**Ovation Interlude**

**Monsters and Nightmares**

*My dear Taylor Hebert, I have excellent news for you.*

*Lorgar is reacting exactly like you wanted him to, and he pushed Magnus to support him as well.*

*Oh no, I have no spies in his inner circle. The last wizard to try is still screaming in the torture chambers of the* Trisagion*.*

*But no spies are really necessary when one can hear his tantrums in the Immaterium and the concentration of military forces gathered under his banner is growing larger with every day. Unless the priest-commander of the Word Bearers intends to attack Abaddon the Despoiler and challenge him for the title of Warmaster, his ambitions can only begin with the Cadian Gate.*

*To misquote an Aleph movie, war will arrive promptly in this system. The gauntlet was thrown, and the reinforcements dispatched by the High Lords to the Fortress Worlds have obviously goaded him further along this course of action.*

*But I don't give you any new information, I'm sure. For two short moments, you illuminated the darkness during the Battle of Commorragh. You illuminated the abyss, where no mortal had ever dared bring the Anathema's Light. Furthermore, you sent the old rat curse of a long dead age to Sicarus. You may have only obeyed the orders of your crippled master upon his Golden Throne at first, but it evolved rapidly from there. Your deeds, your alliances, and your hopes will break the Imperium's slow decline and the current correlation of force between the Imperium and the enemies opposing it.*

*Lorgar can't afford to give you another century of rearming, reforms, and hope. He could have waited a bit longer if the rat infestation wasn't there, but as it stands, his 'Grand Armada of Chaos' has a very limited window of opportunity to strike or everything he believes in will be lost.*

*For this is the dying Emperor's plan, and yours, truly.*

*A Black Crusade is by definition the alliance of the Three-Who-Were-Once-Four. A Black Crusade is Chaos Undivided, or at least a temporary agreement to work towards that goal. Lorgar is the self-proclaimed Champion of Chaos Undivided. His powerbase in the Great Game can't survive, unlike Abaddon's and those of other warlords of the Eye of Terror. Not if the rats succeed in claiming Sicarus or a significant place of worship in the heart of the greatest Warp Storm of this galaxy, awakening their God of Anarchy beyond any possibility of suppression.*

*This was a devilish choice you gave him, oh destroyer of Commorragh.*

*Either stand by as the Horned God rose on the ashes of his precious temples and watch his precious Pantheon accept a deity in their midst which will make cooperation between the Gods impossible, or try a decisive gambit to destroy Anarchy and put the genies back into the bottle they were firmly trapped in before you annihilated the post-Fall Drukhari civilisation.*

*If the Custodes gave you enough information on Lorgar, you knew it wasn't a choice at all for him. The gene-sire of the Word Bearers is a fanatic when his convictions are at stake. I don't know if it was something gene-crafted by his creator or a malign poison the Gods infected him with when they sent him to Colchis, but it is the reality and the outcome was decided before the first attack on the* Templum Officio*.*

*The Imperium will face the Black Crusade, perhaps the last one to ever* *exist, and you will have a gigantic host of enemy Astartes where you can fight and kill them in a single campaign, burning the dead branches of the Imperial tree which need to be pruned before the new age begins.*

*Two words of warning though, Queen of the Swarm. Do not underestimate Lorgar. His plans are based on a lot of flawed assumptions and millennia spent stewing on nonexistent wrongs inflicted upon him, but he is still a Daemon Primarch. When he strikes, it will be with the strength of a Legion and the greatest alliance of Astartes and Neverborn since Horus was slain.*

*And do not think the Three are going to be less redoubtable when it comes to confronting you. My Patron and the other Two will be invested in protecting their most important followers from the ravages of Anarchy at all times. Divided the hosts of the Eye and the cultists will be, but a new 'order' will soon emerge...until the next war.*

*Because in many ways, this conflict is only the first step for you, isn't it? It is the great clash before you go back to Mankind's Cradle.*

*Many Lords of Change don't believe it is within your capabilities.*

*I believe otherwise.*

*A daughter of Terra must return and deliver salvation or damnation to the Throneworld. One of us must kneel before the Anathema and hear the story of our rise and fall.*

