taylor was far, far smaller than any Astartes. She had received incredible gifts and skills. But the Basileia of Nyx simply did not have the body to wield the *Spear of Telesto*.

"It is your decision, my Lady."

Taylor didn't chuckle. It would feel...disrespectful.

"I have the best weapons a Lady General Militant can hope to wield. There's no need to take what belongs to the Great Angel. Let the *Spear of Telesto* and the *Blade Encarmine* stay here. Who knows, they might be wielded again one day...but not by my hand."

"I will relay your words...and I hope you realise, it is extremely unlikely anyone will dare take them from this hall, after the sermons the Sanguinary Priests will use to support them."

"The Sanguinary Priests...they and every battle-brother of the Arx Angelicum will make their choices, Gamaliel. This is the first time I visit Baal, and while I hope it definitely won't be the last, it would be...arrogant of me to impose decisions on a planet where I am in many ways a curious guest."

Similarly, it was not her place to tell the Blood Angels who was to be their new Chapter Master, as they were currently busy deciding that even as Gamaliel showed her the Marvels of Baal.

"You are far more than any curious guest has any hope of being, my Lady. You are one of our benefactors, to start with."

"On that point, I am not going to disagree." Thousands of Tech-Priests and guardsmen had been deployed to Baal so that the Arx Angelicum could be restored to its previous glory. Needless to say, it was a process that was going to take years...but the plans she had agreed with the former Regent of Baal were in motion, and long-term projects needed long-term planning.

They left the Golden Sarcophagus Hall slowly. Taylor looked behind her many times...even with her powers, strange feelings assailed her in this mausoleum. It was as if she feared she was going to wake up, and this beauty would be revealed as an illusion.

It was only when Puriel came to join them while they were watching a Knight-sized rendition of Sanguinius battling the Megarachnids of Murder that the insect-mistress spoke again.

"I doubt the deliberations to choose a new Chapter Master have ended so quickly."

There were a few Captains who were considered favourites in the 'masterly race', but none had a decisive advantage over their peers.

"The deliberations are not over." The Sanguinary Guard of the Angels Encarmine confirmed. "It is another issue which may require your attention."

Taylor closed her eyes...and she felt something. It was distant, but it was getting closer by the second. And there was a taste of **Sacrifice** to it.

"And what is this issue?" She asked, her curiosity properly teased.

"Five transports came out of the Warp a few minutes ago. While they were all built by the Imperium, all of them were lost in recent centuries during pirate raids. Now they are back...and according to the communications the watch officers had with them, they are filled with former slaves who escaped the Webway."

Taylor raised an eyebrow...and smiled.

"Well, it seems a certain clown decided to honour his part of the deal. It seems the lasguns I delivered may have led to the most efficient slave insurrection in recent history."

"Yes, my Lady. But there's another issue. There are a few Eldar aboard these transports. And they want to speak with you."

The Lady General Militant laughed. Yes, of course, they did.

"You'd better tell Renaldo to prepare our Thunderhawk, Gamaliel. It seems we have a few more interesting tales to hear today..."

**Transport Ship *Crown of Freedom* – docked to *Skyfall***

**Phoenix Lord Asurmen**

Asurmen was no stranger to cursed wounds, but the majority of times, the pain they inflicted faded rapidly.

Sadly, the injuries he had suffered at Shaa-Dom were proving to be agonising exceptions to the rule.

In the brief moments of clarity, the Phoenix Lord had tried to guess why. Was it because Khaine had died, and thus the blessings of the Path of the Warrior had diminished in consequence? Was it because Asurmen's soul had been wounded by the Second Fall? Or was it because Kharsaq El'Uriaq, much like his fell master, was a master of poisons and chaotic spite?

All of these reasons could be true...or none of them might be.

And Asurmen wasn't exactly in a condition to verify each guess. The first Dire Avenger was already unable to leave the bed into which the Harlequins had pushed him after the Battle of the Basilisk Port ended.

Then all thoughts ended as something pressed against his armoured chest, and Asuryan screamed.

For several seconds, it was like someone was pouring something extremely hot inside his flesh. It was as if his lungs were told to beat, yet his ribs were smashed with something incredibly heavy. His head was told to think, but there was someone hammering him with fists. There was pain, so much pain.

And suddenly everything ended.

Asuryan opened his eyes, which he didn't remember having closed.

In front of his eyes, in the palm of a golden hand, there was an orb of infernal orange-black light swirling and trying to expel dark flames.

For all his battles against the Primordial Annihilator, the Phoenix Lord recoiled at the sheer sight. This was something abominable, this was nothing but sheer arrogance and desire to subjugate, this was-

The golden hand tightened its grip around the orb of chaotic power. The malevolent power of Addaioth was crushed like an overripe fruit.

Asuryan was able to breathe easier. At last, he could see the identity of his saviour...and for all the fact he had never seen the golden-skinned being before, the stars-filled eyes had been described by many Seers who had now embraced the Choice of Moderation.

"Empress Weaver," and the black-haired woman currently in her Aeldari form smiled. "You have my profuse thanks for healing my wounds."

"And I accept them in the spirit they were given," the Destroyer of Commorragh answered. "A bit of a clarification: your wounds are not completely healed. I've used the Sacrifice you made to save all the slaves of Commorragh to extract the corruption the new Dark Muse of Vainglory infected you with."

"I thank you nonetheless."

The Empress of all Aeldari gave a nod, and then went to find a chair, which she pushed towards his bed.

"You must have really annoyed the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom," the stars-filled eyes commented while swiftly placing herself on the chair. "That was an impressive chaotic curse."

"We used his internal troubles to assault one of the fourteen entrances." Asuryan replied. "Worse, and I presume the Harlequins did it for this very reason, Kharsaq El'Uriaq looked weak in front of the only people he really cares about: his great military commanders and tyranny enforcers."

"Hmm...to be honest, I'm a bit disappointed no one invited me. I would have given the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom's subordinates all the reasons to believe him weak."

Of that, the Phoenix Lord had no doubt at all. The Empress didn't say words like 'annihilation of Shaa Dom' or 'turn the Tyrant's Domain into a Second Battle of Commorragh', but the desire was there.

"There wasn't enough time, as far as I was given to understand. The opportunity came from one of the Tyrant's sons trying to usurp him, but it didn't last very long. And El'Uriaq is not the Dynasts you broke at Commorragh. He reacted incredibly fast...and sadly, he is far more powerful than I."

"Unsurprising. He gained the power of a Muse, much like I did. While he remains considerably weaker, this unholy merging of a Drukhari and a Muse is close to a Greater Abomination in its own right."

"I agree. The abilities he showed me...the limbs shifted from some sort of corrupted crossbow to a long blade when the long-distance attack failed. And the Tyrant himself confirmed I did not see his true powers. While Vainglory will lie like the rest of the Primordial Annihilator's Aspects, I think that in this instance, Kharsaq was speaking the truth. He is no longer a true Drukhari, but a corrupted mockery of it."

"Interesting," the Empress nodded, before whistling. "Of course, this is something that won't be of much use in the coming years. The servants of Cegorach hinted that the Tyrant may try to abandon the Webway."

"Yes." It may have already happened. El'Uriaq had seen what one Harlequin plan could do to Shaa-Dom, it was doubtful he was confident in his ability to survive there, even with the Gates sealed from the outside. After all, the blades of Cegorach had a gift to storm locations where they weren't supposed to be in the first place. More than ever, the Webway was their kingdom.

"I will have to hope one of his children will stab him in the back, one day." Golden fingers clicked, and for a brief moment, golden flames danced. "For the moment please receive my own thanks. Your courageous deeds saved fifty thousand men, women, and children from an atrocious fate at the hands of the slavers. You saved them, at great risk for your souls and your life. I won't forget it."

"The thanks are appreciated. I won't deny that the Harlequins failed to tell me how powerful the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom was...but I would have participated in this battle regardless. It had to be done. I only regret our strength was insufficient to launch thirteen other raids and free all the slaves of the other Ports."

The Empress of All Aeldari said nothing, but in her eyes, regret could indeed be read. If it had been possible, Asuryan had no doubts *Maelsha'eil Dannan* would be on her way to teach the Tyrant a long lesson of humility.

When she spoke again, her voice was far more thoughtful.

"While I would love to hear the full tale of this battle, I need to change the subject. The gestalt of souls that I see inside you is extremely unstable. You must have felt it."

"I did..." Asuryan admitted. "It began when...when you killed Khaine with the Herald of Atharti."

"Yes."

He had not expected apologies, and there would be none.

"Are you going to tell me I must embrace **Atharti**?" The Phoenix Lord tried to pour some humour in his voice. Immediately, he knew the attention of the Goddess was upon them.

"In my long experience," the Empress replied sarcastically, "telling your species they *must do something* invariably leads to a result where they attempt exactly the opposite of what I proposed."

Ouch.

"So no, I am not going to give you orders. I am just going to tell you what I think are the two options available to you...assuming you want to live, which I assume you do. The first is the one Atharti is busy whispering in my ears. You deny Khaine, and swear yourself to her."

"An Herald? A High Priest?" Asuryan asked to check if he understood well enough.

"No. There will be only one High Priestess for all her worshippers. What Atharti has in mind is more of the same thing you did on the Path of the Warrior, but widened to all the non-military aspects of Craftworld life, to give one example. Should you accept, you would be the Symbiosis-Carnality Lord of Passion...sorry by the way about the atrocious name."

"I've heard worse." Asuryan replied with a chuckle before returning to deadly seriousness. "This proposal...nothing would be the same anymore."

"No." The Empress didn't try to hide it. "Your essence won't lie dormant inside your armour anymore. Should you be defeated, you will be with the Goddess until she reforges you and send you anew to fight the wars of this galaxy."

"This will be the end of a cycle."

"This will also be the first and last **Sacrifice**."

Asuryan nodded. Yes, he could see why the Empress would be happy to know young warriors stopped donning his armour and merging their souls with his.

"I am not going to say I am not tempted." The soon-to-be former Phoenix Lord admitted. "And the second option?"

"You spoke of Heralds a moment ago, avenger. While it is true Atharti will only accept one, the sum of what is possible is constantly changing, with Excess dead. The rise of Carnality-Symbiosis was not expected by the Great Enemy. Yet she now has a High Priestess. There might be other powers stirring themselves into action. Some might have had claims to Domains where Atharti will never be dominant."

Asuryan admired the way 'Infinity Circuits' and 'God of the Dead' were never mentioned. The Empress was beginning to speak their tongue with more and more subtlety.

"I can open you the Path, with the fires of your sacrifice and my own name. But I can't guarantee there will be a victory as important as the one just won waiting for you at the end."

Asuryan thought deeply about the two choices offered to him. It was a complicate dilemma the Empress had offered, but humble origins always began with those. Each had tempting and dolorous visions dancing before his eyes.

It was difficult.

Asuryan opened his mouth and spoke.

**High Orbit over Baal**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Shadowkeeper** **Baldur Vör**

Lady Weaver was petting her largest spider when he entered.

Of course, Baldur knew better than to think the insect-mistress was idle.

There were a large number of beetles frenetically tapping on various devices, and the flux of information pouring in and out was simply gargantuan. To equal the sum of work done in this office, the Shadowkeeper guessed the Adeptus Administratum would have to gather thousands of its moderately competent Scribes and low-ranked Adepts.

The stars-filled eyes didn't turn towards him at once.

But the words which came out of the Angel of Sacrifice's mouth made clear Weaver knew he was there. As were the multiple anti-spying and counter-detection devices that activated in the next couple of seconds.

"The first Phoenix Lord chose Death."

There was only one answer he was going to give.

"It is as *He* expected, then."

Lady Weaver snorted.

"At some point, I hope *He* will tell me how he managed to predict that outcome. In this instance, I know for certain there was no psychic method for him to predict it."

"Sometimes," Baldur ventured carefully, "great experience trumps psychic powers. My liege does not need his formidable precognition to know what burns in an Eldar's heart."

"True." The golden-winged being he couldn't really call a woman conceded after five seconds. "Does He know if other Phoenix Lords intend to pursue that path?"

"The majority will likely choose salvation in the embrace of Carnality-Symbiosis. They are after all creatures of Passion."

"Hmm..."

For exactly thirty-five seconds, the attention of Weaver seemed to turn to the enormous lists of strategic materials which could be seen streaming across the various hololiths and data-slates.

It was, as every Custodes knew very well, an absolutely wrong impression.

"Well, time will tell if they are successful or fail epically, I suppose. And I assume you didn't come here today to give me the odds of whatever complicated scheme certain Eldar Lords want to pursue working out for them."

"I did not." The Shadowkeeper allowed a temporary pause to mark the change of subject, then spoke again. "We found one of the relics that *He* wanted you to recreate for Project Austerlitz."

This time, the radiance of the wings intensified by a factor of at least three, and the stars-filled eyes brutally flashed out.

"Intact?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"The Malak System."

"I've never heard of it."

"I would have been more surprised if you had." Shadowkeeper Baldur Vör replied. "It is a complete backwater. The most developed world was classified by the Administratum as a Frontier World decades ago, and little has changed there. There is no trace of any tithe-fleet ever sailing in its vicinity."

"Backwater sounds right," Weaver agreed as he handed her the critical digi-folder where the ultra-secret information had been stored. "Does *it* have a name?"

"The Savants we brought with us called it the Choral Engine."

"Poetic," the insect-mistress replied, before frowning. "It is...an impressive piece from the Dark Age of Technology."

"It is."

"And the confirmation that the Imperium's predecessors must have had a truly frightening hate for the psykers."

"You noticed."

"Lord Custodes, I know that I am lucky to have Lisa and my other Moths, but there are far less amoral ways to obtain psychic energy than throwing psykers into techno-sarcophagi which will siphon their very powers and souls while torturing them until they break apart."

Baldur didn't reply. Lady Weaver, after all, was absolutely correct.

He waited ten more seconds, and then the digi-folder was returned to him. There was no need to ask if the colossal amount of information had been correctly understood.

"If I understand correctly, the Choral Engine is divided into five parts. The Sanctum is the command room with an enormous toroid tower of cogitators, and plenty of operator thrones for the failsafe protocols. The Choristry Pits are where the ancients tortured the psykers with advanced technological psy-sarcophagi. The Syphon Coil is nothing but an enormous geothermal plant drawing power from the planet itself, all the while harvesting deep core ores for the self-repair mechanisms. The Resonatum is the particle collider around the Sanctum. And the Focusing Vane is, as its name implies, the chambers where the Astropaths are working as a 'lens' for the Engine, something that will undoubtedly burn them out in short order."

"Yes." The Adeptus Custodes should take care to recruit people sharing Weaver's analytical skills; several Savants had needed over a day to give him the same points, with plenty of useless information burying the critical parts. "Do you think copying it identically would work?"

When the reply came, there was no hesitation.

"No."

"Why?"

"The Syphon Coil is an extremely bad idea. It links the entrails of the world to a psy-engine of incredible power. If one breaks, the other will follow shortly after."

That was...indeed a major flaw. And the exploration teams had completely missed it...though they lacked the experience of Weaver in certain important matters, of course.

"Other problems?"

"The psy-sarcophagi and the stations for the other psykers are far too wasteful, as I said before. In the long-term, they may kill more psykers per year than the Astronomican ever did."

"Yes. And?"

"The failsafe protocols are likely insufficient. Their existence being tied to the command thrones is reassuring, but given the complexity of the Choral Engine, they are still insufficient."

The stars-filled eyes stared at him implacably.

"And of course, there is the elephant in the room: the moment the Choral Engine is activated, all hell is going to break loose. I think that within mere days, the Malak System can expect a rampaging horde of monsters to assail it before devastating everything and everyone associated with the Choral Engine."

"The psychic beacon should incinerate the empyreal abominations."

"The weaker ones? Absolutely." Weaver grimaced. "For the bigger and more powerful monsters, I am not so confident. Remember that Astropaths and every soul-bound psyker have only a weak amount of the Emperor's psychic fire in them. Most of the energy released will be light-empowered, but it won't have the banishing properties Lisa is capable of."

In hindsight, it was absolutely logical why the Captain-General had ordered him to speak with her before doing anything else.

"I think that the Choral Engine would be able to repel a major assault from three out of the Four Great Parasites." The insect-mistress continued. "When it comes down to it, it would be a contest of raw strength, and this contest the Imperium would likely win against the hordes of Decay, Change, and Anarchy...but not War."

"And the Malak System is a complete backwater. It would need centuries of colonisation and fortification to be considered ready to mount a somewhat effective resistance."

However, it wasn't a massive problem. There was a reason the parts of the Choral Engine had been analysed and tested one by one, without going so far as to a full activation.

"What are the implications for your part in Project Austerlitz?"

"The most obvious one is that I will be forced to build the infrastructure on Nyx itself. Choral Engine variation or not, if the tests are as potent as your information implies, the defences must be powerful enough to repel a major assault from the abominations, especially during the phases of maintenance the Engine will necessarily be under at one point or another."

"True."

"I will most likely power this beacon by the psychic radiance of my Moths."

"One Titan-Moth will likely not be sufficient."

The Angel of Sacrifice nodded.

"Yes. More likely, we will need ten to twelve Moths. In all likelihood, this means every world where an example of Project Austerlitz is built will require a full colony, for complete psychic security. That way, the Moths will be able to establish a system of rotations, with a specific Mosura powering the Engine for a day before resting for a good week."

That sounded...far less costly in resources, ultimately, than all the psykers the original Choral Engine had likely killed before it was abandoned.

"I approve. The other parts?"

The expression of the Basileia of Nyx grew more thoughtful.

"To keep the Sanctum as simple as possible, we are likely going to need quantum cogitators operated by skilled Magi of the Mechanicus, Logis Division...they will be supported by my Adjutants, of course."

"It will be an honour to operate something so elaborate, Webmistress!"

"As for the Syphon Coil," the black-haired being petted distractedly her spider, "we are likely going to power it with our new model of Fusion Reactor. Or Fusion Reactors, plurals. An Engine like that promises to need a frighteningly high energy output. For the self-repairing mechanisms, we might have to supply them via auto-loaders feeding metallic ingots directly into the manufactorum section."

"And the Resonatum itself?"

"That's really the simplest part. We use Aethergold Pylons to increase the psychic conductivity and make sure the light will truly be burning with the Emperor's light. And to avoid the Navigators and Astropaths burning in golden flames every day, the channelling will be done by my Ants and other species that can handle the strain."

"It is-"

"I will give a last warning: we are playing with a lot of psychic energy there, and Aethergold will be involved. The commitment in extremely valuable resources aside, the presence of so many Moths and insects of my Swarm guarantees the future Engine will be a symbol. These symbols create a lot of power and influence. But they won't be able to be built everywhere. Unless you find another Living Saint who can make the necessary modifications and change a Choral Engine to be attuned to them, I will only be able to obtain the optimal effects in places that are very significant to me."

The Shadowkeeper examined every detail, before nodding.

"I will give a full transcript of this conversation to the Captain-General." The report had to be delivered to *Him* as fast as physically possible. "Assuming permission is given, when can you begin?"

**The Webway**

**Shaa-Dom**

**Great Temple of Addaioth**

**Temporal Anomaly – date is somewhere in 311M35**

**Tyrant Kharsaq El'Uriaq**

There was one positive point when it came to usurpation attempts.

They provided plenty of sacrifice-fodder for the altars.

Assuredly, this was the only one of two positive points Kharsaq had been able to find. The other was the sudden and totally unanticipated shows of deep respect his children gave to him every day.

The Tyrant of Shaa-Dom knew better than to think it was going to last for a significant number of cycles, but it was pleasant while it did.

"At last, the sacred artefact is in position. Is everything ready, Count-Dracon?"

"Yes, my Lord Tyrant. I take full responsibility for the preparations which were made."

Kharsaq snickered.

"How I love hearing those words...it makes easier to give out the rewards when everything works according to my brilliant plans."

"Yes, Lord Tyrant!"

"Of course, it also makes it easier to identify the parties which must be blamed when my visions fail to materialise before my noble eyes."

"Err...yes, my Lord Tyrant!"

"Not that failure is a possibility, of course, Count-Dracon. Why, the very thought is ridiculous!"

Truly it was funny watching his subordinates try to hide their fear. If he had tried that with Mon-keigh, the Tyrant was sure they would have been redder than a blood fruit and sweating to boot!

"You can begin powering the *Stealer of Suns*."

This was not the true name of the artefact, of course. Unfortunately, whichever unctuous name had been given in the Age when the Empire of a Billion Moons was the rightful Master of Everything...well, it had not survived the First Fall.

The First Tyrant of Shaa-Dom had been the one to rediscover the artefact, and alas, flowery speech had not been among his main strengths. Nevertheless, this long deceased predecessor had been able to rediscover the process that could control the *Stealer of Suns*.

To put it quite crudely, it needed energy and souls.

Oh, in ancient times, the *Stealer of Suns* would have operated with different kinds of fuel. Unfortunately, part of the artefact had codes none of the Tyrants' many servants were able to break. You needed someone recognised as the legitimate Emperor or Empress for that. Unfortunately, Kharsaq very much doubted *Maelsha'eil Dannan* was going to answer 'yes' if he asked.

"By your will, Lord Tyrant."

Exactly fourteen heartbeats later, the first circle that had been carved into the Temple began to be filled up with molten metal of obsidian colour. Once the levels were suitably satisfying, this dark pool burst into the familiar orange flames of his God.

Another fourteen heartbeats later, the ritual circle became a wall of orange flames that nothing in the vast ritual hall could cross without suffering instantaneous immolation.

It was the moment the fourteen traitors trapped inside the circle began to scream.

Kharsaq grinned. The hypocrisy of those who had followed his son was so nauseating that even this awful death was truly justified under the circumstances.

"Asurmen chose to refuse my gift, you know."

"My Lord Tyrant?"

"The Harlequins must have rushed him straight to *Maelsha'eil Dannan*. I would commend them for their dedication, if it wasn't so annoying." And if it wasn't so obvious it had been the plan of Cegorach in the first place when the assault against the Basilisk Port began.

"Yes, my Lord Tyrant! It is very annoying!"

"It is of very little importance in the grand scheme of things, of course." Kharsaq continued, feigning boredom to his audience, "Asurmen could have returned to greatness and embraced that whore of a weak Goddess. But he chose another path. Now he marches to his doom, the stubborn fool."

Three more circles began to burn as he spoke. More screams echoed. Each group of fourteen traitors inside the circle was sacrificed so that the *Stealer of Suns* could function optimally...and his God could guide the ancient device to the use it was supposed to have.

"There is only one thing I don't understand...my Lord Tyrant. This superior artefact of the True Empire was only ever supposed to steal suns from outside the Webway and create a space-time dislocation so that they arrived as Dark Suns in the Webway. What your Formidable Tyranny is intending-"

"It is very much the opposite of what our predecessors did, yes." Kharsaq acknowledged, before baring his teeth as soon enough, the fourteen circles were enormous pyres of orange flames, and the power of Addaioth engulfed the altar. Some hidden traitors outside the circles who had intended to free their brethren – fourteen of them in all – were on the receiving end of a very nasty surprise.

"But this function was there from the very beginning. It is just our ancestors had no reason to use it until now."

The humiliation was particularly galling. Of all Tyrants and nobles of the Empire of a Billion Moons, he was the first to flee the Webway, humiliated and beaten.

But there was no choice, the ruler of the El'Uriaq Dynasty repeated to himself. With the Harlequins having for all intents and purposes sealed Shaa-Dom from the rest of the Webway, the only remaining options were escape or starvation.

"Besides, now that Slaanesh is no more, we are free to claim our rightful destiny across the stars! The former Emperors and Empresses abandoned this galaxy, letting the Mon-keigh proliferate, but we aren't going to follow their example! By the whip and the blade, we have avoided the fate of Commorragh! By powerful blessings and implacable defences, the Empire of the Manticore stopped the destruction campaigns directed against the Tyrannical Throne! By the will of the Dark Smith, a Phoenix Lord was defeated, and never will it rise to burn again! The Sacrifices have been burned, fourteen of them, fourteen times! The fourteen hidden malcontents have duly burned as well! The bargain is sealed, the souls are the blood of the Glorious Forge! CREIDANN!"

The entirety of Shaa-Dom shook, as the *Stealer of Suns*, a large orb bigger than four Jetbikes put together, went from onyx to an orange shade, before burning like a miniature orange star.

Shaa-Doom shook again, and all the Tyrant's prodigious senses felt as if an enormous maw of utter darkness had swallowed them whole.

Evidently, the proximity of the ritual made sure the greatest damage happened here. The Great Temple was built to be solidity itself, but the psychic earthquake was so powerful that parts of the massive roof began to cave. Enormous blocks of black stone crushed everything that had stood beneath them...removing several problematic courtiers from existence, by a strange coincidence.

And then it stopped.

The eyes of Kharsaq El'Uriaq watched through the massive holes just created...and for the first time ever, the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom saw the stars of the galaxy from the heart of his own Domain.

"My Lord Tyrant...where are we?"

"Addaioth, by His Divine Might, has transported us to a galactic region of space known to the primitive species as the Dark Marches," the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom revealed. "And it is a place where our enemies, be they led by *Maelsha'eil Dannan* or any would-be usurper, can't hope to reach us."

In a distant future, one where the galaxy burned in the fires of the greatest war of the thirty-fifth millennium, most Drukhari would use this sentence to teach their children that taunting fate always resulted in terrible consequences.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Ramilies-class Starfort *Pax Imperialis***

**0.164.311M35**

**Lord** **Admiral Benjamin Rath**

Several days ago, with the notable exception of Lawson and von Goldenbaum, the six Judges had not been sworn enemies.

For several of them, it was the first time they met each other.

But now Lord Admiral Benjamin Rath had no doubt that when this Court-Martial finally ended, and it would end because even the most unpleasant things had to, they would leave it as bitter and irreconcilable enemies.

Too many things had been said that couldn't be forgotten...or forgiven.

The testimonies of the Astartes and Cadian officers were crushing by their numbers and the conclusions they arrived at. Ormuz Vandire was guilty of complete incompetence in the face of the Black Crusade, and did many other things that made him feel dirty to think the man served in the same Imperial Navy as Benjamin did. And there were other egregious violations of an Admiral's duties, though they couldn't be added as the Articles in question weren't read in the act of accusation.

But it was far enough to convict Ormuz Vandire and shoot him ten times.

That is, they would have shot him, if the Judges had been impartial. And three of them certainly weren't.

"How long are you going to persist?" Rudolf von Goldenbaum asked him as one more vote ended in a now familiar draw, with three in favour and three against. "You know you aren't going to have the votes; all you're going to do is wasting our time...and yours."

"Unlike you," Karl Gustav Kempf retorted, anger flashing in his eyes, "some of us still remember the vow we swore the day we joined the Imperial Navy. We have our honour. The same can't be said where you and your stooges are concerned."

Rudolf von Goldenbaum laughed. This was a sound full of contempt.

"We have very different view about what honour is, then, Admiral."

"That is true," Miranda Lawson for once replied...almost politely. "We also have a different view on what constitutes self-preservation."

"Self-preservation?" Helga Lansung asked with an expression of curiosity.

"A large part of the reasons why this Court-Martial was convened in the first place," Miranda Lawson explained sternly, "is that battlefield officers trusted Holy Terra to deal with this eminently political trial while they dealt with far bloodier and life-threatening problems. If this Court proves we don't support them, the circumstances will be dire."

Thomas von Stockhausen looked at her like she had spoken some xenos language.

"The officers of Battlefleet Cadia, as will every other Battlefleet, will have no choice but to send the political accused to be judged here. There is no alternative."

"You're wrong," Kempf was prompt to say out loud what Lawson had merely been dancing around. "The Commissars and the officers will have one alternative option. They will execute the men and women sullying the Navy's honour. That way, we will avoid wasting everyone's time, as you yourself put it, and we will be sure no one will avoid the sword of justice."

Von Goldenbaum didn't seem impressed, but then, the man was a snake. Von Stockhausen...the old man had been on the receiving end of a colossal bribe, and he would stay bought. Helga Lansung, on the other hand, was suddenly far more hesitant. As a descendant of a famous High Lord who had been killed in the legendary Beheading, she knew very well how ugly things could get when your enemies decided to just remove you permanently and damn the consequences.

"These words are outrageous for an Admiral of your seniority, Admiral Kempf. Especially as your honour demands you to judge the son of the High Lord of the Adeptus Administratum. Do you have any idea about the kind of powerbase you're going against?"

Benjamin had not expected Kempf to flinch...but he hadn't expected the man to scoff in disdain either.

"Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum." The officer of Battlefleet Cadia replied. "Do you really think we believe the Space Marines and all the reinforcements we received to stop the heretics were sent by the will of the Adeptus Administratum? I would thank you to not take me for a fool. Hundreds of starships and thousands of Space Marines, along with many detachments of Mechanicus and Guard, were there by Her Celestial Highness' will. And Her Celestial Highness utterly annihilated the Traitor Armada at Macragge."

"Yes, yes. How kind of her to make up for your failures."

"That isn't what Admiral Kempf wanted to say," Miranda Lawson crossed her arms. "In blunt terms, the one who destroyed this Traitor Armada and helped Battlefleet Cadia *hates the guts of Xerxes Vandire*."

"I'm not sure I would say it like that..." Five pairs of eyes looked at Thomas von Stockhausen like he had just announced he was a complete idiot. Which, to be fair, he had.

"The question," the black-haired Admiral continued as if the old Lord Admiral had not spoken, "in my opinion, is not really what Vandire is going to do to you if you choose to execute his precious son, who has become famous for his infinite incompetence. It should be more something like: what will be your excuse when Weaver comes and purges the High Lord, along with his entire powerbase?"

"You give your Living Saint powers she doesn't have...and likely never will." Rudolf von Goldenbaum replied, in a tone that was not far from one where he would grit his teeth.

"You may be right," Benjamin conceded, "but based on the outcome of the latest campaigns the Victor of Commorragh, Mandragora, Tau, and Macragge won while inflicting cataclysmic losses to her foes, I would certainly not gamble even one month's pay on it. Her Celestial Highness returned a Primarch from the dead. Underestimating her tends to have fatal consequences for those who oppose her."

"We are not on Macragge. This is the Throneworld and the Sol System...and the Imperial Navy will not be cowed by a mere *Guard officer*!"

The words had to be spoken, but it was clear Rudolf von Goldenbaum was in too deep to back down. Maybe it was because he owed too many favours to a certain High Lord. Or maybe the High Lord had promised things that were too valuable to pass up.

Lord Admiral Thomas von Stockhausen would stay bought. The last argument was not exactly terrifying for him: given his age, it was highly likely he would be retired, maybe dead, by the time Lady Weaver would visit Holy Terra.

Helga Lansung on the other hand...whatever transaction had been done, it was obvious that siding with Clan Vandire in strategic terms was not her intention.

"Fine," she muttered. "Fine. This is...a political affair. So let us treat it like one."

"This is a bluff!" Rudolf von Goldenbaum exclaimed. "They have nothing to-"

But the female High Admiral wasn't looking at him. She was staring into Benjamin's eyes.

"I hate to say it, but Admiral Lawson spoke of many concerning things that may happen to the Imperial Navy in the future. And if catastrophic events turn out like I fear they will, it will be because the incompetence of one Ormuz Vandire will have tarnished the Navy's honour. I won't vote for death, Lord Admiral. My conviction hasn't changed in that regard. But I will agree that Article Fifty-Five and Six Hundred and Eighty-Seven apply to the behaviour of Admiral Ormuz Vandire."

The vote was of course purely trivial, but it had to be done.

It was three-against-three for the first three Articles. And four-against-two for the latter two.

"The sentence?"

"I vote for a dishonourable discharge. He was the Navy's problem; tomorrow he will be someone else's."

"Who votes in favour?"

**Holy Terra**

**Fort Aquitania**

**0.176.311M35**

**Lord Commander Militant Paul von Oberstein**

There was something extremely cathartic about re-watching the vid-cast of Ormuz Vandire being thrown out of the Imperial Navy in disgrace.

The ceremony was always particularly humiliating for good reason, but there were officers who managed to hold stoically, even as their sword was ritually broken and their decorations and rank insignia were torn apart. Moreover, it was left to the soldiers themselves to decide if they wanted to leave the uniform of the disgraced officer intact or not.

Apparently, the men and women chosen for the occasion had somehow heard of the litany of incompetence the former Admiral had been accused of.

There was so little of the Admiral uniform's left by the time they were finished with him that Clan Vandire's henchmen had to give him new clothes to preserve what was left of his dignity.

A better man would not have rejoiced, but Paul von Oberstein never pretended to be a saintly man.

Besides, the rejoicing was limited to a few smiles and watching the vid-cast a few times.

Watching a Vandire get humiliated for something he absolutely deserved was good.

The problem was that Ormuz Vandire shouldn't have been humiliated. He should have been executed.

That told a few things about the influence of Clan Vandire among the officer ranks of the Imperial Navy that were putting Paul in an unhappy mood.

Or, as several of his old friends' contacts suggested, there was the possibility Xerxes Vandire was used by several radical factions of Battlefleet Sol, and Ormuz Vandire's survival had been Xerxes' price.

No matter how you looked at it, Ormuz Vandire's disgrace was a minor setback. The public would have forgotten about it before the end of this year. All in all, Clan Vandire had gambled and lost far more with the devastating victory Lady Weaver had handed the Black Crusade's Armada.

Paul sighed, petting the head of his faithful Pilou.

"You are lucky to avoid all these politics, you know."

The mastiff barked in agreement...unless it was the signal it was time for his favourite meal to be served. After much reflection, the latter was confirmed to be true.

Paul von Oberstein, High Lord of the Imperial Guard, shook his head at the spectacle of his formidable companion feasting upon a pâté of some delicacy whose name was utterly unpronounceable for his tongue...before wincing at the large pile of bureaucratic duties that waited on his desk.

Truly taking twenty minutes of rest to watch a Vandire's humiliation had not decreased the size of the challenge...

And then someone knocked at his door.

Paul frowned.

At this hour, he was very well aware there was no appointment. And the men guarding his door knew he liked having a few minutes to himself...accompanied by the crushing paperwork, of course.

"Enter."

The door opened, his Lucifer Blacks saluted, and Paul caught a glance at a Custodes waiting some feet away...along with a woman he had seen on a Court-Martial's vid-cast minutes ago.

It was surprising...and so was the fact that the golden-clad Watcher of the Throne stared in his direction, slightly inclined his head...and then departed at a brisk pace.

Okay. Evidently, it was not the Captain-General this time...and the foremost servants of the God-Emperor clearly thought he had to have a conversation, preferably without an appointment and too many people being aware of it.

"You can come in, Admiral Lawson. It just so happens that the Adeptus Custodes has added 'surprise appointments' to the list of my duties."

"May I offer my condolences?" The black-haired Admiral's lips twitched with the shadow of a smile.

"You may." Paul von Oberstein cleared his throat. "Not that I am unhappy to see an officer of the Imperial Navy walking into my office, but what led the commanding officer of the Jupiter shipyards being escorted by a Custodes?"

"Actually, I am no longer in charge of anything big or small where Jupiter and the Navy are involved," Miranda Lawson revealed in a grim tone. "I was officially discharged from my duties yesterday...and one Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum was named Third Space Lord of Sol."

Paul grimaced in understanding. The Third Space Lord of Sol – who by tradition was always a Lord or a Lady Admiral – oversaw the maintenance and construction of the ships of the Imperial Navy in the Sol System. Obviously, his authority was extremely limited when it came to Mechanicus yards and civilian industrial production capabilities, but it was uncontested when they were under Navy control. And Jupiter was Navy territory, it didn't belong to Mars.

"I suppose it was kind of inevitable, given your...past history."

But it raised disturbing questions of its own. There was no way someone like Rudolf von Goldenbaum should have been raised to such a lofty rank without warning. To begin with, there must have been a Third Space Lord in charge before him. And that man was-

"Yes. But his predecessor tragically shot himself. An extraordinarily case of suicide, the investigators said. They didn't explain to me how a man who wanted to end his life shot himself in the back of the neck and other parts where it is nearly impossible to aim, but that's life I suppose."

"That indeed answers a few questions I was asking myself." Paul admitted. "Now the question is what led you to ask for this appointment here and now."

"I want them dead." If you could kill with a cold voice, Miranda Lawson would have conducted a one-sided purge of the Imperial Navy with this sentence.

"Von Goldenbaum?"

"Von Goldenbaum, Von Stockhausen, Vandire, and most of the boot-lickers they have bought," the young-looking Admiral corrected in the same tone carrying what could be best described as 'freezing rage'. "I am sick of the games they play with our lives. Each time we go to the frontlines, we have to perpetually watch our backs, because those corrupt groxes always have weapons aimed, ready to kill us! And even when you win, they are busy stealing the laurels that were never theirs!"

"Some might say," Paul ventured prudently, "your own connections are the reason why you were allowed to reach the rank of Admiral despite your...lack of diplomatic skills."

"You're right. But if you're expecting to go very far without a prestigious name in a Battlefleet, I strongly suggest you do your best not to try your luck with Battlefleet Sol, Lord Commander Militant."

"I will keep it in mind."

"And yes, I am blunt to the point of being insulting." Miranda Lawson admitted shamelessly. "But I want to be surrounded by competence, both on the battlefield and in the shipyards where the future Crusades are prepared. This, clearly, is too much to ask for after the ridiculous spectacle we made during the Court-Martial."

If the affirmations had come from another Admiral, Paul von Oberstein would likely have scoffed. But the Lawson Dynasty was a very prestigious one, and truth be told, Miranda Lawson could likely have been a Lady Admiral by now, if she was willing to voice unconditional support for the doctrines of the main factions dominating the Imperial Navy these days. It had given her a certain amount of celebrity, even outside the Imperial Navy...and it had given her plenty of powerful enemies too.

"The desire is admirable." Paul nodded. "I will honestly admit that even the Imperial Guard has its fair share of troublemakers, however."

"But at least you eliminate them. Or you at least make sure your most terrifying subordinates do it in your name."

Paul tried not to look smug. As a matter of fact, he had not 'made sure' certain incompetent officers met the cold embrace granted by a Bolt Pistol or any weapon wielded by a Commissar. Ender Trevayne and Her Celestial Highness Taylor Hebert were perfectly capable of reaching their own conclusions as to who was suitable to serve in the Imperial Guard and who wasn't.

"Let's just say the efficiency of the Imperial Guard has increased. And I have reasons to be optimistic it will continue to increase in the future."

"Good. I want to be part of it."

Ah. So that was the reason the lone Custodes had been willing to make this notable intervention.

"Since I doubt you want to transfer to the Imperial Guard, I assume that by these words you want me to use my influence so you are introduced to 'my most terrifying subordinates'."

The determination on Miranda Lawson's face was so powerful it was almost frightening.

"Yes. Specifically, with the Saviour of Macragge."

Well, the choice was not unexpected.

"Why?"

"Because when Her Celestial Highness comes to Holy Terra, Rudolf von Goldenbaum will be the one who will command the Battlefleet she will have to fight."

Paul von Oberstein was not afraid to acknowledge that in the coming decades, he would have his fair share of nightmares remembering this dark prediction.

"Let's assume you are right." The Lord Commander Militant began carefully. "Why would my most terrifying subordinate have need of your services? She has plenty of extremely skilled subordinates and allies by now. This includes Admirals in their own right."

Some of them had received the Lion of Terra for their bravery and command performance against the Ymga Monolith and the Word Bearers' Armada, to name just a few achievements. Names like Oskar von Reuenthal and Fritz von Bittenfeld were now renowned across all of Ultima Segmentum...and Segmentum Solar.

"I am willing to acknowledge you are a talented Admiral with plenty of connections here on Terra. But you are only one woman."

"Actually, I bring a bit more than that." Miranda Lawson countered. "I was far from the only one to be removed from my duties. A lot of my subordinates were put on half-pay because Goldenbaum's ego can't tolerate a galaxy where someone disagrees with him. Many men and women who were working the shipyards themselves directly have seen their contracts inexplicably end."

It was interesting...and not just because all signs pointed to that imbecile of Lord High Admiral having decided to support the Goldenbaum faction. For that matter, where was he going to find the skilled workers to replace them? The Lawson Dynasty may not have the power of some other naval powerhouses, but they were not exactly devoid of allies. Such an attack against their vital interests when nothing justified it was going to meet severe opposition, both on Jupiter and elsewhere.

This was something Paul would have to direct inquiries at in the next days, to be sure.

Which left the issue of what to do about Miranda Lawson.

After a good minute of weighing the advantages against the drawbacks, Paul decided that, ultimately, it was his 'most terrifying subordinate' who should decide. It was her shipyards and fleets, in the end, who would benefit, or not, from Lawson's connections.

"I am going to write a letter of introduction for you, Admiral Lawson. It will give you the opportunity to plead your case to Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert in person. You won't arrive in time for her visit to Baal, but should you be willing to travel with the next convoy bound for Ultramar, you should be able to meet her when the *Enterprise* returns to Macragge."

"Thank you, Lord Commander Militant."

Ten minutes later, he was back fighting against the dreaded monster of paperwork and bureaucratic duties. And this one, sadly, was stronger than a thousand agents of Clan Vandire...

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sortiarius**

**Tizca**

**Temporal Anomaly – date impossible to estimate**

**Master** **of Ruin Ignis**

It was a trap.

In fact, it may be the most ridiculously blatant trap Ignis had ever seen.

The pursuit had only ended when Sortiarius entered this system, one where there was nothing that could be described as a 'planet'. Of course, this ensured you couldn't miss the *nine* suns providing them Warp-tainted light.

When they had landed, it was to be met with violence. With Magnus gone, *someone* had whispered to the Tzaangors it was time to revolt, and they had charged in *nine* great waves until Ignis and all the Thousand Sons had felled them to the last.

"We were blind." Ignis declared as he crushed the skull of one of the beasts beneath his armoured boot.

"They were our Legion's servants, Ignis."

"They were servants," the Master of Ruin whispered to Ahzek. "I doubt they were for a moment our Legion's. Their true allegiance, like everything else, was to a far more malevolent and capricious Power."

It was amazing how the end of the Rubric and the disappearance of their father had removed the blinders from their eyes. Suddenly, every bargain made with the daemonic, every pledge of vengeance, every arrogant monologue and forbidden incantation were thrown back into your face, revealing the stunning amount of hypocrisy that they had refused to acknowledge.

It was not, Ignis could confirm, a pleasant sensation.

For a Legion which had spent so much time mocking the hypocrisy of the Space Wolves in general, the counterblow was particularly horrible.

"We have no choice but to play the game for now." The former First Captain of the Fifteenth Legion declared. "Are they ready?"

"They are. On your command, Ahzek."

"Very well. Do it."

There were originally nine Obelisks of Ruin defending Tizca. These empyrogeometrical structures were built to analyse all the weaknesses of an approaching enemy, and then reduce them to a pile of corpses or something else suitably horrific via powerful applications of the arcane.

Today they had been turned against the Thousand Sons. But not for long.

One after another, the Obelisks of Ruin fell, the very lore that had shaped them proving their doom. Ignis could feel the symbol, and he didn't like it. The Thousand Sons were destroying what they had built long ago once they truly settled in the Eye of Terror. They were destroying their roots, at the same time Magnus was not here to give any measure of protection.

But was there any other choice?

Once the Obelisks were no longer a factor, they had to break through *nine* more wards.

It was one more taunt from the Architect of Fate, obviously.

At last, they could see what had truly been done to Tizca.

And it was extremely unpleasant.

Ignis had known from fellow battle-brothers that the city had completely changed after they left the planet. How could it not change, when the 'patron' was the Lord of Change?

But here it had changed to be nearly unrecognizable, and not for the better.