*Because when it comes to it...Parahumans and Primarchs are not that different.*

*I am Malicia the Destiny Unwritten now, Angel of Sacrifice. I will wait for you where even daemons fear to tread.*

\*\*\*\*

From: Agent E-2649VI5

To: [CLASSIFIED BY INQUISITORIAL ORDER]

Clearance: Vermillion

*My Lord,*

*Your suspicions were right. The Traitor Seventeenth has accelerated their preparations. Their agents are seemingly everywhere in the Eye, and are recruiting or enslaving millions of mutants and abominable things that I won't name here.*

*More worrying is the sheer number of Traitor warbands and warships answering the call of these monsters. At least one representative for every Traitor Legion has sworn itself to [REDACTED] cause. The number of capital ships is frightening no matter how one looks at it. The sources employed are unreliable in the extreme, but I have been able to confirm over sixty Battleships and ten Grand Cruisers are being repaired or under construction in the pit of horrors that is Sicarus.*

*Given how difficult it is to spy upon these heretics, I must admit there are likely more fleets and corrupted hulls waiting in secret shipyards that I have been unable to locate.*

*The industrial effort to sustain this military expansion is absolutely massive and can only be directed at one target. There is no other conceivable reason to equip tens of thousands of Traitor Astartes and hold them back in a single location. Add the presence of Chaos Knights and Extremis Traitoris Titan Legions, and there can no longer be any doubt.*

*My Lord, there hasn't been- [SCREAMS]. You must- [RECORDING PARTIALLY DAMAGED]*

*They are coming. They are coming. Warn Cadia, for the love of the God-Emperor. The heretics are returning to the Cadian Gate and- [SOUNDS OF FIGHTING]*

**WE ARE COMING! WE ARE COMING SLAVES OF THE FALSE EMPEROR!**

*[ABORTED TRANSCRIPT; EXTREME CORRUPTION; AGENT E-2649VI5 DECLARED LOST]*

\*\*\*\*

**90th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**EKODAS**

'**APOSTLE OF DESTRUCTION'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 20 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 3 PLANETS**

\*\*\*\*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

Thought for the day: Peace is Hell.

**Grand Apostle Ekodas**

"I hate these damned rats."

Ekodas had an enormous amount of self-control, one had to in order to be a senior member of the Dark Council, but the sentiment had to be voiced and his fury abated, if only for a short while.

All the while he was trampling the corpses of dozens of giant rats, one of the few therapeutic methods he had found to work since this war had begun.

The Grand Apostle uttered a word and hundreds more vermin corpses liquefied, creating a torrent of blood which would run to the prepared altars. At least this way Khorne would be satisfied. The souls of the rats were repugnant and unsatisfying for the envoys of the Gods, but blood was blood, and the Throne of Skulls did not care whose blood flowed on Sicarus, only that the life-essence of beings poured out of their veins.

"It was a great one-sided victory, my Lord," his Coryphaus spoke, advancing carefully amid the unending mountain of rat corpses.

It was also a useless victory, and they both knew it.

Battles like the one they had just fought were basically achieving nothing, for they were fought on the surface of Sicarus, where the rat commanders, their spawning pits, and their hazardous armament manufactorums were never found.

"Yes, if one ignores the fact these rats should never have been here in the first place."

The Cathedral and the Bastion of the Black Scalpel were the heart of a fortified city where, until today, the vermin had failed to make any inroads. Most slaves had been Possessed to make sure the slaves of Anarchy had no opportunity of teaching them their heretical beliefs. Skulls had been modified to play the role of vigilant sentinels.

Living and non-living guardians had been mustered in the thousands to play the role of garrisons. Pacts had been made. Sacrifices had bled. And all of this had proven futile in the end. Despite the security measures, despite the seismographs and the other blessed devices to ensure no tunnel creation came as a surprise, a rat army had nonetheless managed to break through, and he had to come in person with a thousand warriors to eradicate them.

"Do I begin to assemble a reprisal force for an invasion of the tunnels?"

"Yes, do so," Ekodas approved the suggestion of his Coryphaus. "We can't afford to let the vermin believe they've struck a significant blow."