The large avenues were gone, replaced by twisting roads that seemed to go everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Where there should have been ferrocrete or another building material, there were now fractured crystals or broken glass.

In fact, everything looked broken, and it had been a deliberate act: there was no way such a wanton act of destruction could not have been done deliberately.

Everything was broken fragments and ruins of priceless relics.

There was one exception, though. It was the *nine* massive pyramids which were the sole monuments to have endured the devastation.

"Whatever is lurking in these pyramids, Ahzek, I have no wish to uncover its identity." Arguably Ignis could only feel the things trying to hide from his senses in the closest pyramid, but that alone was enough to alarm him...that is, if he wasn't already trying to guess where the hammer was going to fall.

"For once, this knowledge is one I too have no wish to learn." Ahzek Ahriman approved. "But I doubt we will be that lucky."

"Luck doesn't really exist anyway, not in this realm of the Damned."

It took a lot of fighting, but they managed to reach the Pyramid of Photep. Or more accurately, it was a copy of the Pyramid of Photep, as the real one's broken remains were above their heads.

Ignis wished he could claim it was a 'splendid copy', but that simply wasn't the case. The original pyramid had been built of gold and silver.

This one was bathed in Warp flames, and everywhere on its facade, mutated eyes opened and closed randomly. All the pyramids of Tizca looked like monuments to Tzeentch. But this one was even less subtle than the others.

The last wards fell, and one thousand members of the Thousand Sons faced what had to be thousands of Space Marines...the very Astartes the Rubric had condemned to a fate worse than death.

"Brothers," Ahzek advanced for a brief moment...and then to everyone's astonishment, including Ignis', he *prostrated himself*.

"Brothers, forgive me."

There was a powerful feeling of...uncertainty. Quite clearly, none of the former Rubricae had expected *that*.

At last a group of three advanced.

"We forgive you, Ahzek. We aren't going to pretend your mistake was minor, but the Rubric showed us the exhausting efforts you made to set everything right. We will not forget...but I for one am willing to forgive."

"Thank you, brothers."

At last, Ahzek stood from his imposed self-flagellation...and then Ignis felt the magical pulses before he heard the hateful voice.

"**What a tender and brotherly reunion**," suddenly, there was a Lord of Change atop the Pyramid of Photep's copy. It appeared so quickly that Ignis knew instantly the daemon had always been there, waiting for the moment to strike. Then Ignis shivered as he realised the servant of Tzeentch had not one head, but two. This was no mere Lord of Change, assuming one of these daemons could be thought of as 'mere', this was-

"Kairos Fateweaver," Ahzek greeted calmly.

"**Here by the will of the Architect of Fate**," the Vizier of Tzeentch taunted them. "**Do you not thank me for allowing this so touching and pleasing reunion**?"

"I will never thank you for anything ever again," Ahzek proclaimed. "The Rubric, the leash that was strangling the Fifteenth Legion, is now broken!"

"**The leash had its uses**," the Oracle of Tzeentch proclaimed arrogantly, "**and the Changer of the Ways has tired of this game anyway. It is time for the Thousand Sons to embrace what they were always destined to become. It is time to pledge yourselves to the Master of Fortune. The moaning and the proclamations of loyalty to the Anathema despite the atrocities committed have lasted long enough. Embrace Change! It is your destiny**."

To his credit, Ahzek didn't hesitate.

"No."

"**You dare challenge the Architect's will**?"

"I have seen how much your cruel master tried to mutate me, Kairos," the Space Marine who had never ceased to be the First Captain of the Fifteenth Legion retorted. "Find another puppet to amuse yourself with."

The cruel laughter resonated everywhere. And while one head had delivered all the words, this time it was the two of them which were showing their amusement.

"**Oh, very good Ahzek Ahriman. At which point did you think your opinion mattered?** **You have returned to Tizca, with nine hundred and ninety-nine battle-brothers by your side, to save nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine of your other brothers. There is only one thing you didn't understand. One of your brothers was...not your brother**."

Ignis, like every Thousand Son, understood too late.

Helio Isidorus, the first brother that had been freed from the Rubric, the brother they had all celebrated the return of...Helio Isidorus struck Ahzek with his Khopesh, and Ahzek fell with a scream of surprise.

Of course, the surprise didn't last. Helio Isidorus was neutralised and bound...until he disintegrated into a pile of sand.

Several Thousand Sons formed a protective circle around Ahzek, while others did their best to heal the wound on his back, which had shredded his Power Armour like it didn't exist.

It was much needed, for in nine seconds, the Thousand Sons were surrounded by what had to be the greatest horde of Tzeentchian daemons Ignis had ever seen. On top of each pyramid, a Lord of Change was summoned. More daemons poured out of the pyramids, supported by thousands of Tzaangors.

"I knew the trap was going to be unpleasant, but I didn't think it would be this bad."

Still, they were Astartes. If Tzeentch wanted to enslave them one by one, they weren't going to make it easy for the Lord of Daemons.

"WE ARE NOT DUST!" the Master of Ruin screamed, and the battle-cry was repeated by thousand of voices.

"WE ARE NOT DUST! FOR LOST PROSPERO!"

The battle began. And at first, the daemonic assault was brutally stopped. The Fifteenth Legion had changed a lot, but of all the Legions, they were likely the one the most apt to resist this onslaught.

But Ignis knew very well the true threat was not from the Blue and Pink Horrors that were coming at them by the millions. The true threat was on top of the Pyramids. The Lords of Change had begun a powerful ritual, and the Thousand Son Astartes knew in his guts that once it would be completed, all resistance would be extinguished.

"Ignis!"

Ahzek had managed to rise once more, though with his tired and erratic breaths, one could tell easily the First Captain was not able to fight.

"You will have to take command of the Legion."

"Ahzek, this isn't the moment for poor humour," he barked before vaporising plenty of Blue Horrors with a blast.

"Ignis...you can see the situation...as well as I do. This fight...can only have one outcome. We are...in a kill zone."

"Well, I can't argue with that." Tizca had been transformed into a lair of horrors, and they could barely hold their positions. Which was exactly what the 'besiegers' wanted, of course. "But charging like one of the sons of Russ and challenging Fateweaver to a duel isn't going to work."

"I told you...I had a plan, didn't I?"

"You did, Ahzek, but-"

"I have a plan. Prepare...and when you can...run...run and do not look back."

There was a flash, and suddenly, Ahzek was levitating.

He was levitating and his body seemed to burn with unlimited power.

In the distance, Kairos Fateweaver laughed again.

"**You see, Ahzek? I told you that you would embrace the power of**-"

The laughter ceased abruptly.

For the creator of the Rubric had unsealed something, and suddenly something shining in blue light was in his left hand.

"This is Transmutational Changestone," Ahzek explained, as suddenly all daemons fell silent. "Congratulations by the way; it took me a lot of time to recreate the formula you gave to your new favourite puppet."

"**You wouldn't dare**."

"But I wonder," and this time Ignis didn't have to look at his brother to know there was a jovial expression on his face, "what will happen when Transmutational Changestone explodes with my ritual attuned to it? You are capable of seeing the future, if there is a kernel of truth to your boasts, Fateweaver. Do you see what is going to happen to your plans?"

"**You aren't going to escape**!" The Vizier snarled, proving that yes, he did...and that the future certainly looked unpleasant. "**Your torment will be eternal! You will be broken and re-broken until nothing of you is left! We will unleash you against them**!"

"But my brothers will be free."

The Black Staff of Ahriman was raised a last time...and then it smashed into the Transmutational Changestone.

The Staff broke. The Change-cursed Noctilith broke.

For a single second, there was a tenth sun illuminating the system.

The hordes of Tzeentch screamed and were disintegrated.

Suddenly, the Thousand Sons were no longer surrounded. They were alone...though Ignis knew better than to hope it would last.

Ahriman...Ahzek Ahriman was nowhere to be seen.

But Ignis had an order. The last one he would ever hear from him, and this one he swore to himself he wouldn't fail.

"BROTHERS! RUN! RUN TO THE TRANSPORTS!"

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**Grand Central Station**

**2.180.311M35**

**Dominic** **Spurius**

Dominic had left Macragge with the conviction that for all the military exploits of the Living Saint, Nyx remained far inferior to the Macragge-that-was of before the Cataclysm. Yes, his father had outright ordered he invest here. And yes, Dominic understood that the return of the Primarch had implied punishing taxes for certain families, including his.

But come on, Macragge was Macragge. It had been founded well before the darkness of Old Night, had endured periods of massive turmoil without flinching, and emerged stronger each time the civil wars and long eras of strife ended. Macragge was the Jewel of the Eastern Fringe, the former Capital of the Five Hundred Worlds, the Homeworld of the Avenging Son, as well as countless other things attracting millions of Imperial citizens.

They had nothing to learn from them.

This certainty had faltered as soon as his ship had translated into the Nyx System with the rest of the massive convoy.

There was a lot of industry in orbit around Nyx...in fact there was a lot of industry everywhere. And the enormous defences to protect them were quite apparent too. Starforts, Battleships, Space Marines; the Living Saint had clearly fortified the system so that what happened to Macragge didn't happen to her hope.

But the real shock had come once Dominic landed. The Giraffe Spaceport was simply a titanic symbol of engineering, and learning it was not even fifty years old, like most of the green cactus fields and most of the infrastructure, had been met by a gaping expression from him.

And now there was the great mag-train station...Grand Central.

It was a properly colossal subterranean station, yet managed to be perfectly lit and ventilated like the 'outside' was merely a few metres away. By any means, it must have been a titanic project. It had to be, for there were tens of thousands of trains coming and departing every day.

But this wasn't all that the builders had done. Creating vast halls with passageways and ramps had not been enough. Angelic statues had been added, along with vid-frescoes representing quantities of insect species. This alone would have been worth the detour, but someone had clearly decided 'Grand Central' had to do *more*. And so they had done it. As many guides inside the station were proud to explain, there were many restaurants, going from the plebeian hasty pocket meals to luxury establishments for the gourmets. There were sports rooms for those who wanted to do some physical activity before their train was called. There were small churches where one could pray. There were shops. In fact, there seemed to be more shops than anything else, including places to eat.

Something Dominic pointed out to the man who had invited him to one of the aforementioned upper-class restaurants of Grand Central.

"Yes, there are tens of thousands of shops here. It wasn't exactly intended for there to be so many, but rumour is Lady Gutenberg personally mentioned this shortcoming to Her Celestial Highness."

There was something insinuated when 'Lady Gutenberg' was said, but Dominic let it go. The interests of his family weren't going to turn towards the Throneworld anytime soon.

"Of course, once it became clear that the profits were coming, everyone involved in the mercantile sector wanted to be here. The initial price to gain a concession has easily been multiplied by five hundred in the last decade, and the waiting queue is three kilometres-long, or so I was told."

"Does it mean a new 'Grand Central' will be built in the coming years?"

"It's possible, I suppose," Marquis Orion Crantor replied, checking his elegant short grey beard was perfectly trimmed. Naturally, it was. "But it has not been announced so far. To be honest, I don't think it is the first priority of the Ministers. The main mag-lines' expansion has been on the Dolos Continent for the last five years."

"Fair enough," Dominic replied, trying not to think about the titanic numbers of projects the Hive World was successfully implementing at the same time. True, in many ways, rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure of Macragge was going to be an equally titanic effort, but here, it was slammed in his face. "And my father vigorously insisted that I invest in starships and ship construction...as I'm sure he delicately informed you, Lord Marquis."

"He may have sent a few strongly worded letters to that effect," the noble who was both the head of House Crantor on Nyx and one of the most influential representatives of what was vulgarly called 'the Banking Houses' on Nyx replied diplomatically. "And I will repeat what I told him by letter: in my opinion, it is a mistake."

"Ah?" His father had certainly mentioned nothing of the sort. "Why? Your ruler forbids you from investing in the shipyards?"

This at least managed to bring a chuckle out of the two centuries-old noble.

"Oh, no! Her Celestial Highness would not have been able to expand Nyx's orbital industry if that was the case! No, Heir Spurius. You want to invest, you can. But the major contracts are delivered to different powerful blocks, and to be among them, you have to be willing to coordinate your goals with those of the Tech-Priests, and be willing to invest millions of Thrones Gelts on a long-term perspective. As I repeat often to the clients I personally meet, this doesn't happen in a year."

"Isn't that a bit...short-sighted?"

Orion Crantor looked at him as if he had said something very funny.

"Five days ago, the Lady Regent formally confirmed what everyone was aware of for a month: Kar Duniash formally gave Nyx an order to build approximately two hundred Destroyers. The specific details are classified, but it is common knowledge they will be of the Warrior and Hoplite classes. It is very likely other contracts are on the way."

Dominic was thoughtful. Even for Macragge, two hundred Destroyers was a very big industrial effort. And the Crantor Marquis seemed to find it *normal*...

"And no...foreigners were allowed to enter the race?"

"Certain Samarkand Zaibatsu are investing in Attica and a few other local Cartels, so they are present, even if it's unofficial. But outside the capital...the biggest 'foreigner block' to gain something was Duquesne of Toulon. And they aren't that 'foreign', their participation in the Nyxian programs began before Her Celestial Highness destroyed Commorragh."

"Oh. That's...good. Out of...curiosity, you told my father shipyards weren't the best place to invest. What do you think, then, is the best place to have large profits?"

"Agri-Hives," Orion Cantor thanked the butler who had brought him a second small bottle of Fay wine. The smell when it was opened was very fruity, Dominic had to admit. Once the glasses were filled and the butler silently disappeared, the Marquis spoke again. "I was one of the parties who advised Her Celestial Highness that limiting Nyx to one Agri-Hive was counterproductive. Our advice, several years ago, was not followed, but it is beginning to change."

"I don't know much, but isn't it something the Adeptus Administratum will frown upon?"

"The local Adepts and Tithe-Masters won't." The Marquis smirked. "As for the Throneworld, there are some...differences of opinion between Her Celestial Highness and some high-ranked Adepts."

There was something...stunning about listening to a Nyxian noble speaking like the wrath of the Administratum was no big thing. It was. Even the upper classes of Macragge knew that.

"Agri-Hives are the future, and anyone willing to invest in them will have many reasons to rejoice in the coming decades. Agri-Hives and Orbital Elevators..."

**Nyx System**

***Ferrus' Revenge* Shipyards**

**2.181.311M35**

**Commodore Yang Wen-li**

Strangely, there was no one to welcome him, which was a bit surprising when you had seconds ago been told the words 'she is waiting for you'.

Yang resolved himself to wait...not that it was that much of a chore. There was no one but him in this ecliptic-shaped council room, but the main table had a superb model of a warship to admire.

It reminded Yang of the museum the Federation had. As a self-appointed historian, this had been one of the rare things he truly liked in these military buildings boasting about glory and the superlative power of each new starship generation. Models cost far less money than true warships, and they didn't kill anybody. What was not to like?

The models had some problems, of course. The moment you looked at them, you knew after some effort what their flaws were. And then you pitied the crew that was going to be assigned to several problematic locations inside the hull.

Yet this was a model in front of him. An impressive one, for it was ten metres in length, maybe a bit more. As his feet took him before the table-sized representation of a warship, the notes in 'Low Gothic' informed him the scale was one metre for one kilometre in real size.

It was...impressive. Yang had noticed without anyone saying him that there weren't that many Battleships of the 'Imperium of Mankind' which were over seven-eight kilometres in size.

And yes, a short inspection confirmed the final Battleship that would be based on this model would be ten kilometres-long.

This was not going some kind of inoffensive warship. Granted, this Battleship remained minuscule compared to a Dreadnought like the *Midgard*. But then Dreadnoughts had a habit of making everything look tiny when you used them as comparison. This Battleship would be quite redoubtable if there was nothing over twenty kilometres in your order of battle. It could generate three layers of Void Shields, and the Lances were mounted in triple turrets. The other gun decks were armed with plasma-based guns. And the prow had a massive cannon which would probably kill anything that wasn't a Battleship in one shot.

This wasn't a class designed to go hunting trade convoys or stay quietly at anchor over a particularly important planet. This was an offensive warship, a Battleship with walls of Adamantium, built to endure the inferno of war battles like the one of Macragge was.

And it frightened Yang, because for all he had seen, this was a Battleship that the Imperium felt was rightfully necessary, not something that they wanted to use to brag about at their balls and other celebration parties.

"I see you are interested by the model of the New Battleship Program, Commodore."

Yang abandoned his study of the model to turn towards the voice who had spoken. It was...a surprising sight. The red robe of the Mechanicus – that Admiral loved to call 'tech-charlatans' – was draped over a body of bronze-coloured metal, that had curiously been forged to look like dragon scales...much like the Minister of Industry who had been at Macragge, now that he thought about it. There were dozens of those...those metallic cables they called 'mechadendrites' emerging then disappearing under the scales.

It was not the strangest sight Yang had seen in the last months, but it deserved to be mentioned.

"I am interested by all models. It was a hobby of mine. I suppose you created this Battleship model?"

"I did! I am going to present it to the Chosen of the Omnissiah when she returns." Lady Weaver, then. Yang had learned that the ruler of Nyx earned titles faster than should be humanly possible. "Forgive me for the late arrival. I am Arithmancia Sultan, Mistress of Ships in the name of Basileia Taylor Hebert, Archmagos Prime of the Nyxian Mechanicus."

While the true meaning of the ranks was nebulous to him, it was enough for the Federation Commodore to know a very important person stood in front of him...and one certainly who had played a major part into developing the very industrialised Nyx System.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mistress Sultan." Yang greeted half-sincerely. "But I suppose you didn't request my presence here to speak about a new model. I suppose it has to be about the *Midgard* and the *Spirit of Eternity*."

"The *Midgard* can wait." The scale-plated mechanical voice answered quickly, surprising Yang. "We are going to place it in a dockyard we are busy modifying."

"Err...you don't want to use it?"

"For the moment, we can't," the Mistress of Ships answered with honest candour, "the Dreadnought belongs to the Chosen of the Omnissiah, and by law she is only allowed to own a single warship in active service. The conclusion is implacable: the *Midgard* can't be in active service. The *Midgard* isn't a warship. It is a relic, a symbol of archeotech the Nyxian Mechanicus has been granted the privilege to study, while Imperial Admirals are granted the privilege to test its hyper-advanced catapults and some sophisticated devices."

Yang's opinion at first when it came to the Imperium was that it was a despotic regime with feudal foundations and an urge to tyrannize everything that didn't meet their definition of 'normal'. The more worlds he saw, however, the more this first opinion seemed...incorrect. The different organisations, these 'Adeptuses', were separate yet united, a mess of common and divided interests that somehow managed to function together...if only by accident.

"I note you didn't say anything about the *Spirit*."

"Not the *Spirit of Eternity* per se," Arithmancia Sultan tried to reassure him...or at least Yang thought it was supposed to be reassuring. "These two ships are the proof the Ancient Age you were part of had a more efficient industrial base than we did! I must therefore understand where this efficiency comes from!"

"I see no problem with that," though she might be disappointed, as certain industrial processes and shipbuilding functions were done using Artificial Intelligences on a macro-scale, something the Imperium had never had access to. "I can tell Admiral to give you copies of the Federation's relevant history. I will warn you though: it's a lot of data, and you might not get pleasant answers."

"It is a question of efficiency," the red-robed 'Archmagos Prime' affirmed stubbornly, "and I enjoy very much my historical debates with the Chosen of the Omnissiah and Archmagos Dragon."

**Hive Athena**

**2.183.311M35**

**Archmagos Dragon Richter**

"You had a lot of fun, didn't you?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Dragon."

This statement might have been a bit more believable if Missy Byron wasn't grinning like the cat that had eaten the canary.

"I saw them. I saw the draconic plushies. And I know for sure they weren't produced when we left."

The Regent of Nyx made a comical expression...and then brutally changed her strategy.

"I blame Taylor."

Dragon blinked...before grinning back.

"You realise blaming a Living Saint is heresy, right?"

"Bah, she will forgive me. Besides, it serves her right. Do you have any idea how much paperwork I had to deal with when your band of rascals teleported a planet? And then I had to approve the addition of a moon, since your band of galactic demolishers hadn't thought of it!"

"Well, to be fair, we were a bit busy with a giant space battle at the time..." Dragon wondered how a nice Artificial Intelligence like her had arrived at a point where she was justifying teleporting planets and moons. "I blame Cawl."

"Isn't the Archmagos Dominus still senior to you? Congratulations on your promotion, by the way."

"That's it!" Dragon decided. "I blame Cawl for corrupting my heroic tendencies, and I blame you for these horribly cute draconic plushies!"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I completely disagree."

"I am still the Regent of Nyx, you know."

The Tinker smiled.

"Her Celestial Highness will be *so* *disappointed* to hear that all this power has finally gone to your head."

Missy grinned back.

"Like you will be so disappointed to wait for forty-eight hours before reading the Basileia's last message where she informs you of the projects she formally agrees to fund?"

The recently-promoted Tinker-Archmagos snorted majestically like a wrathful dragon.

"That is an extremely low blow. You have grown tyrannical in our absence, Regent Vista."

"So the Adjutant-Spiders inform me. It was they who pushed for spider plushies, by the way."

"And then you decided to add draconic ones."

"Well, the Salamanders and their cousins insisted on Salamander plushies after that, and one thing led to another..."

"Wonderful," Dragon grumbled, "you are really fortunate my Tech-Priests have begun to adopt proper draconic fashion in robes and metal. Otherwise I would think of a fiery and devastating manner to take revenge..."

"But I have a lot of things ready to make sure you forgive me!"

"Really?" The female Tinker asked dubiously.

"Really. Did you know the daughter of a certain High Lady left for Baal the moment we knew our great and terrible Queen of Escalation's schedule? And I urged the Dawnbreaker Guard to not warn her of this little insignificant information..."

Dragon thought it over. And she arrived at an easy conclusion.

"This is evil. I approve."

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Baraspine System**

**Baraspine**

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate date is 311M35**

**Arch-Duke** **Maleagant Mandrakor**

Maleagant screamed in anger as the wave of enemy bombers withdrew after having expended their disgusting ammunition.

"Stop screaming, brother," his sister Meliagrance ordered.

"You do not command me," the Arch-Duke of House Mandrakor hissed angrily.

"Yes, and what did that lead to, brother?" Maleagant couldn't see her, but he could almost taste the grin she was wearing inside her Knight Abominant, the *Deinonychus*, the twin of his own *Gorgosaurus*. "You have lost many of the irreplaceable Knights of House Mandrakor...again. Should I remind you...again...that our parents are not here anymore to replace the toys you break?"

This was enough for his Throne Mechanicum to pour the images of the humiliation into his senses. Maleagant saw once more the banners of House Mandrakor be removed from their towers and burned in large piles while Knights of House Krast advanced to wipe out as many of the High King and High Queen's Knights as they could.

Dharrovar, their impregnable bastion, had fallen in a single week, as the never-enough-cursed Inquisition had brought dozens of Knights and Titans to incinerate their castles.

"No, sister...no, it won't be necessary."

"Good. Because now we are down to half of our strength, and the pestilent minds in command of the enemy force seem think their 'Spore Caste' has weakened us sufficiently."

Maleagant, by a ducal effort of will, didn't snarl. How he hated those bloated Bombers and disease-filled air support! At first they had appeared like slow, rust-covered flyers, but without warning the enormous things had been shrouded in putrid light, and then the 'spore missiles' had been launched from such a distance none of his Knights had a chance to engage.

"They are wrong," the legitimate ruler of House Mandrakor retorted. "We are far from beaten."

"That is your pride speaking, nothing else," Meliagrance corrected with this condescension he had grown to hate, in addition to the obstacle his twin represented.

"We still have fifty-three Knights that are ready to sound the charge."

"Out of the one hundred we began this morning with." The pilot of the *Deinonychus* answered sarcastically. "And my last Scout has returned while you were busy raging and seething at an enemy you aren't even able to touch. The followers of Disease and Pestilence have stopped the air assault, yes. I am not fully certain if it is because their 'Spore Caste' is low on ammunition or because they believe us fully beaten. What is certain, unfortunately, is that their Titans are moving in for the killing blow."

His Throne reminded him again of the fell night where House Mandrakor had lost Dharrovar. Maleagant again saw the Warlords of Legio Crucius which had torn apart the High Queen's steed without slowing down before massacring the High King's guard. He felt the poisonous words ordering the desperate retreat as the last Barges made a near-suicidal translation above their heads so the evacuation had a chance of success.

"Which Titan Legion are we speaking about?"

"They are proclaiming themselves the Festering Death. No idea what their name before was, but they've been infected by the Lord of Plagues, as sure as I am the Arch-Duchess of Mandrakor. And they're led by what they call a Plaguelord, a Warlord that is armed with contagion weapons and who knows what else."

"I see...it is a big problem, *sister*."

"It is more than a big problem, *brother*. I saved our flanks, but now, we have nowhere else to flee to."

"You would flee? Again?"

"There are Titans, brother. Of course I would flee in a heartbeat if I could. Must I also tell you that they have several armies of peasants under their banners, while ours had to be put down when they rose against us after the aerial bombardment of the Spore Caste?"

"No. That won't be necessary...*sister*."

The dismal climate of Baraspine was once again making their lives miserable, but in the next minutes it was insufficient to hide the enormous figures slowly advancing towards them, breaking through effortlessly what had been the sole line of defence erected by House Mandrakor.

There were the Titans of the Festering Death.

And by the Great Plots, they looked hideous.

No Titan could compare to the martial beauty of a Knight, but the great walkers of the Titanicus were certainly the biggest and most powerful weapons anyone could deploy on a planet. And the Titans generally had the appearance of predators.

The things which were now coming at them were disgusting in the extreme.

From the cannons and the arms flowed rivers of green pus. The legs were not limbs anymore, they were trunks of some Warp-spawned trees, and organisms resembling enormous worms covered them, colouring some sections a yellow-green that hurt his eyes. The less said about the upper parts of each Titan, the better.

"There are ten of them. Three of them were former Warlords. The smaller ones must have been Warhounds."

If the Warlords hadn't been there, they could have won. There was-

"*Hello there. Is there someone willing to negotiate*?"

Someone had broken through their most secure communication network, who-

"It is somewhat rude to enter a conversation uninvited," Meliagrance informed the mysterious voice. "Who are you, stranger?"

"*I am Malicia, Warlord of the Sons of Change, Knight*." There was a chuckle. "*And the reason you are still alive. The diseased Bombers of the Spore Caste are forced to defend their bases against my attack, which is why you have been granted a reprieve*."

"If what you say is true...you could have landed your troops to finish them one hour ago." Maleagant interrupted.

"*I could have, yes*." The voice was definitely female and amused. "*Why would I? The slaves of Decay are my enemy, but with their warships destroyed, I can pulverise them with orbital strikes*. *Baraspine is not so valuable that I feel like losing even a single soldier to purge it of the Festering Death's diseases*."

"You want our oaths." He bit out.

"*I do*."

Whoever this voice belonged to, she was a fool, did she really believe-

"*And before you get any ideas of complex and amusing treachery in your head, let me assure you, the oaths will be enforced by my sorcery. If you betray me, you will grow to envy the fate of the Titans you are facing*."

Maleagant gritted his teeth. This kind of oath...he knew it was one that could last an eternity, as long as the warlord lived, at least. It was completely unacceptable, it was-

"We accept...Lady Malicia." His twin sister, odious bitch that she was, replied.

There was no choice. He was the true Arch-Duke, but he couldn't fight the Titans alone.

"We pledge our Lances to your service."

There was a new chuckle.

"Good. Now watch and admire the spectacle."

An enormous pillar of blue flames exploded in the wasteland separating them the Knights from the Titans.

Everyone stopped moving...and there were many gasps, as from the flames strode an enormous bipedal monster.

It seemed to be a beast straight out of nightmares. It was no mere Titan. It was a reptile of metal, with a tail and reptilian spikes. It had fangs and claws. It was burning in sorcery like a reactor burns plasma.

And when it opened its maw, it was the most dangerous Plasma Cannon was preparing to fire.

The biggest Plaguelord Titan and all its disgusting companions fired, but nothing seemed to touch it. The shots of pus and disease seemed to be stopped hundreds of metres before hitting their targets.

"Tyrannosaurus Rex. *KILL*."

Inferno and death in one blue-gold blast slammed into the leading Plaguelord, and a second later, there was a catastrophic explosion across the torn-apart plains of Baraspine.

Then there was a flash severing the horizon, this one purple, and Maleagant swore for one moment he saw in a vision an armoured woman flying and cutting a Titan's head in two.

One thing was sure, there had been ten Titans and three Plaguelords on this battlefield. Now suddenly there was only one Plaguelord and eight Titans.

"*Kill them all. Let none escape*."

"By your will, it shall be done!" Meliagrance obeyed, and Maleagant had no choice but to repeat the same words.

**Several hundreds of kilometres away from the main Baraspine battlefield**

**The Fourth Mortarch**

There was no need to breathe, for the Mortarch had left this mortal limitation behind him long ago.

There was no need to summon an Astropath, for in many ways, the recipient of the message was always with him.

There was no need to utter pledges of loyalty, feigned or real, for the very existence of the Mortarch was tied to his sire, and if by a near-impossible turn of circumstances it wavered, the Mortarch would cease to exist.

"Your will has been done, my King. Eternity will be yours, or there will be no eternity."

There was none of the full strength of His Eternal Majesty manifesting this time. There were too many slaves of the Pretenders on and above this planet to take that risk.

"*Speak*." It was barely a whisper, but it was enough.

"All happened as you predicted, my King. The Warlord-child calling herself Malicia intervened personally to save the broken remains of House Mandrakor. I estimate she saved between forty-nine and fifty-three Knights, all of them of the Questoris pattern. The forces of Decay lost ten Titans and seven million plague-infected infantrymen."

"*How strong is her control over the Black Blade*?"

"She was able to kill three Titans with it. I noticed no weakness and no strain. During the battle, she was able to exert a moderate amount of control over the Beast-Engine that the Change Pretender gifted her."

There was a moment of silence from his King. The Mortarch waited. He would wait, for disobedience was the worst sin imaginable when it came to his true nature.

"*Good*," the King in Yellow murmured. "*She is walking on the path I desire. Now my Mortarch, speak of the latest rusted sword of the Decay Pretender. Tell me everything you learned about the Spore Caste*."

"They remain a very efficient aerial force, my King. Without the Warlord-child's arrival, their methodical strategy would have destroyed the entire House of Mandrakor and its allies for no losses in return."

There was no intervention or demand to explain a specific detail, and thus the Mortarch continued.

"When their transports in orbit were destroyed, the Plague Marines opened a portal and evacuated the majority of the Spore Caste. Seven Titans which were not sent against the Knights joined them once the presence of the Beast-Engine and the Black Blade made defeat inevitable. Your lesser servants were not close enough to make out every detail, but there's a high degree of certainty the elite forces were evacuated in time to their other bastions."

The infantry and a lot of support vehicles had been abandoned, of course. But millions of diseased servants were of little value individually or collectively. The Decay Pretender would find others to compensate for these losses.

"You have done well. Go to Reth, and report once the outcome of the battle is decided. Do not intervene. If there are souls feeling the pull of Eternity, send the lesser servants to claim them."

"It will be done, my King. Eternity will be yours, or there will be no eternity."

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Tephaine System**

**Reth**

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate date is 311M35**

**Commander Eclipse**

As all things should be, the ammunition ran out.

There was only one order to give.

"BANZAI! BLOOD CASTE! CHARGE AND BLEED THESE SNAKES!"

"BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!"

The traitors couldn't do anything. They tried to cast their cursed witchery, and Eclipse felt an immense hatred for these tricksters and blasphemous diplomats. It wasn't enough to lie, they had to cheat with their sorcery too?

Thankfully, the Impaler Rifles were now in range to explain the meaning of pain, and the mutated flesh of the Water Caste soon poured onto the water to join the blood of the snakes.

"It does not matter from whom the blood is taken..."

Eclipse struck down one snake. With the strength his Battlesuit and the blessings of Khorne gave him, it was decisive. A second snake lost its head. He recovered another warrior's blade, and threw it. It killed one of the Water Caste's sorcerers.

This was enough for the rest of the liars and weaklings. Their line was collapsing, and when their lives were at stake, they looked to their own hides rather than the glory of their God.

Many explosions of blue and pink flames resonated across the battlefield, and soon enough over a third of the enemy forces disappeared, leaving the rest of their accursed allies to die one by one.

"You shouldn't have come here," Eclipse told one of the blue-skinned traitors who had lost his legs and had what remained of his body balanced upon the corpse of a white serpent. "But then, you always thought you knew better than us. Isn't that right, oh former pet of the Ethereals?"

"You..." the dying traitor coughed, before vomiting blood...which strangely was turning red as it fell into the waters of Reth. "You are just...blind. We were...deceived."

"Deceived? This coming out from the mouth of someone prostrating himself before the great sins of Lies and Witchery?" Eclipse spat in the traitor's face. "You deceived us, you and your band of Ambassadors, Diplomats, and cowardly Magisters! You chained us! You promised us there was only the Greater Good, and those too blind to see it! Guess what?"

His Impaler Blade, perfectly adjusted to be an extension of his Battlesuit and will, severed one arm, and the thing that had been of the Water Caste screamed in pain.

"You were wrong. Now we no longer have to restrain ourselves. Now we can have our wars and enjoy the slaughter. Now I hear the call of the Skull Throne, and our God promises us the galaxy to conquer!"

"You..." the lying traitor managed to utter, struggling against the pain, "you are exactly why...it was necessary...to stop the Mont'au."

"Of course you would say that. You were about to lose the war! But now we have seen through your lies, and the war will never end! BANZAI!"

And Eclipse claimed one more skull for Khorne.

His troops, seeing him raise his new trophy-head bayed in triumph.

"BLOOD CASTE!"

"COMMANDER!"

"Our God has spoken, warriors of the Bloodshido. It does not matter from where the blood flows, only that it does. This purity, this feeling of peace this planet is filled with...it is an insult to our Lord. It must cease. It must stop at once! The cowards have departed, but there are others on this world! In eight days, it is His command all the waters of this planet must be running red with blood! The skulls of every enemy must be claimed! You will not fail! You will not spare a single life of the Castes who chained us! BANZAI! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!"

"SKULLS FOR HIS SKULL THRONE!"

The survivors of the eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight Blood Caste Warriors began to run, slaughtering everything in their path.

The Blood Campaign of Reth had begun.

**The Somnium Stars**

**Dominus Minoris System**

**Reserve Nodal Base Number Eight**

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate date is 311M35**

**Hell Forge-Mistress Sota-Nul**

"Are you satisfied?"

It was good the Prince of Crows had not used the dark humour and the other provocations the Night Lords were so fond of using; Sota-Nul had always hated them.

"I am unhappy the storage procedures in about ten percent of the Reserve Nodal Base were carried out by incompetents." The Hell Forge-Mistress replied. "But given the low standards of the Eighth Legion when the Great Crusade was fought, the global situation is eminently satisfying. You did not lie."

"When establishing long-term alliances, I try my best to only offer what I have in my possession," the Space Marine who had been a First Captain stated without a trace of arrogance. "Your analysis of the depots' equipment and weapons?"

Sota-Nul took some micro-seconds to check her data-notes before answering.

"There are twenty-two thousand five hundred Power Armours stored here that are in an acceptable, serviceable state by my standards. The hundreds that are not can serve as spare parts. The main problem is that this number is misleading. Many patterns are completely obsolete; any engagement with a Mark VII-equipped force would result in their destruction." If they were thrown into a battle against Mark IX Power Armours, Sota-Nul might as well shoot them herself; it would save her a lot of trouble. "The seventeen thousand Power Armours of the Mark IV Maximus are the most promising, and will need to be improved to hold their own against opponents fielding Mark VII."

"And the rest?"

"The five hundred Predators and the eight hundred Rhinos that are serviceable are a useful armoured force. I wish you could have stored more Land Raiders. Twenty were stored, and two are already going to be used as nothing but a source for spare parts."

"True. Although I will note we managed to keep one hundred and twenty Kratos heavy tanks in reserve."

"Those can serve a Space Marine assault force well." Sota-Nul acknowledged for a second, "but they will need to be refitted as well. Based on the data I was able to obtain, the Imperium is unlikely to use masses of infantry without armour support. And logically there is the greatest flaw of the Kratos, which led it to being phased out of the Space Marines' arsenals: its frustratingly slow speed. The Kratos you have need a new engine, or the Predators and Khan Tanks of your enemies will run circles around you before causing crippling damage."

"I will concede that we didn't predict the existence of the new Khans and Cataphracts during the Great Crusade."

Sota-Nul would have felt extremely satisfied at saying the flesh didn't like to plan in the long-term, but it would have been illogical. The True Mechanicum had not planned the evacuation of Mars during the civil war in the slightest, despite knowing the Primarch of the Ultramarines and the other Legions were mere days away from Sol.

"The air force stored in this depot is far less satisfying. Between attack gunships and transports, only one hundred and fifty Thunderhawks and twenty Stormbirds can be considered serviceable. You have tens of thousands of Drop Pods, but for acquisition and extraction purposes, those are functionally useless."

Sota-Nul calculated the numbers again, and arrived once again to the original conclusion she had reached before.

"With this depot, a Chapter-sized force of Night Lords can be sustained. You have one hundred veterans in stasis; I recommend they each train a new Astartes per generation."

"Both the Apothecarium size and the gene-seed reserves allow us to sustain a more...vigorous expansion."

"Theoretically yes." Sota-Nul was absolutely unconvinced by the argument. "In practise, you need to prove you aren't going to slaughter each other and the psy-indoctrinated troops won't turn on you the moment they are able to use their Astartes' gifts to the fullest effect. Throwing nine hundred or two thousand Astartes into the same training pit will result in an equal number of dead, which will achieve exactly none of my goals."

"But you agree the idea of recreating a Legion here has its merits."

"Provided you give me the means to secure an industrial base in the region and follow my logistical recommendations...yes, the idea is logically sound. It falls to you, First Captain, to ensure the illogical elements will not trouble my work."

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**2.200.311M35**

**Primarch** **Roboute Guilliman**

Sometimes, Roboute wondered if Lorgar's ultimate goal had been to make sure that once he woke up, the bureaucratic mess he would have to deal with would have reached the size of a planet.

After several seconds, the Primarch of the Ultramarines regretfully discarded the theory. Not because he didn't believe the traitor would have been spiteful enough to do it if someone gave him the idea, but this sort of vellum-infused vengeance was not how religious fanatics worked.

Unfortunately, the fact it hadn't been a goal of the Traitor Seventeenth didn't make it any more pleasant to deal with. There were colossal problems, old and new, for Ultramar as a whole. His sons were trying to deal with problems before they reached his desk, partly in order to not shine too many spotlights on old and poor decisions. Citizens of Macragge were leaving in haste for more tax-friendly planets, now that this ridiculous policy of isolationism had failed. The Mechanicus and the Ecclesiarchy, two religious organisations, were clamouring for more rights in the systems under his rule in exchange for reconstruction resources.

Fortunately, the meeting in the next minutes wasn't about that. Though it was about a different kind of problem, alas.

"My son."

"Father."

Roboute observed the red and yellow armour for several seconds, wondering if so many catastrophes would have been avoided if Cato Valens had behaved like the scions of Mancora. Unfortunately, there was no way to know...and maybe the 'Mancora Approach' would have created its own share of problems.

"First, I must present my apologies. You were treated quite unfairly after the great victory of Commorragh. You have my deepest gratitude for helping Weaver annihilate that lair of monstrous xenos, as well as participating in the necessary extermination of the Necron Tomb-Worlds."

Chapter Master Gilbert Sertorius of the Howling Griffons removed his helmet...and sighed.

"I won't pretend everyone is perfectly happy in the ranks of our battle-brothers, father. That said, the anger is...subdued, for the moment. We won, which always helps when it comes to morale. There isn't much we can do about the Ultramarines' officers who made the mistakes, and for all the...antagonism, no one loyal wished they learned the errors of their ways with an invasion of Macragge. And the sincere apologies will of course help as well."

"I will bring more material apologies once the situation has stabilised here," the Thirteenth Primarch promised. "It is regrettable that the logistics are in a lamentable state, for I would have dearly wished to reward you for your exemplary campaigns and compensate you for the losses you took. I understand you lost approximately two entire Companies during Operation Stalingrad."

"We did," the Lord of Mancora confirmed. "And two more Companies are severely understrength. Fortunately, my Master of Recruits was far more farsighted than I, and made a double recruitment tithe several years ago. So we should be able to return to our pre-Stalingrad effectives relatively quickly, though the experience, of course, is going to be a problem for several decades. Materially...Lady Weaver's manufactorum should deliver about sixty ground vehicles, all Rhinos and Predators, and her Mechanicus connections are completing the void trials of a brand-new Strike Cruiser."

"That is good to hear." Of course, it made the apologies and this meeting as a whole all the more important. Cato Valens and his circle of advisors had given commands in ignorance which had weakened the bonds with Mancora, and the Howling Griffons were supported logistically for it by their new 'benefactor'. Theoretically, there was a high risk that if he hadn't woken up, his sons of yellow and red would have progressively refused to have anything to do with Macragge. "And I suppose the same applies to the Silver Skulls."

"It does. They may even receive more war machines and help from Lady Weaver and the Mechanicus. Their operations around the Eye of Terror have been more difficult than ours."

Given that the Howling Griffons had been engaged against xenos whose hyper-advanced technology routinely disintegrated ceramite and other forms of armour like it didn't exist, that was really saying something.

"I would appreciate using your relationships to apologise to them in person." The majority of the Silver Skulls were deployed deep into Segmentum Obscurus, and while their temporary headquarters was Cadia, in practise they were on a mobile campaign to hunt down and slaughter the squadrons of traitors which had splintered off from Lorgar's 'Grand Armada'.

"Of course, father."

There were more topics which had to be discussed. The doctrines the Howling Griffons had developed to use the Mark IX Power Armour and their new vehicles, for example. In an irony Sanguinius would have loved to hear, his sons of Mancora were likely the first chapter in millennia to have added the Baal Predator to their armouries – though technically those had come from Nyx – and used several Raven Guard designs for the Thunderhawks for their insertions on Necron worlds.

This was all fascinating...and confirmed his belief that if the *Codex Astartes* was used as the tactical and strategic treatise it had been intended to be – and not a holy book – Space Marines could find a way to win wars against enemies whose existence Roboute had never even dreamed of.

"I thank you for the battle-report. It has provided me a lot of insights, my son. Now for the last subject I wanted to address with you. I don't think it is very much of a secret I would enjoy having a Chapter of my sons establishing a presence in the Nyx Sector, for a multitude of reasons."

Reasons which included – though of course were in no way limited to – that any large-scale reform of the Codex Astartes and the Adeptus Astartes was going to be impossible without the Lady ruling the Nyx Sector. The influence she had over all Successor Chapters of the former Ninth Legion made that evident by itself.

Gilbert Sertorius chuckled, to his relief.

"I understand. There were...diplomatic overtures made right after Commorragh. But neither the Silver Skulls nor we had any interest to go further on that path. We are really happy with the homeworld we have, father...and the industrial and military relationships that were solidified by Operation Stalingrad are satisfying in their own right. But if I may make a suggestion, father?"

"By all means," Roboute smiled and would have done something more expressive...if he wasn't unable to move, tied to the enormous machines of Cawl.

"The theoretical is to offer something really good. In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of the Death Star, Lady Weaver needed Space Marines to stabilise the Nyx Sector. Once the destruction of Commorragh was completed, it was better to have Space Marines in order to deter the Eldar and other foes. But now, there isn't really a need for more Chapters."

Roboute understood the core of the argument perfectly...along with what hadn't been said. The political legitimacy was there – after Macragge, who would deny a 'Living Saint' more Space Marines under her banner? – but the military necessity wasn't, and besides, the current Chapters: Brothers of the Red, Fists of Roma, Black Templars, Magma Spiders, White Thunderbolts, Heracles Wardens, and Iron Drakes all seemed to have cordial relationships with one another. Why change what was evidently working?

"The theoretical is noted and will be thought over many times before a decision is taken, my son. Directly related to this subject, I heard many Astartes before Operation Stalingrad fought mock battles against the Swarm of Lady Weaver..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Baal System**

**Baal Secundus**

**5.201.311M35**

**Chapter Master Sabriel**

The black sands of Baal Secundus were certainly not without their own beauty as long as the wind was absent.

Of course, to full enjoy them like Lady Weaver and he did, your armour had to be completely sealed.

This part of the desert was far too radioactive for humans. In fact, this particular region was so bad that even the mutants and most of the mutated wild life stayed as far away from it as they could. There were places on this moon where someone not native to Baal could survive without rad-protective armour for several days.

This desert wasn't one of them.

"Have you led me here to discourage me, Chapter Master?"

Sabriel chuckled, wondering how little in certain aspects the Shield of Angels had changed since the Battle of the Death Star.

"Not at all. I just wanted to give you the truth. If restoring the moons of Baal was easy, it would have been done long ago."

"That I completely agree with."

"And unless I am greatly mistaken, you did not obtain STC templates to solve this problem."

"The key word is 'yet', Chapter Master." The Astartes who had once been called Valerian Benlio turned his head in a silent plea for more information. "A certain thief who has infuriated the Chapters of the Blood for millennia...let's just say he stole plenty of interesting databases concerning terraformation and other lost technologies. Obviously, I won't know how good the templates are until I have them in my hands."

"Obviously," Sabriel nodded. "Given how many miracles you seem to enjoy doing recently, can I ask how far you are willing to go if the optimistic assumptions triumph?"

"Full restoration of the moons."

That was...a very tall order. Before the Age of Strife nearly annihilated Mankind, the moons of Baal Primus and Baal Secundus had been paradises – something confirmed long ago by the Emperor when he landed and met his son for the first time.

"That is going to be a challenge, even for someone with your powers and wealth."

"It will." The determination in Taylor Hebert's voice was sufficient to tell him she measured the magnitude of the titanic effort lying ahead. "But I think it is necessary. To be blunt, my conviction is that a colony of my favourite Moths is necessary for Baal to thrive. And you have seen how picky they can be about their food."

Oh yes, Sabriel had seen how...voracious Lisa and her fellow Moths could be. Macragge had proved once again that wherever there were strawberries presented on gigantic plates, the fruit-devourer was going to arrive, and all the Warp horrors could step aside or be left broken in her wake.

"Well, the benefits your Moths bring are such that I am not going to refuse, Lady Weaver. I am more concerned, however, about the changes it will usher for the culture and society of Baal."

"The changes have already begun, in many ways." The Angel chosen by the Emperor remarked. "I know that for the last trials, you tested all the boys by groups, not as individuals."

"I see Gamaliel explained nearly everything. This isn't exactly the full truth. There are going to be individual tests for the Aspirants; they should begin tomorrow now that I think about it. But yes, we decided to test them as groups. As I'm sure you know, we took some inspiration from the Heracles Wardens. On the other hand, we aren't keeping childhood friends or sons of the same tribe together. The new 'tribe' must at first be complete strangers to each other, and then prove they can work together under the Angels' gaze. And with each trial where they succeed together, where they triumph over adversity, they will become brothers-in-arms."

Or they would fail, but better for the Chapter to realise they couldn't be trusted for teamwork now.

Obviously, this necessity for teamwork had always existed. But now, as they were progressively phasing out the gladiatorial combat – with the exception of 'reprogrammed' Baalite Scorpions that were way too useful for this purpose – the teamwork trials were gaining an entirely new level of importance. Naturally, it demanded more 'overseers' for the selections at Angel's Fall, but as the Chapter needed to rebuild, this was acceptable for the Captains of Baal.

"An interesting approach," the golden-armoured Angel noted, unfurling her wings. "And one I approve of."

"Thank you, that means a lot to us."

"I'm afraid we are going to have to end this conversation. I feel old and new friends of mine have come to visit your humble star system."

"Pleasant surprises, then?"

"I believe so." Lady Weaver said it neutrally, but Sabriel could tell there was happiness under this apparent calm. "As for the equipment needs, please give your answer within ten days. I need to inform Dragon of the arrangements in vehicles and armours we agreed upon."

"It will be done...my Lady."

"Have a nice flight!" And the golden-winged heiress of the Great Angel soared above the deserts, much like He must have done long ago...and it was truly an angelic vision.

\*\*\*\*

**9th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**AHRIMAN**

'**THE EXILE'**

'**THE ARCH-SORCERER'**

'**THE HERALD OF MUTATION'**

'**THE LORD OF CONSPIRACIES'**

'**THE EVIL EYE'**

**FIRST CAPTAIN OF THE TRAITOR FIFTEENTH LEGION**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLUS**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PSYCHIC THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA MORAL THREAT**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT MASSIVE ASTARTES LIBRARIAN SUPPORT**

**THE USE OF ALPHA-CLASS ASSETS IS DECLARED NECESSARY TO EXTINGUISH THIS THREAT**

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS KNOWN TO TARGET LIBRARIES AND ALL SOURCES OF LORE. IF HE MANAGES TO GAIN ACCESS TO SUCH A PLACE, CONSIDER IT LOST AND ACT ACCORDINGLY. FOR THE LOVE OF THE GOD-EMPEROR, DO NOT ENTER THE LIBRARY! THERE ARE FATES WORSE THAN DEATH.**

**REWARDS: 3.9 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'FRIEND OF FENRIS' AWARDED, FIVE FENRISIAN SAGAS SUNG IN HONOUR OF THE VICTORY, OVATION FROM THE ADEPTUS LEXICANUM, 1000 RARE BOOKS, SEVERAL COLLECTION OF ARTWORKS AND GREAT CRUSADE RELICS, DELIVERIES OF ADVANCED COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS, 1 STARFORT, ETC...**

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**The Eye of Terror**

**Sortiarius**

**The Pyramid of Photep**

**Temporal Anomaly – date impossible to estimate**

**Ahzek Ahriman**

For a brief moment, his plan worked.

For what might have been an eternity, Ahzek Ahriman was the equal of a God.

Which had been his plan, yes.

The idea had seeded in his head when Slaanesh had died. He was honestly surprised so few Space Marines had bothered to ask themselves the question. If the Gods of the Warp could die, then the implication was clear: they had to be born first.

There was a beginning and an end.

The Ultramarines would have made it one of their vaunted theoreticals.

Ahzek was more practical.

If Slaanesh for an infinitesimal moment could become mortal, and thus be killed, then it stood to reason that a mortal could become immortal and impossible to defeat...for an equally infinitesimal moment, of course.

The preparations had been arduous, especially as they had to be hidden from everyone. The risks of failure were too high if a single being besides himself were capable of seeing through his schemes. As it was, it still had been a near-suicidal endeavour: if the multitude of possible futures calmed, if Tzeentch was able to predict what he would do, everything would fail.

But thankfully, his arduous work had not been in vain.

For nine heartbeats or nine eternities, Ahzek Ahriman was the God of Sortiarius.

The former First Captain of the Fifteenth Legion banished all daemons from the planet.

The traps and ambushes that had ben lying in wait to seize the Thousand Sons were broken.

Entire vaults of weapons too terrible to be named were incinerated.

And the greatest servants of Tzeentch could do nothing but rage in impotence as his brothers obeyed his last order and fled.

They were not completely free. For many of them, the taint of the Warp was strong, and they had plunged their souls too deeply into the poisoned chalice. One Thousand and Ten Thousand. The Legion of Terra, and the Legion of Prospero. The survivors. Minus one each time, for the sacred symbol of the Tyrant of Change was nine, and it was tenacious.

But they were his brothers. And now he had given them the chance to survive.

Ahzek was not naive, not that it was possible to be given the sheer volume of knowledge available to him.

Some of his brothers would abandon the Fifteen's colours, old and new, the moment they could get away with it. Some worthy souls would try to join secretive Imperial organisations, and find redemption. Others...others would form their warbands, perpetually on the move, hunted by the Tzeentchian hunters across time and space.

He really didn't know which outcome was the worst, to be honest.

Ahriman could hear the wrath of Tzeentch, the fury of a God scorned.

The hatred was everywhere.

Chaos was all about hatred.

And the Powers of the Warp were all Tyrants, in their own fashion.

One Tyrant for War.

One Tyrant for Change.

One Tyrant for Decay.

One Tyrant for Anarchy.

There was only war in the Warp, and if more Gods came, there would be only Tyranny, for the slaves had to be enslaved, and the corruption of souls was everything.

Ahriman saw his brothers depart.

He bid them farewell, though they couldn't hear him.

The former exiled Captain watched as the warships fled as quickly as they could.

And when the last ship vanished, Ahzek Ahriman was no longer a God.

The return to mortality was...extremely unpleasant.

Unpleasant and painful.

The wound immediately exploded in pain, and as a result his back felt like it was on fire.

It was a struggle to breathe and not collapse completely.

Ahzek was on his knees, gasping, trying to find some way to calm his hearts.

And then they returned.

They were nine.

They were Exalted. They were Lords of Change. They each commanded Nine Legions.

Psychic backlash or not, Ahriman couldn't have resisted them.

They chained him. They rendered him powerless.

They dragged him towards the summit of the false Pyramid of Photep.

There was a throne waiting.

Even as tired and powerless as he was, Ahzek could tell it was no more trinket. It was-

"**Yes**," Fateweaver spoke, "**you see clearly. This throne was forged using some of the shards of Paramountcy that were recovered after Weaver shattered it. Nine of them, to be exact**."

"And what do you expect to do with it?" the Arch-Sorcerer retorted. "This power is fragile. I can see the glass-like fissures of this throne." In fact, the more he approached, the more Ahzek perceived it as a throne of glass. It was imposing and powerful, yes, but of an extreme fragility.

"**Didn't you guess, Ahzek**?" the two-headed Lord of Change laughed, and the universe seemed to tremble under this sound of utter malevolence. "**My Lord Tzeentch wants a Primarch to lead the Fifteenth Legion in His Name. And you, by your defiance, have just volunteered for the role**."

"Daemon Primarch or mere Primarch," it was a pleasure to throw the enormity of the victory against the Vizier's two beaks, "you will lack what truly makes a Primarch something to be feared: a Legion."

"**That has been accounted for**," the Oracle cackled. "**Once you will be fully transformed, you will call them. You will summon them to you. And they will obey your commands. Haven't they done it before? You are their new sire. You have the mantle of authority. And you will be a far better servant than your Cyclops sire ever was**."

"Never. I will never betray my brothers."

His defiance angered the Vizier of Tzeentch.

Ahzek took strength in it.

He had a feeling he was going to need it.

And he was right.

When they forced him to sit on the throne, there was so much pain the elder Space Marine had to scream.

Ahzek Ahriman screamed for aeons.

Then the pain receded.

"**It will only end when you give our Lord Tzeentch what he wants**."

"No. Not them. I will not betray my brothers. Not them!"

"**You will change your mind soon. Everyone changes**!"

The pain drowned everything again.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Baal System**

***Skyfall* – Orbital dockyards in orbit around Baal**

**5.205.311M35**

**Rogue** **Trader Dennis Peters**

No one was really surprised that the orbital station was an artwork by itself. Dennis didn't know how much it had cost the Blood Angels in the first place...never mind how much it was costing them in maintenance. Having luminous domes, angelic statues, and immense frescoes detailing the exploits of the sons of Sanguinius had to be expensive.

At the moment though, all these decorations, some millennia-old, were ignored as one gold-winged parahuman did her best to hide how happy she was to see a certain Vicequeen again.

Dennis had to admit, it was really funny to watch.

Both of them were making doe eyes. Really, the two were trying so hard it had to be obvious to all the attraction was there.

What was the saying, that absence made the heart grows fonder?

Yeah, it was completely accurate here. If there weren't thousands of potential witnesses, Dennis was ready to bet the Basileia and the Vicequeen would have already kissed and embraced each other, and likely have far fewer clothes on their bodies than they did right now.

"One hundred Throne Gelts they will use the same bed tonight," Gabriela whispered.

"Only one hundred Throne Gelts?" Dennis smirked.

"Okay, maybe ten thousand," his lover corrected.

Unfortunately, they must have been not discreet enough, because the insect-mistress walked to meet them in the next seconds.

"Well if it isn't the great Rogue Trader, the Intrepid Clockblocker himself!" And of course the Basileia said it loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear it. "What sort of mayhem have you been up to, lately?"

"Oh, a lot of fairly normal things," Dennis replied humbly, "we discovered the location of several promising Mining Worlds, we destroyed an Abominable Intelligence, we removed a few audacious pirates permanently..."

"Missy told me you also saved a planet from an Ork cruiser."

Sometimes, Dennis wondered how young and stubborn Vista had become such a gossiper. Surely it couldn't be his influence that was responsible for this?

"Well, I suppose you would know...'Queen of Planets undergoing sudden Teleportation' is among your new titles, I heard?"

The stars-filled eyes were new and very impressive...but far more was needed to make him adopt an expression of submission.

"Well, it's good to see you haven't changed, Dennis." The smile, as far as he could tell, was three-quarters sincere...with a good dose of amusement. "Fortunately for you and all the new guests who invited themselves to Baal, I have managed to empty my schedule for today. That way-"

There was a large movement of the crowd, and a small number of black-clad men and women came into view. Most smiles disappeared in the next seconds. They did not wear the ornate weapons of the Blood Angels, the practical gear of the Nyx manufactorum, or the splendour Taylor Hebert had with her golden Power Armour, but no one could doubt they represented a powerful military force.

And you knew immediately who they were too.

Dennis had seen enough of them to recognise one, never mind several. Most of them were scarred, and their eyes were ever on the move, as if, in the middle of *Skyfall*, they were still going to come under attack any minute. They stood like the galaxy was against them. Something that unfortunately, from what he knew, was not that pessimistic of a view to have.

A large rosette which appeared in the hand of the tall man leading the delegation was just the last confirmation Dennis hadn't really needed.

"Your Celestial Highness," the man gave a simple nod. "I apologise for the lack of warning, but I urgently request an audience."

"You are an Inquisitor Lord Terran."

Taylor didn't make it a question, and the man didn't reply to say she was wrong.

Many people, Gabriela included, had expressions of stupefaction. And for good reason: if Dennis remembered correctly, this meant the man in front of them had at one point been one of the Twelve High Lords ruling the Imperium in all but name. He was certainly not the current holder of the seat, for those rarely left the Cradle of Mankind, but still...

"I suppose you wouldn't have travelled to Baal if you didn't judge the situation wasn't serious. Please give me a couple of minutes, and we will speak in private aboard the *Enterprise*."

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Lord Inquisitor Terran Berlin Chimera**

There were three people waiting for them. One was obviously the Living Saint. The second was a Space Marine in black armour, who was the bodyguard for this audience. Those had been expected. That the third member was a black-armoured Custodes was very much not.

But Berlin Chimera was not going to show his surprise. He was a Lord Inquisitor...and he had a mission, Custodes or no Custodes.

"You may call him the Shadowkeeper," Lady Weaver's introductions were shorted to the very minimum. He saw no problem with that.

"My second, Katharina Greyfax, of the Order Hereticus," Berlin made his own introduction. "I have come to ask for help. The situation in the Calyx Expanse is unravelling faster than the Ordos' direst predictions thought possible."

"Continue, my Lord."

Berlin did. He explained everything that had happened so far to the best of his knowledge, including the arrival of the great heretic named the Traveller, the presence of billions of heretics fighting hundreds of wars spiralling out of control, and most of all, that they knew the worst was yet to come.

"I see." The Living Saint stated calmly. "I had no idea the situation has gotten that bad. It is a very unwelcome surprise. I thought...well, it doesn't matter what I thought, quite clearly. The total failure of the Black Crusade broke the unity between all the chaotic factions, but clearly the defeat has just pushed them to fight for domination in the Calyx Expanse even more ferociously."

"Thus my urgent request for adequate reinforcements."

The Custodes made a sign which may have been to warn the golden-winged Chosen of the Emperor of something. If so, Lady Weaver didn't seem to notice it.

"The big problem is that the reinforcements don't exist." The Victor of Commorragh and Macragge bluntly told him. "Out of the different Battle Groups, five have been completely dissolved, either because they were attached to new Crusades, or they needed so many repairs and force reconstitutions that keeping them on the battlefield would be a mistake. The majority of the Space Marines have dispersed across the galaxy with my blessings, and plenty aren't able to take back to the field so soon after battling the Traitor Seventeenth Legion and the Necrons. The Titans have left the order of battle, per the accords I signed with Mars and the other Forge Worlds. I haven't looked at the wide strategic picture in several hours, but from memory, the only notable force is the Battle Group I left to protect Macragge. But it can't leave immediately; it would leave Ultramar dangerously exposed. And even if it could, they can't cross most of the galaxy in mere days or weeks."

This was worse than he had feared...but alas, not a complete surprise. The Living Saint simply couldn't keep the forces of Operation Stalingrad on a war footing; not only was it ridiculously expensive, but the High Lords would have not have been pleased by the thought of an Imperial commander gathering that much military power with no threat to justify it.

"And a personal intervention?" Berlin ignored the true scope of the Living Saint's powers, but what he felt here was certainly formidable enough.

"I can't fight Traitor Primarchs on my own, Lord Inquisitor."

"Certain rumours from Macragge say otherwise."

The shadow of a smile appeared on her lips.

"The circumstances were a bit special there. I am not going to try to be humble, but the Traitor Primarch was back in a mortal body, heavily wounded, alone, and he had been battling most of the Fortress of Hera's defenders on his own. The battlefield outrageously favoured me. I am not complaining. But I am incredibly unlikely to find a battlefield as stacked in my favour as that one."

Several beetles landed in her palms, and for a second, the Living Saint played with them.

"I can likely fight a Daemon Primarch one-on-one," the star-filled eyes commented unflinchingly. "But it needs to be a duel. If there's a daemonic horde supporting that kind of foe, I am likely going to lose. And since fair fights are for idiots, and I can't take any member of the Dawnbreaker Guard with me, it would be a very unfair fight."

"Are the risks not worth it? Not that I am asking you to throw your life into peril, your Celestial Highness."

The Victor of Macragge looked at the Custodes...who stared back silently. Finally, the black-clad guardian nodded.

"The risks are worth it. The Calyx Expanse may currently be a worthless region of space, but letting the Archenemy have it and transform it into a second Eye of Terror does not sound appealing. The problem is that we aren't ready to move against them. You know better than I do, I suppose, how thinly stretched the Imperial Crusades are in Segmentum Obscurus. At the same time, Lord Solar Trevayne more or less has his hands tied by the High Twelve. It's likely he won't be able to do anything significant before moving to command Project Initiative. And frankly, Lord Inquisitor...I am going to order my Prognosticator to make a Tarot reading after this audience, but I would be very surprised if already travel times won't be *the* massive problem. If everything is to be decided in a matter of weeks or months, the forces capable of smiting the heretics simply don't exist."

"There is," the Lord Inquisitor Terran said slowly, "a force which is able to arrive in time: *His* hidden blades."

Even here, he wasn't going to say the name of the Knights of Titan.

"There aren't enough of them. Especially with so many potential Arch-Traitors on the battlefield."

"There might be, if there is enough Aethergold to shield them from the Warp's baleful powers."

The Living Saint looked at him with the kind of expression Berlin had seen too often in senior Inquisitors: grim but determined to do her duty.

"What did the Tarot drawings tell you?"

"That is not-" Katharina Greyfax began to protest, but Berlin stopped her.

"She has a right to know." The representative of the Ordo Malleus cleared his throat before revealing the truth. "The Great Eye." War against Chaos. "The Despoiler, inversed." A rival to stand against the warlord commanding the Black Legion. "The Shattered World." Devastation on an untold scale. "The Daemon." The hordes of the Warp were going to be summoned into reality, corrupt and kill.

"And the last?"

"It was the most mysterious one: it should have been the Ragged Fool...but it changed. It became the Ragged *Fools*."

The Living Saint was intelligent. She understood what he was implying.

"How many of your Tarot Cards are changing?"

"Only four so far, but I am not too worried about that," Berlin admitted, "between that and the cards which appear in my subordinates' Tarots like they have always been there...I am far more worried about the implications."

"There is a card of Angel or Living Saint, isn't there?"

"You already know the answer to that question perfectly well."

"Yes. Yes, I do. Very well, Lord Inquisitor. I am going to try to find you the reinforcements you desire. But I have to warn you, the first wave will most likely have to be drawn from the reserves of Segmentum Tempestus, and include a disproportionate number of former Frateris Templars. This will be your quarantine force."

Berlin wasn't happy, but didn't complain. He had asked for reinforcements, and the Living Saint was going to provide them; not thanking her would be seriously hypocritical.

"As for the other matter...give me a few hours, I am going to try to find you the Aethergold you need to arm the hidden blades. Though obviously, I need an idea of how much you need."

"Given that we speak of the Greatest Champions of the Archenemy," the Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus replied honestly, "as much as you can give me."

**Yn Cromarc Wyldyr System**

**Night Hawk Moon**

**8.209.311M35**

**High Priestess Aurelia Malys**

The servant of the Primordial Annihilator screamed insults and charged.

It was the last thing it would ever do.

A second later, two swords bathed in golden flames permanently removed it from this reality.

"When you told me this was a redoubtable enemy," Aurelia could sense the sarcasm in her Empress' words, "I believed you, you know. But you seem to have exaggerated the problem just a smidge, High Priestess."

Aurelia gave an apologetic expression.

"I don't really understand. The tales I was allowed to listen to insisted this moon was the prison of a most terrible foe. One the survivors of the First Fall had no choice but to imprison here lest it return to torment them for hundreds of cycles to come. I don't understand why it was that weak. It doesn't really make any sense. The population of Arranoc is descended from those survivors, and that kind of enemy, they could easily have dealt with."

"That..." the starry eyes of the Empress fixed onto something in the distance. "There is a possible explanation. You said this was a servant of Chaos as a whole, not just Excess?"

"Yes. It was not a powerful opponent before the First Fall, but with the rise of Slaanesh, it grew mighty and murdered its way across countless planets."

"In that case, it was sworn to the former Four as a whole, a Champion of Chaos Undivided. But the united front is no more."

Aurelia frowned.

"This is a far bigger step I would expect the Aspects of the Primordial Annihilator to take. Deprive all their former favourite slaves of their powers and break a timeless Covenant?"

The Mistress of Spiders shook her golden-skinned head.

"I can't know for sure they did it for every monster they found valuable before the Battle of Commorragh. In fact, I would be surprised if that were the case. But for this one, the Ruinous Powers must have clearly felt they were going to lose it no matter what they did. So they cut their losses."

"It does sound like something...they would do." The Primordial Annihilator hated everyone, including its slaves, and it wasn't as if it didn't have the necessary ruthlessness to sacrifice them when it felt there were bigger victories to be won elsewhere. "I am just...surprised how easily they conceded the victory."

"The time where Chaos gave us easy victories is long over." The sentence was hardly comforting, but it rang with truth. "Commorragh surprised the different factions, but now it is well and truly over. I suspect they launched the last offensive because they knew that whatever happened, they were going to lose the Word Bearers and the majority of the servants of Chaos Undivided, so why not inflict all the losses they could in a final blaze of glory?"

"They underestimated you."

The Empress of the Aeldari let a giggle escape her lips.

"Personally, I think they underestimated Mankind...and certainly the crazy schemes of the Harlequins too."

Aurelia had to admit the latter point was deadly accurate.

"As a result, the big victory is more the enemy underestimating the losses they were going to take and overestimating the slaughter they were going to inflict to the Imperium."

"I am forced to agree."

"Good. Now that your 'great enemy' has been removed, it is time to talk about this/to discuss this small mountain-prison of Noctilith we have suddenly acquired."

Aurelia Malys looked again at the edifice which had been erected and everything around it. It was...sinister. The moon could have been beautiful; even uncountable cycles after the Exodites of Arranoc fled it, the air was still easily breathable and there was plenty of vegetation. But all of it was...twisted. It was not the Primordial Annihilator per se, it was just...there was too much Noctilith here.

The 'mountain-prison' was obviously the greatest amount of Noctilith their eyes could see, and the only one that had been used as a prison for abominations, but there was more of the black stones everywhere on the moon.

The High Priestess of Atharti couldn't wait for it to be purified.

"I propose one-third of the Noctilith goes to Atharti, one-third is used to hide the system, and one-third goes to you, my Empress. Provided the security guarantees to Arranoc are fulfilled, in the light of Carnality and Symbiosis."

"I gave my word, didn't I?" Her Empress spoke lightly. "I already contacted the Anvillus Mechanicus who gave the technological support for a previous invasion. They are going to stop and stay far away from this trio of stars. The Inquisitors will place satellites and beacons ordering every loyal citizen of the Imperium stay clear of this region. A few patrols will be made regularly in the future to ensure this order to be followed. With Umbralshroud providing both active and passive defence against hostile parties, Arranoc and its entire system should be safe."

"I...thank you, my Empress."

"You're welcome. Arranoc is a beautiful planet, honestly. I have no wish to see it burn in the fires of war. If there is a power to be found there, it would be...Innocence."

The words were a bit surprising, but nonetheless very pleasing to hear.

Aurelia had not been sure her Empress would like Arranoc and its verdant woods, its songs, and its pure waters.

Contacting her so soon had been a calculated risk, but a risk in the end. Of course, Atharti knew what she was doing.

"That deals with the mountain-prison." The Mistress of Spiders and Moths agreed. "As for the rest of the Hawk Moon?"

"I propose one-third goes to the King of Arranoc. It is his system, after all...and they have a lot of prestigious...how did you call them? Dinosaur Knights?"

"It fits, High Priestess."

Aurelia had to admit honestly it did. Besides, after Mandragora, she was trying as best as she could to avoid thinking of a certain Dragon. If the Empress' red-robed companion wanted to provoke the Yngir, that was her business, but Aurelia preferred not taunting the monster.

"Well, it will give him some negotiating power, both with Human and Aeldari diplomatic delegations...and something will have to be organised for the Imperial ones, since they won't maintain a permanent presence here."

"I will be able to present you something to resolve this issue when we meet the next time. For the remaining two-thirds, I thought to continue as we did. One-third for Atharti, one-third for you, My Empress."

The answer was prompt and decisive.

"Agreed. Now please call the Harlequins, so that they help us transport the Noctilith through the Webway. They're beginning these dances, and I'm always a bit nervous; it looks like one of the preludes for their great jokes."

Aurelia Malys laughed, but obeyed promptly.

**Baal System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**5.221.311M35**

**Vicequeen** **Marianne Gutenberg**

It was adorable.

Ingrid, the Mainz Cat she had gifted Taylor, was on the Basileia's lap, meowing and purring, enjoying the petting. At the same time, one of the young spiders was trying to make her leave her position, by taunting her with a bowl of milk.

Ingrid didn't show the slightest inclination to move, of course. Gifted with the knowledge that had been given to every feline creature, including Frostlions, the female animal knew that sooner or later, the milk was going to be in her tongue's reach.

The mistress of the two feuding animals was doing an admirable job of ignoring them, it had to be acknowledged.

"And I immediately returned here. Of course, now that the Lord Inquisitor is busy arranging the details, I will have to deal with a small army of Rogue Traders in the next days. And no, Dennis doesn't count."

"I've seen several of them," the blonde-haired Vicequeen admitted. "But most of them only joined our convoy at our last stopover before Baal. What do they want from you?"

"In simple terms? Material and financial support. My generosity when it comes to rewarding Rogue Traders has finally become common knowledge Segmentum-wide."

Marianne raised an eyebrow.

"They realise you don't pay the Rogue Traders in your employ to stay idle and parade in dashing uniforms, right?" In fact, now that she thought about it, Marianne could think of at least four dozen Dynasties which lived calmer lives than the Rogue Traders the Hive World of Nyx supported.

"They aren't that stupid. Most of the grandiose messages I've read before you arrived are hiding the material and financial support as 'expeditions to locate and acquire large quantities of Noctilith' plus some first-rate poetry."

"Hmm..." the daughter of Aliénor Gutenberg sipped her tea. "One might think that if they had located a valuable deposit of Noctilith, they would have brought in a few kilograms as evidence. Or at the very least, they would have some samples. That's what the Argovon Rogue Trader did, if I remember correctly."

"Your memory is as perfect as ever." The petting of Ingrid continued, and the Mainz Cat purred. The spider finally conceded defeat and approached with the bowl, allowing the feline to lap the milk. "And that's why I'm reasonably confident these Rogue Traders are opportunists. Frankly, reading between the lines, I'm of the opinion most of them won their Warrants by playing card games in luxurious salons against several high-ranked Adepts."

"That's certainly not impossible. It has been known to happen. Of course, it is also possible these Rogue Traders were causing political issues in their home Sector, and their rivals used the Warrant as a solution to expel them so that they would cause trouble elsewhere."

"A good explanation," Taylor smirked, "which unfortunately doesn't solve my problem. I have a feeling that as bad as the current crowd here is going to be, there will be ten times as many waiting for me at Macragge."

"They might be there for the revived Primarch too."

"Yes, and once the Sire of the Ultramarines will have them gently escorted out, guess whose headquarters they will end up besieging?"

Marianne giggled.

"This isn't supposed to be funny."

"I know, my poor Taylor." The stars-filled glare was intimidating, but insufficient to stop her giggles. "Have you heard of what a Rogue Trader Compact is?"

"I can't pretend I have, no."

"It is really old-fashioned today, but it was something *He* began after the Unification of Holy Terra. It is...rather feudal."

"Let me guess...*He* provided protection, and in exchange every time there was a call-to-arms or another perilous mission to give, the Rogue Traders were bound by it to obey."

"Yes. Obviously, *He* can't exactly give them orders these days...or should I say he couldn't?"

"The Custodes often give me instructions." The Basileia answered. "But I have really no idea if Rogue Traders of ancient lines are contacted like I am. I wouldn't be surprised if some were, but I have no proof."

"Something to keep in mind, I suppose," Marianne murmured before continuing louder. "Anyway, the family archives were quite clear *His* sons were granted the same privileges. They could form Compacts and give the protection and support they wanted to the Rogue Traders operating in their orders. Naturally, it created grave problems down the line."

Half of the Primarchs turning Traitors had, in the end, resulted in nearly all the Compacts sworn to the heretics turning Traitor. And multiple Compacts which had stayed loyal had not survived the massive civil war pitting brother against brother.

"That sounds like a precedent to be wary of."

"Oh, yes. But sometimes I think that it would not be that bad." The expression she received in return was certainly curious. "Let's be honest, oh Basileia. The situation we found ourselves in today has hundreds of Rogue Trader Dynasties gallivanting from one Sector to another, cornering the markets on xenos artefacts, drugs, and heavy weaponry they shouldn't possess in the first place. All of that happens, in the majority of cases, without any supervision whatsoever. A Conclave Master or Mistress with the authority and power to properly punish Rogue Traders who fail to understand there are boundaries could solve a lot of problems before they create disasters."

"And it would be a great boon to the Chartist Captains, who are often facing the unfair competition of aforementioned Rogue Traders," the insect-mistress added ironically, sipping her own tea.

"I won't deny I haven't considered this minor improvement," Marianne shamelessly admitted.

The answer came after more petting for Ingrid.

"I am going to think about it. It sounds like a good idea, but I want to study the historical precedents. And if I even have the authority to do it, of course. I have the influence and the financial power, but I am not a Primarch."

That was a good legal point, truly.

"Have you thought of more excellent ideas during your journey from Nyx to Baal?"

"Ideas, maybe not, but I deposited gifts in your stasis-frozen vaults last time I visited."

"Oh?"

"Have you heard of the Gallosque Nebula in Segmentum Pacificus?"

"I can't say I have."

"A shame, one of the local Pontifexes there is busy building a church in your name," the moan of despair was something to behold, truly. "Setting that aside, the Gallosque Nebula is a Sub-Sector that has just recently been reminded their allegiance must be to Terra, not those bastards of the Nova-Terra Interregnum or whatever they used to justify their rebellion. Naturally, Gutenberg Captains visited this region of space to rebuild old trade connections. And they found very interesting things in the Paleon System, which has only a single inhabitable planet, also named Paleon."

"Interesting how?"

"Paleon was renowned to its customers of Nova-Terra because it sold exceptional medical goods. And before you ask, no, it wasn't because their Medicae Healers were superior to the Imperial ones."

"They're using the fauna and flora of the world, aren't they?"

"Only the flora, in fact," Marianne grimaced. "It is both treasure and problem, from what my family's Captains reported. The jungles cover the world, and they are ever-growing; many unflattering comparisons with Catachan were made."

"Are those comparisons...justified?"

"Oh no, the Catachan wildlife would eat Paleon's for breakfast twice over. But if the Administratum Adepts are not insane, they will likely label it a Death World. Outside of the massive Hives, there is nothing but the jungle...and the fauna is certainly gigantic."

"One more planet eager to kill us all," Taylor commented with a sigh. "And the medical goods?"

"The foremost example is the Hulvasa berry. Harvested in large quantities, the berries are an essential component of a rejuvenat treatment that gives an average three hundred and fifty-two years of added life-expectancy. That's on par with the ones your hospitals and clinics are able to deliver."

"That's impressive."

"It gets better. While our Captains weren't able to discover the specific species, there appears to be plants that combined with the Hulvasa berries are able to lengthen this life-expectancy even further. There is plenty of evidence some of the nobles on Paleon are over eight hundred years old."

"Do I want to know what sort of consequences it had on their minds and behaviours?"

Marianne grimaced again.

"Nothing good. They consider themselves the rightful masters of the galaxy. Fortunately for us, these self-professed masterminds have a very negative opinion of everything that is tied to military affairs. The Compliance operations barely lasted a week, I'm told. Unfortunately, instead of hanging them by the hundreds, the Adepts preferred to fine them."

"They were offered a colossal bribe, weren't they?"

"Yes."

Ingrid jumped off the Basileia's lap, to the vivid pleasure of the spider, who immediately rushed to be petted herself.

"Since I haven't heard of Hulvasa berries suddenly being cultivated on Terra, I assume there is a massive problem with their acquisition."

Marianne smiled.

"Right, here comes the bad news. None of the exceptional plants can be grown outside of the Paleon jungles. And transplanting them more often than not results in the plants becoming poisonous in record time. That means the only way to acquire the berries is to go harvest them in the wild. And that's when the problems begin: the local megafauna is extremely fond of these fruity delicacies, and guard them ferociously."

"Of course they do."

"To be honest, I was at first going to tell the Captains not to bother. It's bad enough the arrogant groxes ruling Paleon are using their peasants as gigantausorus-fodder so that some can always harvest the medical goods they want, no need to add to the casualties for nothing. But then I remembered you telling me how plants and plenty of very valuable things are proliferating under your Catachan Ants' guidance."

"Yes, they are. And the Titan-Moths provide a lot of fertiliser which has been used in large quantities on Nyx to undo some particularly nasty environmental damage." The star-filled eyes were suddenly thoughtful, and the golden wings materialised with a flash of gold. "Wait, you think...?"

"I think that in fact, the comparison with Catachan may not be that far off the mark, yes. Weren't you the one who told me a certain xenos species may have turned the Jungles of Catachan into the hell they are renowned for across the galaxy? It is entirely possible Paleon is what Catachan looked liked long ago before the Tyranids' influence turned it into hell."

"True...but Catachan is in Ultima Segmentum, Marianne. It's a big galaxy, yes. But if they share so many points, it can't be a coincidence. A species must have engineered these worlds to have these qualities."

That was a nice and logical reasoning, yes.

"You're certainly right," she smirked as the spider seized the Mainz Cat by the scruff of the neck before rushing in the direction of the antechamber. "I think there's not much of a risk this xenos species will return, however. Paleon's colonisation happened more seven thousand years ago. Catachan's is hardly recent either."

"For once a species has done very productive things to expand the market of medical goods, we can't do anything but regret its disappearance. Poor galaxy. For the sake of my curiosity, how many plants like the Hulvasa berries were you able to acquire?"

"Counting the berries themselves, ten. It was not cheap in lives."

"But it is such a fine gift I will provide pensions and privileges to their families."

"And what about my gift?"

"Well, I will think the percentage of the medical sales will-"

Marianne had waited long enough; she abandoned her seat and went to kiss the insect-mistress deeply.

To her pleasure, after the first seconds of surprise, it was reciprocated.

"Do you want-"

"Keep the wings, remove the uniform." The Vicequeen ordered. "I've waited to do this for too long, my angel."

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Forsarr Sector**

**Kiavahr System**

**Deliverance**

**Raven Guard Bacta Depot**

**5.247.311M35**

**Callidus Assassin Elena Kerrigan**

According to certain Adepts whose conversations Elena had been eavesdropping on a couple of years ago, the Raven Guard Space Marines were morose and taciturn in behaviour. They never smiled. They lived on a gloomy world, and each time they left it, they tried to make their military campaigns as depressing as humanly possible. They eschewed all shiny colours, and their serfs were forbidden from showing expressions of utter happiness.

On other completely coincidental news, Elena was sure the Adepts of the Administratum should maybe one day leave their offices before their piles of vellum crushed them. Their knowledge of the galaxy they were trying to administer was complete and absolute nonsense.

The reason why the Primarch had asked the senior Captains of the visiting delegations to meet him in the Bacta Depot in the first place?

It was because the domes outside it were crowded with hundreds of thousands of people celebrating.

And it was a small number, compared to the crowds of billions that had assembled on Kiavahr. Yes, the Forge World was celebrating. In fact, it was *exultantly* celebrating. Last night, they had celebrated by launching fireworks. The smallest of them could have been considered a massive intercontinental ballistic missile in its own right.

Yep, that was celebration done right...for a certain definition of it.

The inhabitants of Kiavahr and Deliverance had all decided in a splendid display of unity that yes, all the days of celebration that happened in a perfectly normal year...they had to be celebrated in advance this year. And all at once. And with three times the budget.

Needless to say, it was good a certain ruler of Nyx had ordered the Bacta Depot to be sound-proof. Otherwise the Primarch would have to scream to make sure his words were heard.

"This meeting is going to be short, my sons. I have a feeling that if we stay away for more than ten minutes, they are going to fire rockets in celebration, and we want to avoid that at all costs."

Everyone chuckled. Elena was not sure it was a joke, but it accurately described the situation outside.

"For the moment, I don't intend to change anything about the organisation of any of the other Chapters. You have fought well to save the worlds of Mankind, and you have done your gene-sire proud. The only intervention I plan for the moment is a gift of my gene-seed, which will be divided in twelve parts, one for every Chapter present here."

"We are not worthy," a black-armoured Space Marine with a white helmet under his arm protested.

"You are worthy," Corvus Corax immediately refuted. "The Death Spectres may be the youngest of the Chapters carrying my legacy, but you have donned a heavy mantle in the name of duty. Watching over the Ghoul Stars is no simple task. I travelled there long ago, and I did not like it at all."

Note to self: if no assignment ordered her to go to the Ghoul Stars, best avoid that region of space like it was the Eye of Terror.

"As I said, ensuring all Successor Chapters are at their full strength is my only priority for now. The recent campaigns you have fought have confirmed, if anyone really needed it, how tenuous the line can be between harsh survival and extinction."

"Will we adopt some of the ways of the Brothers of the Red, father?" one of the Captains of the Sons of the Raven, a Chapter from the Tenth Founding, inquired. "They have massively increased the number of their blood-themed Apothecaries."

"It remains the decision of each Chapter whether to pursue that path or not. If you are in favour, I will trade the favours to make it possible with my brothers, the Imperial authorities, Mars...and of course, Lady Weaver."

"Since you mentioned her, father..." This time it was the Chapter Master of the Revilers who spoke in earnest. "Lady Weaver broke the Word Bearers at Macragge. Those bastards at last paid for the Drop Site Massacre. Will it be acceptable to pledge one of our own to be part of the Dawnbreaker Guard?"

"It is acceptable. I certainly have no issue with it, and one of your brothers is already serving loyally among her Honour Guard. I will warn you however that her powers are in many ways weakening any shadow-wielding gifts you may have while in her presence. Unlike the young woman here," yep, dozens of Astartes looking at you curiously was not that fun, "Lady Weaver is not trained or inclined to pursue the infiltration tactics we favour. But she is determined to liberate men and women who are oppressed and enslaved. As a result, if you intend to propose Champions for the Dawnbreaker Guard among the delegations sent at Macragge, choose wisely."

Well, this was rather a free-will approach, all things considered.

"As for the Callidus Temple and the Umbralshroud created from Noctilith, the Emperor has made its will known. We are-"

There was an extraordinary amount of noise for a few seconds, before an apologetic Raven Guard stormed in, confirming out loud the 'celebration crowd' was here, at the gates of the Bacta Depot.

And yes, there were things a Primarch, taciturn or not, could not fight against.

"Let us not make the cheerful crowd wait..."

The smile on his face rather contrasted with the tone more appropriate for a funeral, it had to be said.

**Galactic Core**

**Free Bastion of Ur-Thang**

**8.267.311M35**

**Marder** **of the Talion**

"I think, fellow partners, this affair ended in a very profitable outcome for our interests. Thousands of tons of Magnaferrite have been recovered, the survivors of the *Iridium Plunder* will be loyal to us until their deaths, and we got rid of the greenskins."

Marder lit one of the precious cigars he only smoked on the great occasions.

"You didn't have anything to do with the fact the big green Warboss decided to throw his ships into a wormhole known to devour all ships that try to get through, however." Kastor, his right hand and chief enforcer, pointed out.

"There are two things you can't predict, Kastor." Marder smiled, savouring the good flavour of the dried bio-compounds unavailable to the average Duardin, "the obstacles this damned galaxy is going to throw at you, and the stupidity of the greenskins. Everything else is far easier to anticipate."

"Interrupting this little moment of self-congratulation," Garm, Accountant-Paymaster of Ur-Thang, interrupted acidly, "I will kindly remind you that we have a little problem. You broke one of the greatest taboos, Marder. You gave weapons to the greenskins!"

"Technically, I sold them, and for a very nice profit," the artisan-born Duardin who controlled effectively all of Ur-Thang corrected, "the greenskins gathered all the ores, rare and common, for us, and we only needed to transport them to the Forges of Ur-Thang. I applied your lesson, by the way. Never give the big bad greenskins an inch."

Meeting the Warboss in person had not been a pleasant experience. Marder had never seen such a big monster...and one which was smarter than most of its fellow brutes, at that. Although as the wormhole affair proved, more intelligent didn't mean 'smart', especially when it came to greenskins.

"Do you really think the Bank of Stone will care?" Garm asked gravely, challenging him by creating impressive circles of smoke with his pipe of auramite, a relic forged countless generations ago.

"Technically," Kastor pointed out this time, "we broke no Laws."

"And the Amendments?"

"Lava and Supernova take their Amendments!" Marder growled in annoyance. "Garm, you know as well as I do we didn't sign them for a reason. And since two decades ago the Bank of Stone refused to loan us the Talions we needed to buy the Forges of Ur-Thang, they can't bleed us that way."

In the end, they had dodged a very vicious hammer blow without being aware of it. To be sure, the contingency plans he had been forced to use had not been exactly what an honourable Duardin would love to do.

But Ur-Thang had been saved from the economic decline that caused thousands of families to depart every year. Now, the miners and the highly-qualified workers were returning home. And the profits were there.

"You know as well as I do that the Bank of Stone has not yet moved overtly against us. For the moment, it has only been cheap assassins and a few idiots trying to stop our Mining operations. But the prosperity of Ur-Thang is something they have noticed. They will soon act against the Free Bastion...against us."

"Yes," Marder reluctantly admitted, "those old and decrepit whitebeards can't tolerate that a Bastion handles its own affairs without asking for their permission every time they want to try something new or costly."

It was a bit of a lie, of course: the Bank of Stone was exactly like that, but the leaders at the head of the Bank were not old and decrepit. The most redoubtable one was in fact a young Duardin woman so beautiful that Marder had instantly been on his guard; more than a few Talion members must have enjoyed some carnal pleasures with her before losing their wealth and their lives.

"Is it going to be a big problem?" Kastor asked. "I mean, for the moment the expansion of Ur-Thang is proceeding according to the schedule we planned here fifteen years ago. The population should reach one million soon, and there's a brand-new mining acquisition-fleet about to be commissioned. The profits are flowing into our pockets...and are redistributed to our workers, of course."

"The problem," Marder savoured his cigar before replying, "is that for all our efforts to...oh by all the adamantium deposits we mine, let's call it what it is, we sold weapons to practically everyone in the region! For all our cleverness, about half of our trade is still tied to the trade we do with all the other Bastions. What Garm implies," his Accountant-Paymaster nodded, "is that the Bank of Stone may soon strike with harsh measures, like a selective ban for some of our mining cargos to other Bastions as long as we sell weapons to non-Duardins. And we can't do anything to stop them if they decide to go through with it."

Ur-Thang had enough resources to pay the services of thousands of warriors of the Guild of the Axe, but Marder wasn't stupid enough to think that for a military confrontation it would be enough. The Bank of Stone had far deeper pockets...and hundreds of Kings were so indebted to them they would jump to obey their commands, economically wise or not.

"And what Svern of the Errant found when spying for us? He returned with a lot of valuable information about what's happening outside of the Core."

"Most of the band he spied upon also saved their heads," Garm sniffed. "The Bank's executioners were already sharpening their blades. But I have to admit that their audacious gamble seems to have been a stunning success. They got plenty of food and got rid of a ship no one has the effectives to man anymore."

For the briefest seconds, Marder felt regret. Despite all his successes to revitalise the declining industry of Ur-Thang, the *Midgard* and many other ships were a stark reminder that the Duardin Kingdom of Old was long gone, and for all their pretensions, the surviving Bastions were mere shadows of its blinding glory.

"I wouldn't succumb to the mad enthusiasm some of our young fiery heads have," the Accountant-Paymaster warned. "I am not an isolationist, but it is a dire truth that when our civilisation decided to rely on food supplied from outside the Core, anytime the system failed, tens of thousands died. The expansion we're doing here is so important because it relies on no external partners when it comes to food-production, and the Bastion is self-sufficient when it comes to its own needs now."

"For we can't eat our own metal," Marder whimsically mused, the old truth that still held today, even if certain Duardin refused to acknowledge it. "I am certainly not about to suggest we bare our necks to the vast 'Imperium' sitting outside of the Core. Really, according to Svern, their red-robed tech-shamans have cornered the market, and seem as friendly as the bankers of a certain institution of our society. But there are plenty of ores we know to be very rare outside of the Core. Stelanictite, Helical, Thyrikite, Styrium, Teldrite, Magnaferrite, Adamantium, Auramite...all of that we mine in the millions of tons per year, and too often the main problems are to guard our miners from the dangers of our Core, and then finding customers so that it doesn't pile up in our strategic reserves."

"That sounds more reasonable," Garm conceded, cleaning his glasses and adopting a mollified expression. "That said, it might run into the same problem that we have for a hypothetical food trade: the trade routes don't exist anymore. And we don't have the means to change that. Oh, I'm sure you could convince a few young fools to brave the dangers that come with leaving the Core. But I doubt we could afford to lose more than two or three ships every year...and make no mistake, Marder, we would lose far more than that. Many tried to reopen the lanes when the High King's sons went to war against each other. Our miners still find many wrecks to this day while trying to survey new concessions."

"The Bank of Stone could." Kastor pointed out. "But I suppose asking them to throw the Talions that would break the system they control is a bit too much for them to stomach?"

The three Duardin had a good laugh at that.

"They would kill you," Garm's tone was the one he used for his rare jokes, but he was speaking the truth, they could all feel it, "just for having the audacity to come before them. Tell them how to spend their Talions! The audacity of these non-Bankers, these days!"

"Some might die from the sheer shock of it," Marder chuckled, and took the time to finish his cigar before speaking of the idea he had. "I'm in the mood to repeat the stunt the near-extinct Admiralty played with the *Midgard*. We prepare a good ship, one which will have a high chance to exit the Core while using Svern's data of the previous expedition, we fill it with some of the metallic stocks we have an excess of, and we sell what is stocked inside the hull to the 'Imperium'."

"Where?"

Marder shrugged.

"The world of Macragge seemed to have plenty of customers, and since it must be rebuilt after a violent battle, I don't think we will lack potential buyers there."

"You don't want to sell weapons for once?" Kastor asked, visibly surprised.

"Profit is profit," Marder replied, "but this time we aren't selling to an indebted King or a species which is so under-gunned we can basically put them down at any time we choose. I assume there's a lot of ridiculous propaganda spread by this 'Imperium of Mankind'. The Bank of Stone does it, why would they be any different? But lies or not, they seem to have the industrial power to build hundreds of Battleships and fight battles that go from one side of the galaxy to the other. What we sell, we won't be able to recover by force of arms."

"You're the boss-profiteer, Marder," Kastor rolled his large shoulders. "I suppose you want a real negotiating team to be included this time?"

"I do. For a first contact, it was best for the Duardins to be Errant or some parties that we were never associated with. But if we want to really be taken seriously, it is best to send a team that proves we are a bit above in means over the common and desperate King's Envoy we routinely speak with."

Marder poured the beer he preferred in three cups, and gave each cup to his fellow partners-in-profit before raising his own.

"To a new era of profit, my friends!"

"TO PROFIT!"

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Gloriana Battleship *Macragge's Honour***

**2.299.311M35**

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

Leaving the Fortress of Hera was not a way to escape the thousands of medical devices he was strapped into for more than a dozen hours each day. It wasn't. He, the Primarch of Ultramarines, was above that.

Convincing his sons of it was an entire matter altogether, it had to be said.

"The *Macragge's Honour* is as splendid as ever," the Avenging Son declared. "I suppose the tourists who visited it must have been very satisfied."

"They were," Aeonid assured him. "I think it was the second most visited museum across Ultramar...though it was left in the dust by the Shrine of the Primarch, of course."

"Of course," Roboute echoed, trying, as always when the subject was mentioned, to not think too much about the fact he had been the target of uncountable *religious pilgrimages* for more than four millennia.

"I would have thought you would be a bit more...angry hearing of this, father."

"Why?" Roboute asked, apparently surprised that the point was raised. "I have always stressed the point all military assets had to see their efficiency maximised. Since the Chapter was unable to sustain the manpower to crew the *Macragge's Honour* while maintaining the rest of the fleet, it stands to reason using it as a museum was an optimal outcome. It provided a constant flow of Denarii to the treasury, and some of the funds were allocated to the maintenance every Gloriana ship needs."

"Ah...I was more afraid you might consider it proof of...religious idolatry."

"As far I am aware of, no religious ceremonies were ever conducted on it." Roboute Guilliman replied with a shrug. "If I could tolerate tourists during the Great Crusade, then surely I can tolerate pilgrims in this millennium. It helps that some of the latter are exactly the same as the former, they are just hiding it under religious cloaks."

"True."

"Obviously," the Thirteenth Primarch continued, "the very fact it was used as a museum causes a security problem. Since the Word Bearers were able to infiltrate the Shrine which boasted far greater security, the theoretical is that our enemies were likely able to place a lot of inimical presents and other tracking devices in the last four millennia."

"The Vigil Opertii or the Praecental Guard?"

"For this once, the Praecental Guard, my son. I do want the consequences of overconfidence to be public. Ultramar dropped its guard, and the lessons are painful because they were necessary to be learned again. I do not want them to be forgotten in the shadows."

"It will be done," the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines swore. "It is not going to be a short process, however."

"One year is what I am willing to give all who will be involved in this project."

"One year? That sounds suspiciously like a precise timetable."

"Because it is." Roboute nodded. "In one year, the *Macragge's Honour* will be sent to the Forge World of Konor as the first step of its rearmament. Which should take between two and three years, assuming the Tech-Priests hold true to their promises and are able to follow the deadlines I gave them. Then the Gloriana will sail to Mars, and the Ring of Iron. By then, Cawl should have the infrastructure and parts ready to welcome it for the second part of its full modernisation."

Aeonid Thiel seemed to take the news in a very perplexed manner...whether it was to the thought of the Tech-Priests being given access to the *Macragge's Honour* or the flagship remaining away for so long remained to be seen.

"Is this really necessary?"

"Yes." The Thirteen Primarch replied bluntly. "I love my flagship, but at the moment, there's no denying it is completely obsolete."

"Obsolete?" This time the voice was alarmed and shocked, as it should be.

"One easily forgets it, but Glorianas, for all their prodigious size, remain conventional warships. If the systems and weapons are obsolete, the ship is obsolete too. Its prodigious firepower will make it a far more difficult target than a Cruiser, but all that means is that if the enemy manages to engineer a good plan that takes its weaknesses into account, the ship will be destroyed or captured, and given the sheer manpower it needs to function, the loss will be keenly felt."

"I understand that," Aeonid shook his head. "But *obsolete*? I understood Marius Gage repaired it with the best of the technology we had left after the fires of the Heresy were finally extinguished."

"And that isn't the same thing as the best technology of the Great Crusade." Damn the Word Bearers for the destruction they had visited upon Calth and Armatura. "But it should have been sufficient to merely be several generations behind brand-new ships...if Lady Weaver hadn't in the last decades made a habit of recovering priceless STCs. Cawl's part in these technological advances must also be mentioned, of course. As a result, if the *Enterprise* was to challenge the *Macragge's Honour* to a void duel, Lady Weaver's flagship would likely devastate mine in a couple of hours. I am not going to say what the *Flamewrought* would do in the same position; the answer is far too humiliating for my pride."

Aeonid grimaced.

"Thus the modernisation in the shipyards of Mars, I understand. It means avoiding a major war for the next decades."

"Yes. But then as we have to completely rebuild the orbital structure of Macragge, it is best to use deployments of Strike Cruisers. With *Galatan* in-system and the dockyards of Mortendar, we can supply all the Strike Cruisers we have in service. The hulls we're reactivating from the mothballs will be modernised at Konor."

"Not Mars?"

"Not Mars," Roboute Guilliman confirmed. "I'm creatively balancing the budget, but there are only so many resources I can find for all the projects of the coming decade. I could, of course, bargain far more than I have with the Fabricator-General of Mars, but I already have several favours to repay to several Archmagi, and I am wary of debts. They need to be repaid at one time or another...that's why we call them debts and not gifts."

The Lord of Macragge gave an ironic look to his son.

"I already had to calculate the benefits and problems created by formally ending the *Macragge's Honour* service as a proud museum of Ultramar. It was a very profitable tourist-trap...too profitable, in fact."

"We could drag another flagship from the mothballed reserve and say, without lying, you used it for a prestigious military campaign during the Great Crusade?"

"Aeonid," the son of the Emperor declared seriously, "I acknowledge your mastery of skirmishes and unconventional warfare, but I can state quite confidently you understand nothing when it comes to tourists."

**Laevenir Archipelago**

**Oraloth System**

**Oraloth (Eldar name)/Gaanerth (local name)**

**8.313.311M35**

**Autarch Ulion Lakadieth**

"If we survive this expedition, we will have to have a nice conversation about the issue of forgetting to mention certain important details!" Ulion shouted to his Saim-Hann 'client'.

"Please save your strength and run! We must reach the jetbikes before them!"

"I assure you, I can complain and run at the same time!" The Autarch – whatever that meant as the old ranks were more and more undergoing a silent revolution these days – glared, something that didn't seem to trouble his client, though she at least gave him an explanation.

"We hid the artefact here because we knew no one would come searching for it, and other local species in the system make sure the enemies of Atharti can't see the threads of the future here! How was I supposed to know the local species would find it and worship it as the symbol of their blasphemous God?"

"How indeed-" But his poor attempt at sarcasm was interrupted as the ground exploded on their flank, and the cleverness of their pursuers manifested itself one more time. Not that Ulion Lakadieth had had much doubt about it after seeing two of his warriors be sent to Atharti after they made the mistake to stand their ground.

The name of the civilisation was 'Gaanerth Pact'.

Technically, it was the fourteenth or fifteenth to carry that name; Craftworld Kinshara regularly used the near-intact Webway network of the region to cull them.

One glance was enough to know why.

The Gaanerth were a hyper-violent species. And they looked like it. Imagine an enormous mushroom the size of a big human war-walker. Twist it to make it thinner, but give it three legs and four arms. Give the roots an endless thirst to be plunged into the entrails and blood of other living species. And last but not least, the Gaanerth, despite being the most biological attuned species Ulion had ever seen, were quite intelligent and forged metallic weapons. Oh, and they had several Castes, and the one which had just revealed itself was possibly of the most berserker-like.

The Autarch fired a one hundred shuriken-salvo at the 'mushroom head'. The Gaanerth stood for an instant, as if it didn't realize it had been vanquished, then collapsed.

"Yes! You found their weak point! You deserve your reputation, Autarch Lakadieth!"

"Err...yes." He wasn't going to admit that the first time he had done it, he had been aiming for the torso and completely missed his target. "I suggest we hurry, the friends of the Gaanerth I just killed are going to find out we were here, and when-"

The timing couldn't have been worse; the ground exploded at least twenty times, and the dread sight of the mushroom-like warriors surrounded them. Yes, because despite being evolved from mushrooms, the Gaanerth were able to dig tunnels at phenomenal speeds, maybe faster than the Ambulls. How was that supposed to make sense?

"I think," Ulion said calmly, "several prayers to Atharti can't be considered too much right now, for I don't have enough ammunition to kill them."

"The Word of Symbiosis is-"

Their entire world disappeared in a storm of lightning. Well, apart from the little detail it wasn't lightning. It was a bombardment of Pulsar Lances, and a frighteningly accurate one at that. More and more Gaanerths had been encircling them, but the methodical offensive didn't leave them any chance.

And those violent warriors who survived understood in a second their only chance lied in escaping as fast as possible.

"Your Mariners are to be complimented for their accuracy!"

"Hmm..." He wasn't going to insult his men, but the last time they had attempted such an extraction, it had been such a disaster Ulion had told them to never try it again; the *Anthem of Fallen Suns* could sterilise a lot of things, but the Lugganath-born Autarch didn't want to be included on the list of its victims.

It was only when a Phoenix in very familiar colours slowly revealed itself that Ulion realized the identity of their 'saviour'.

"Princess Saarania." He curtly nodded when the Mistress of the Corsair Fleet revealed herself. "Your entrance was impeccably timed."

"Glad someone is appreciating it!" The pale skin of Saarania told quite clearly she was not a follower of Atharti, but she must have made some decision, otherwise why bother coming here? "Your Saim-Hann client seems to be having some kind of vision."

Ulion turned, and to his consternation, the blue skin of the Saim-Hann Seer was pale, and her eyes were clearly not seeing the world around them.

"*No. No. It is happening! It is too soon! It is wrong!"*

There was a strangled cry. The artefact they had removed from the possession of the Gaanerth flashed dangerously, and a blaze of fuchsia power began to burn.

"*He is coming! He comes, and should one fail, tyranny will be eternal*! HE IS COMING!"

**Somewhere between the Warp and the Materium**

**The Tyrant Star**

**Space-Time Paradox - No Date Estimation is Possible**

**Kol Badar**

The throne room had a throne.

It was all it needed to be a throne room.

It was ascetic.

It was good.

**Eternity** did not care about frivolous decorations.

And so there was only the throne.

There was the throne, and the thirteen massive hourglasses.

Each time the last grain of sand fell, the Space Marines assigned to each hourglass would reverse the hourglass, and the inexorable march of **Eternity** continued.

Kol Badar did not know the name of this purple-black sand that was the only method to measure time on the Tyrant Star.

That was because it didn't have one.

But it would soon.

Once, it had been Noctilith, but the days the black stone's importance was unknown to the galaxy at large were long past.

There was a violent gust of wind, and he was there.

All the Space Marines prostrated themselves. The majority of them were not from the Eleventh Legion. By betrayal, great misfortune, or sheer incompetence, they had been abandoned by their brother-in-arms.

But *He* had found them.

*He* had found them, and given them purpose.

For *He* was the King in Yellow, the rightful Master of Eternity.

*His* presence was Domination itself.

Yet the regal form of the King could not be revealed. Not now.

A pale yellow cloak of a style that had gone extinct in the Great Crusade was both protection and body-shaping cloth.

The yellow cloak had a hood, but where the face should have been visible, there was nothing but the void to watch.

The symbols of power, however, could be observed perfectly.

The first was the sceptre. It was in the grip of a metallic golden glove. It was a symbol, yet a weapon. It was not like the batons of Imperial Marshals and Generals. From the base to the top, there were thousands of miniature golden skulls. Kol Badar would have said they were engraved into the gold, but he knew intimately this wasn't the case. The sceptre had been made of these skulls.

All sceptres needed something to make it clear it was not a vulgar baton, and this regal symbol had an hourglass enshrined at its top. Glyphs blazing in the same purple-black dark light gave it a powerful illumination and evoked emotions the former Word Bearer had thought he had left behind him.

The second symbol was the crown. It was tall and mighty. It was yellow and yet dark.

It was all that was needed to know He was the rightful *Master of Eternity*.

The King in Yellow didn't sit on his throne.

He never did.

"They *thought they were going to be the ones to decide the terms of this battle*."

The voice was authority incarnate. It was supreme judgement resonating in their broken souls.

"*They thought that because one foolish child successfully found me once, I would bare my throat and wait for their hosts to come*."

The sceptre moved. Immediately, the sands of the hourglasses...*the sands stopped measuring time*.

"*But I am the King in Yellow. There is going to be a battle, of course. But I, and I alone, will decide when and where it will happen. They think they have trapped me, these foolish Pretenders. They have unleashed wars across the Calyx Stars, destroying their planets to summon their favourite slaves, those I once called brothers*."

No one spoke. No one moved. But every Space Marine felt the hatred of their Master held for the puppet-masters who dared pretend they were True Gods. And before the King in Yellow saved them, they had felt this hatred too. They understood how vast the betrayal had been. They acknowledged how cruel the tragedies prepared for them were.

"*The preparations are complete in the Granithor System. My Mortarchs! It is time to return to this galaxy and claim our rightful place. Eternity will be mine*."

"*Or there will be no eternity*." They all answered.

There was a massive earthquake.

There was power.

The sands imprisoned in the hourglasses began to fall again.

And Kol, like every being present in the throne room, heard the scream of hatred.

The Pretenders had stopped laughing...and this was *good*.

**The Warp**

The ritual which had been enacted was so powerful there was no way to hide it.

The moment the King in Yellow and the Tyrant Star returned to this galaxy, the Four knew exactly where and when their target was.

In normal circumstances, this should have been the end of the King in Yellow. The Tyrant Star was not Terra. It had nothing comparable to the likes of the Anathema and the Astronomican to protect itself.

But the ritual enacted by the order of the former Master of the Eleventh Legion had been far more complicated than a mere space-temporal distortion.

It had merged the planet of Granithor and the Tyrant Star on a spiritual and physical level.

And the Granithor System was a place of Death.

There had been no living beings there.

In the past, long-dead xenos civilisations had brought some of the most impressive beast trophies they were ever able to kill here, in an age where the galaxy was young.

In the present, heretics had used it as a place to execute their enemies before fleeing or being killed by the lethal fighting that erupted across the Calyx Hell Stars.

In the future that would never be, the Imperium had used it as a cemetery.

There was much the Four didn't know about the King in Yellow, but the enormous quantities of bones spread across the system were quite obviously a massive threat. With limited numbers of skeletons, the hosts of the Usurper had been a headache in the recent wars. With large mountains of dead creatures, the thing that had been the Eleventh Primarch would likely conquer the Calyx Stars and use the victory as a great ritual to elevate itself as the Fifth Power of Chaos.

This had to be avoided at all costs.

And it could be avoided.

The name of the planet, Granithor, wasn't yet erased. The ritual, for all its power, would need thirteen days to be complete.

The other twelve dead planets, for all their suddenly revealed defences, were sites of extreme ritualistic importance for the King in Yellow.

Thirteen planets. Thirteen sites of power. Thirteen days to break them.

Any mortal General would have likely refused the challenge the King in Yellow had delivered to the Four.

But the Ruinous Powers weren't mortal, and their hatred for the Usurper was limitless.

For all the traps and stratagems undoubtedly waiting for them in the Granithor, refusing the challenge was never an option.

And while the treacherous son of the Anathema had prepared his armies and his dreaded fortifications manned by billions of undead, each of the self-proclaimed Chaos Gods had not stayed idle.

Tens of thousands of cults, both in the Calyx Stars and outside of it, had been prepared to counter this threat the moment it was revealed aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*.

Khorne roared, and eight Great Hosts raised their blades while screaming in fury. Skulls would be claimed, and if they had to offer their own blood to their God in the name of victory, so be it.

Tzeentch uttered nine spells. Nine monumental Hosts poured out of the Crystal Labyrinth, a Legion of Ambition and Sorcery prepared to teach their enemy that they, and none other, were the masters of the psychic arts.

Nurgle toppled his Cauldron. Seven Hosts of Decay gurgled and laughed as the boons that would have killed an Astartes seven times over filled them with impossible vigour and contagious diseases.

Malal shrieked and gave confusing orders to the Skaven who had survived the initial wars of the Calyx Hell Stars. That most of the commands contradicted each other did not prevent billions of hateful red eyes from knowing something had to be done about Granithor. Anarchy couldn't be Anarchy if they all died and were enslaved.

In the Materium, armies were mustered and teleported aboard capital warships.

There were enough military assets for this effort to be considered a Black Crusade in its own right.

But it was not a Black Crusade.

There was no coordination between the Four, and no supreme commander.

Not that any warlord besides Abaddon the Despoiler would have had the tiniest chance of uniting these disparate forces, of course.

For if the King in Yellow was willing to challenge them on the battlefield, Khorne, Tzeentch, Nurgle, and Malal were more than eager to send his brothers against him.

Orders were given. Psykers from Macragge to Cadia would awake screaming from nightmares they would shiver about for the rest of their lives.

And the Calyx Hell Stars truly began to live up to their cursed name.

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Cholera System**

**Battleship *Terminus Est***

**Temporal Anomaly – date impossible to estimate**

**Typhus** **the Traveller**

The initial plan had called for Cholera 77 to become both the chief fortress and the heart of the kingdom the Death Guard was to build in the Calyx Hell Stars.

This plan had to be discarded.

It was annoying, but the old saying was once again true: no plan survived contact with the Enemy.

That the Enemy was the King in Yellow in this instance was making it twice more annoying than it should be.

The sacrifices that had to be enacted were considerable...but then they wouldn't be called sacrifices if they happened to be cheap and worthless, would they?

"Proceed." Typhus ordered, from the observation deck of the *Terminus Est*.

For seven heartbeats, nothing happened.

It took seven heartbeats for the gigantic rift to become somewhat visible.

It was a maelstrom of Blessed Decay.

It was a Warp wormhole that was only possible through the newly discovered powers of Jaderot.

It was something that was destroying Cholera 77 in exchange for a priceless strategic advantage.

Seven million seven hundred seventy-seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven worshippers of the Grandfather had had their souls sent straight to the Garden to create it, along with seven artefacts of Jaderot.

But as the Decay Wormhole formed a gigantic portal where the planet had been, transforming the rocks that remained into a blessed relic similar to the Warp Gates of Old, the Plague Legions could finally take the field.

Typhus couldn't count them from where he was standing, but he knew their numbers as if he had tallied each Nurgling himself: seven times seven, a tide of epidemics and reapers that had been specifically assembled to prove to the Enemy that yes, bone decayed just like everything else in this galaxy.

The destruction of Cholera 77 accelerated, and as the Warp rift grew larger, the warships arrived.

The first to leave the Eye of Terror and enter the Calyx Hell Stars was, of course, the *Endurance*.

The Legion's flagship had changed a lot since Typhus had seen it when he departed the Eye of Terror. Many batteries had been replaced with what were no doubt more powerful weapons which would be more specialized to destroy undead ships and assets. The new prow cannon was certainly a Pathogen Reaper, a blessed secret the likes of which had been whispered about in excitation when he journeyed in the Garden.

The *Endurance* was not alone, obviously. Sacrificing a planet for a Gloriana would have been stupid.

Behind it, sailing at maximal speed, the ships of the Death Guard were arriving in the Cholera System.

There were seven waves in total.

It was not the entire might of the Fourteenth Legion, but it wasn't an inconsiderable portion of its strength either.

Each of the waves had a core of seven capital ships, with one Battleship acting as the Locus of the Rot for each of them. Learning from the recent lesson the Word Bearers had paid for with their lives, many favours had been called in to provide the Grand Cruisers and Battleships with a true swarm of escorts and Raiders.

It was a formidable force, and it didn't include the assets Typhus had assembled here since his conquest of this system. Millions of cultists had received their rightful blessings, and they now were moved to the fetid cargo holds where they would wait with Pestigors, Morbidus Engines, and of course billions of Plague Zombies.

Nor it did truly consider the sheer might of the Great Unclean Ones leading the Plague Legions, whose ultimate command had been given to an Exalted One.

It was a Host of Decay capable of breaking an entire Quadrant.

It should have been overkill, both to defeat the Enemy and accomplish the plans the Grandfather had given him.

It really wasn't.

But it was all the Death Guard could muster in the Calyx Hell Stars on such short notice, and many servants and assets could not be withdrawn from their zones of operation anyway.

It would have to be enough.

A lake of pus formed, and drones buzzed.

There were more theatrical and perfects methods established by Mortarion to communicate, but those were a waste of time for the present circumstances.

"**Typhus. Is everything ready**?"

"It is. We finished the ritual in time. The Navigators have been transformed to lead us to the Granithor System. No obstacle will stand in our way."

The irony of these wretches helping the Host reach its destination when long ago they had been the instrument he had used to convert the entire Legion was something he hadn't missed.

Neither, he suspected, did Mortarion.

"**The artefact**?"

"It is secure...and ready to be used per the Grandfather's will."

"**Good. Let us depart. It is time to finish the task Russ botched**."

In Typhus' opinion, the Wolf King and the Anathema he served had in fact done the job a bit too well; permanently killing something which had no True Name and real physical presence was going to be a massive challenge.

But expecting anything but bitterness from the Primarch of the Death Guard was an excellent method to waste one's time.

"All assets have been disposed of or were added to the Host. For the Grandfather!"

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Kulth System**

**Skaven Mighty-Mighty Battleship *Scrachit the Magnificent***

**Temporal Anomaly – date impossible to estimate**

**Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster**

"This planet-orb offended me-me! But no-no more!"

The Arch-Warlord basked in the adoration-worship of his warriors.

"Stormvermin!" Scrachit exclaimed. "The triple-barrelled Barbbuster Cannon works-works! By my-my claw, I have smash-destroyed entire planet, yes-yes!"

The miserable insolent of Clan Skyre sniffed loudly.

"And minor but appreciable contribution of Clan Skyre is duly noted, yes-yes." The genial Arch-Warlord finished. Wasn't he most superb in his greatness?

"Oh Invincible Lord of Great Warrens," one of his messengers prostrated himself, "I bring offensive message of vile vermin-thing! False-fake Prophet insults you-you! He dares pretend he-he is in charge-command!"

All happiness Scrachit felt after having destroyed a planet evaporated instantly.

"He was supposed to have great-big accident already!" The Lord of Clan Verminus squeaked. "It is his-his fault so many gnawholes opened close-close to sun!"

Scrachit glared at the sneaky member of Clan Eshin, which was trying to leave his mighty-great command bridge.

"I am surrounded by incompetent fool-fools!" the Council Lord loudly complained. "You! Tell your masters Thanquol-thing must die-die!"

"Yes-yes, Mighty Arch-Warlord!"

"You!" This was accompanied by many solid kicks for the other incompetent he had sent to help Clan Skyre. "Go repair Great-Mighty Barbbuster Cannon! I want to kill-slay Vermin in Yellow with it-it!"

"And the Anarchium, oh Supreme Ach-Warlord?" one of his black-furred Stormvermins asked. "Because of Thanquol-thing, we lost many-many chests of it!"

"This is bad-dire incompetence! But Anarchy will prevail, yes-yes! Mighty is Great Malal, and I am His-His favourite! This makes Clan Verminus favourite Clan of Malal! Praise Anarchy!"

"PRAISE ANARCHY! PRAISE MALAL!"

"But Great Warlord, with Thanquol-thing break-ruining gnawhole, sailing to Granithor will take too-too long!"

"No! We are going to use great-great Warpstone reactors of Mighty-Mighty Battleship *Scrachit the Magnificent*! All praise-praise Anarchy! Death to the Vermin in Yellow!"

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Prol System**

**High Orbit above Prol VIII**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Temporal Anomaly – date impossible to estimate**

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

The ritual had never been intended to be subtle.

Before the ziggurats of Morwen VI, the rats had perished by the billions. While their existences were worthless, they bled like any other creature.

On the grey plains of Dreah, tens of thousands of grey-coloured aliens had been butchered, and with their blood, their settlements were repainted in a far more pleasant red colour.

In the asteroid belts near Zumthor, the slaves of the False Emperor had been smashed apart, and their skulls had been offered to Khorne.

The azure oceans of Reth had turned Crimson, as the Blood Caste had sealed the Covenant they swore to Khorne in blood, bleeding and killing the Scribe Caste and all those who had believed the lies of protection offered by the blue-skinned sorcerers.

Vast mountains of Ork skulls had been gathered on Seedworld, the youngest recruits landing and decapitating the greenskin horde before proving their utmost devotion to the Skull Throne.

The Nurglite cults of Piety were exterminated to the last, and their seemingly-benign harvests put to the torch.

The ruined colonies of Klybo had proven enough of a bait for xenos and animated skeletons alike, and their destruction had been so complete that for hundreds of years, future visitors of the Klybo System would be able to contemplate the fact Klybo was now and would remain a Dead World.

These weren't just the only systems where untold butchery had been the only order given. There had been others, many others. Tzeentch-worshipping Eldar had been ambushed and dragged screaming to the altars. Populations of xenos which had tried to hide while the wars raged were slaughtered for their unforgiveable cowardice.

The rivers of blood had flowed to create lakes, then oceans of blood.

But it was not enough for what had to be done.

And so the gladiatorial contest of the Prol System had begun.

There were thousands of cultists and other worshippers of Khorne which had arrived incredibly late in the Calyx Hell Stars.

They were given the opportunity to prove they were unlucky or slow rather than cowards or hesitating opportunists.

There was only one rule: Kill or be killed.

And for eight days, the carnage had gone out of control on the surface of the Prol planets, as the warships bombarded those who violated the rules. Billions watched as the planets became charnelhouses where the piles of skulls soon outnumbered the living.

Be they members of Murder Cults or Tech-Priests who had grown to cherish the joys of mutilating the flesh, there was only war.

At last, there were only eight gladiators left, and all of them were facing each other.

Prol VIII was nothing more but a cauldron of boiling blood by that point.

On Clar Karond, there had been some signs of stability, for the world was still intended to be part of the Calyx Hell Stars for a significant amount of time.

But Prol VIII was not protected from the Blood God's limitless wrath.

Mountains collapsed as the Blood Legions rampaged. The wrecks of starships that had crash-landed were carved apart by the blades of Bloodletters.

The few arenas that had been built were pulverised by avalanches of skulls or tides of blood.

Eight Champions remained.

And then reality shattered.

From the *Conqueror*, it looked like a meteor had slammed into Prol VIII.

In apocalyptic effects, this was not exactly wrong.

Once meteors created craters however, they stopped moving, and though the shockwaves and disasters created by them were great, there was little risk to your soul and the blood in your veins...ritually speaking.

But it was not a meteor which had hit Prol VIII.

Two large tattered red wings opened.

A weapon no mortal would ever be able to wield was raised in defiance of everything.

Everything was violence. Everything was death.

Lotara knew it very well, because for most of the early campaigns of the Twelfth Legion, when there still was a Twelfth Legion, in fact, the *Conqueror* had been his flagship.

The gladiators were mighty and invigorated by the bloodbath, but six of them were mortals, and two were Space Marines.

They died within eight heartbeats.

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!" Angron, Primarch of the World Eaters, the Red Angel, Lord of the Red Sands, King of the Arenas, shouted, and despite being hundreds of kilometres above Prol VIII, everyone heard him. "**SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!"

The King in Yellow wanted a war? Khorne had anticipated the desires of this undead Usurper.

"All the Haematia stones are to be covered in blood at once," the Blood Rose commanded. "Prepare a course for Granithor. We have a war to win."

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Approaches of the Malfi Warp Crown**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Temporal Anomaly – date impossible to estimate**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

If this had been a superhero-movie, there would have been a suitably heroic music playing right now.

But this wasn't that kind of story.

Yet as the female parahuman who had once been called Victoria Dallon watched the massive fleet placing itself in formation for the massive assault directed at Granithor, she couldn't help but be proud for a moment.

It wasn't every day you were given command over such a massive fleet.

True, there were 'only' nine Battleships, but the Magisters had unleashed most of the Cruisers built in the shipyards of Malfi and Q'Sal, and those could punch well above their weight, as their Crystal Lances had proved time and time again against the other Calyx fleets.

None of them would hold for long against a Gloriana, but nine hundred and ninety-nine capital warships were nine hundred and ninety-nine capital warships.

She was in command of all the Tzeentchian forces.

"**You know,** **I hope you realise that it isn't a vote of confidence**."

"I am not stupid, Antwyr. If he had been available, the Cyclops would have been in charge."

The tumult meant the devastating rituals had reached a monstrous crescendo in the last hours, to the point her paranoia was now in overdrive. Of course, it wasn't really paranoia when your worst fears were confirmed.

The Death Lord of Barbarus, Mortarion of the Death Guard.

The Red Angel of Nuceria, Angron of the World Eaters.

The Fallen Hydra now consorting with the rats, Omegon of the Anarchy Legion.

And of course, last but not least, the King in Yellow. The Usurper. The Undead Pretender. The Lord of the Purged Eleventh Legion.

Malicia wasn't so naive as to think that if it had been within Tzeentch's power to summon the Crimson King into the Malfi Warp Crown, she would have been left in the position of supreme authority.

"**Your God doesn't trust you**."

"My God doesn't trust anyone...not even himself."

Antwyr seemed to be taken aback by her blunt answer.

"**True. But he could have granted you the power of Paramountcy**."

"If the conditions to obtain that kind of power require being tortured like the First Captain of the Fifteenth is right now, I prefer passing on that opportunity."

Malicia was honest enough to acknowledge she was power-hungry. But the tortures Ahriman was enduring and that she had been shown by several Malfian Covens were not something she would volunteer for.

The Exile had not volunteered either, and Astartes had a far greater ability to resist torture than unaugmented humans or parahumans.

And then there were the things a Primarch of the Thousand Sons would be expected to do when it came to the Great Game...

"**You are thinking of a way to take this power for yourself nonetheless**?"

"No." Malicia answered honestly, before adding a lie for good measure. "I was trying to imagine what sort of nasty traps the King in Yellow has prepared. You know, the superior weapons and rituals that could make a Primarch so confident about the idea of fighting four major Hosts, one for each God, at the same time. And that's assuming other armies and fleets don't join us for the cataclysm."

"**Traps would not be of much use if one could predict them light-years away**." The Black Blade sarcastically commented.

Footsteps resonated, and many Sons of Change went to stand by her side.

"The fleet is ready, Warlord." Boros announced respectfully. "I don't think we will be able to establish more discipline...nor expect more transports and supply ships to catch up with us. And I will note we left Malfi seriously under-defended."

"I will inform you that the Nurglite and Khornate maniacs have pretty much emptied every last bit of their reserves in the Calyx Stars, and for the former, they dragged in a fair amount of their assets inside the Eye of Terror too." Malicia grimaced. "Not that it's a bad bargain per se. Whoever wins the Battle of Granithor will in all likelihood be able to conquer the Calyx Hell Stars in the aftermath, given how few military assets will be left to the rest of the factions."

The prize was still valuable, for all the devastation and planetary annihilations the fanatics of the Blood God had done with their rampages.

"I heavily suggest not making these words part of your battle-speech before battle is joined."

"You're right, Boros."

Malicia looked at the stars, and wondered how many of her risky gambits were going to have to be used before the end if she was to live.

"Let's go end this nightmare. Before it grows worse."

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Granithor System**

**Granithor/Komus, the Tyrant Star**

**The King in Yellow**

Everything was ready.

The work on the fortifications continued. It would never cease, and it wasn't as if his subjects were going to be exhausted by it. The Mortuary Artisans were preparing millions of new warriors with the bounty of bones that Granithor's extinct civilisations had offered him in ignorance.

Several times he had wished to erect even mightier defences. He was not so arrogant as to pretend himself the equal of Dorn or Perturabo, but with the effectives at his disposal, there was enough here to make this system as close to impregnable as it was possible to be within a standard year.

But if he had done that, his enemies might have pursued more destructive methods to annihilate Granithor and his armies instead of relying on raw violence. There were traps, and then there were trap-masters falling to their own cleverness. Granithor had to be a real threat, but one the Four thought they could handle by releasing their favourite hunters and slaves...his brothers.

On that point at least, his plan had worked.

He could feel them coming. Omegon was hidden from his view, but he was there, pushing the hordes of rats on their suicidal course of action. At least the slave of Anarchy truly understood they were all slaves playing the cruel games of the Beasts.

No. The King in the Yellow had to be fair to his brothers, even if it was for the last time.

They all understood the depth of their slavery very clearly.

Except perhaps Angron. It was difficult to know if the Red Angel was capable of coherent thought, much less how much of his condition he was aware of. Certain signs lately pointed to a certain ability to think...but it could simply be the dangerous mind of his Master giving the orders.

That was the thing few understood when they looked at past campaigns of the Lost and the Damned. The Primarchs had not been in control the moment the Isstvan System had burned. The moment Horus had pledged their souls to those Pretenders, they were all slaves, and the only difference was how valuable said chained Demigods were for their Masters.

The sands continued to flow. The hourglasses continued their work flawlessly. Obviously, they were all rather full now. It had not been more than five hours since he issued his challenge. All the enemy fleets were on the move, but none had yet reached Granithor.

Or rather...none of the creatures that ruled the Warp for now had reached Granithor.

There was an intruder in his throne room. It was not an ally.

He would have preferred to not give this enemy an audience.

But the level of force required to convince it to leave the stellar system would be...significant.

"*Say what you have to say and leave my domain. The battle is about to start*."

Laughter immediately answered.

"**So confident, King in Yellow...one might say it is incredibly arrogant of you**."

One moment, there was nothing.

The moment after, there was an immense golden being in the centre of his throne room.

It was tall, taller than any Primarch had any right to be.

It was not a Primarch or anything born from humanity's scientific and psychic experiments.

It was another Pretender, though not a Warp-born one.

"*The Deceiver in person...or rather in all the transcendence it has left*."

"**The Eleventh Son of the Human Anathema**," the C'Tan taunted him. "**Forgive me for not calling you by your former name...but there are only two people who have that knowledge...or is it three**?"

"*I have turned this weakness into strength. And you look very arrogant for a being whose presence here is due to events outside of your control*."

"**The destruction of the Ymga Monolith was not a direct contribution of mine, but I may have given it a few nudges here and there**."

"*More lies from the Deceiver. Why am I not surprised? I will repeat myself; say what you have to say and leave my domain. I have far more important things to do than entertaining your miserable Shards*."

"**Very well**," mocking and submissive gestures that were all falsehood were made. He ignored them. "**You are going to fail**. **You made two major mistakes**."

The ploy was so ridiculously obvious that he allowed himself to laugh.

"*Is this the moment I reveal to you how I intend to succeed where my father failed? Must I begin my superb monologue where I proclaim my stratagems for all Pretenders to hear? No. I don't think so*."

He spoke a word of command...and a Tesseract Labyrinth he had recovered while he was still mortal materialised in his left hand.

"**I will leave**..." the C'Tan predictably reacted with a parody of smile, "**not too far, I want to be the first spectator of the epic massacre that is about to take place**."

"*Please do that. And meditate on the treachery of your rebellious slaves, like a certain Infinite Collector*."

"**Fine words**," Mephet'ran laughed, "**when I am absolutely certain Trazyn looted your own collections**."

He was about to activate the Tesseract Labyrinth and risk all the consequences of a duel with a C'Tan, but the insolent Pretender began to levitate towards the exit of his throne room.

"**And since it amuses me that you won't listen to my warnings, here are your mistakes, oh Master of Eternity: you have grown so threatening that the Arkifane and the Lord of Iron have made a temporary alliance**."

There was a flash of golden light, and the Deceiver was gone.

Truly gone; his wards, when he gave the command, were able to track the insolent Pretender racing on a course for the outskirts of the Granithor System.

"*Something will have to be done about the C'Tan Shards once I will have removed most of the current opposition*."

Mistakes, really? Unless he had suddenly become deaf in addition to his current condition, the number of 'mistakes' was limited to one.

And while the 'Lord of Iron' was clearly Perturabo, He had never heard of any daemon called 'Arkifane'. While there were a lot of things he ignored about the Warp Pretenders, no great slave of the Four went by this name, and thus the C'Tan proved as unreliable as ever.

No. The Deceiver had perfectly demonstrated its perfidious nature.

In time, he would make sure the C'Tan would regret it, painfully.

"Eternity will be yours, my King."

"*Or there will be no eternity. What is it, my Mortarch*?"

"The instruments placed in the Enki Quadrant signal several major anomalies about to emerge from the Warp. Confidence is high, based on the tonnage, the outer defences are going to be engaged by several Space Hulks."

"*Not very original, but one can't expect too much from the Pretenders. You can begin the preparations for Case Nergal, Mortarch*."

"By your will, my King."

The King in Yellow banished the Tesseract Labyrinth and marched away from his throne. The throne he had sworn to never sit in again as long as he hadn't achieved his ambitions.

"That is not dead which can eternal lie. And with strange aeons even death may die."

As the King in Yellow left to command his undead armies however, he never noticed that on one of the thirteen hourglasses, in a writing that was so thin as to be nearly invisible for human eyes, the Deceiver had carved five words in Low Gothic.

Five words.

Five little words.

But then as Magnus the Red would have warned his brother, something as insignificant as a leaf could usher the death of Gods.

Mephet'ran knew it too.

It was the last chance to avoid a battle that was going to see more Primarchs fight each other than there had been since the Siege of Terra.

And it was now gone.

WEAVER IS NOT YOUR BANE

**Author's note**:

The Tyranny Arc will continue in *Tyranny 12-3* [REDACTED BY ORDER OF THE INQUISITION]. I think I won't reveal big spoilers if I say most of the action will focus on the Battle of [REDACTED BY ORDER OF THE INQUISITION].

As said before in this very chapter, the Calyx Hell Stars are really going to live up to their name, for [REDACTED BY ORDER OF THE INQUISITION].

Death to [REDACTED BY ORDER OF THE INQUISITION]!

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