They had, though. The infrastructure damage was really minimal, but his forces would have to be reinforced in this Sector, and for all his blessings and the pacts he had made, Ekodas was very clearly aware the strength of his host was limited. The longer this conflict lasted, the more veterans and slave-soldiers were pulled out of Sicarus to participate in the armament preparations of the Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided.

"Can I try a new tactic this time?"

Ekodas tried not to look too incredulous.

"What is this 'new tactic', Coryphaus? If I remember correctly, so far we tried summoning Bloodthirsters into the rats' warrens," and discovered the hard way how unstable the damnable 'Warpstone' was in proximity of major summonings, "conventional field battles, trapping the tunnels, the Scheme of the Eight Major Blood Lakes, the Litany of the Nine Lies, and the Ferric Plague."

Ekodas thought about it for a second or two before adding for himself.

"Amongst other schemes and tactics."

Field battles never worked, obviously. Over half of the rat armies fled into their tunnels when defeat was imminent. Summoning the children of the Great Ocean often failed, either because the Warpstone explosions banished them, or the vermin refused to bow down to the majesty of the Pantheon and drowned them with their overwhelming numbers. The rituals blessed by Tzeentch were more a hindrance than a help, as the rats fought among themselves more than they did his armies anyways and therefore didn't really need an excuse to turn on each other. Targeting the leadership was useless: they had sacked and annihilated the headquarters of leaders pretending to be 'the True Council of Eleven' more than twenty times, only for another Council to resurface afterwards.

Releasing new plagues and anti-rats gasses and neurotoxins had pleased Bountiful Nurgle immensely...until the rats developed their own version of 'Plague Priests', that they had apparently called 'Clan Pestilens'.

This had been the end of 'new tactics' from their side, because the last thing the Word Bearers needed, in his modest opinion, was to give the rats even nastier ideas. The heretical creatures were already far too crazy and prompt to try to kill everyone in explosions of green flames to risk them reverse-engineering new assets of mass destruction.

"We have received new tunnel boring machines, courtesy of one of the Iron Warrior warbands. I intend to use them for a surgical strike."

Ekodas lacked the strength to muster any kind of enthusiasm.

"You have my permission...under the condition that none of the machines are abandoned to the claws of the vermin this time."

On Sicarus and against the rats, this meant powerful self-destruct warheads.

"I will make sure of it."

"Good."

Ekodas observed the partially damaged Cathedral and Bastion, trying to find something, anything, which would tell him this damnable war was going to end in his favour.

He didn't find it. Holy Colchis was crawling with giant rats, and though he and his armies killed millions every gory dawn, there were tens of millions more ready to replace them. It was an infestation...and discontent and doubt were rife within his ranks.

Such was the state of his thoughts when a portal was activated and one of the souls he loathed the most stepped through.

"Erebus."

"*Hand of Destiny* Erebus," the Vile One chided him with his smug smile that one always dreamed of wiping off his face with a series of powerful gauntleted blows. Repeatedly. "It seems you have a little problem obeying the orders our father gave you."

Any other Dark Apostle, Ekodas would have been more cordial with, if only to wait to unleash a good ritual in his face and let his soul be devoured by a Neverborn.

With Erebus though, there was no playing this game.

"I have not invited you into my area of operations. Begone." Over two hundred of his warriors had encircled the bastard as they spoke, ready to open fire at the first excuse.

"No, no, no, my poor Ekodas! You have failed, and our father isn't in the mood to tolerate your defeats anymore. Report to him immediately." A scroll was tossed at him, and the Grand Apostle of the Dark Council gritted his teeth in fury as the bleeding words on the parchment confirmed the order. "Your forces will stay here under my command, naturally."

Ekodas didn't need to bother re-reading the document to know this point of order wasn't part of his Primarch's commands.

"You can always try to take them by force, *Erebus*," Ekodas spat markedly on the ground. Even if he wasn't a leader of the Brotherhood whose goal was to purge the Legion of the Vile One's influence, he would never have left his warriors and resources under this betrayer's oversight. For those who believed it was a good idea, there were the examples of Calth, Nuceria, and a hundred more worlds to point at. "My Host and allies won't help you. I would rather go pledge myself to a Black Legion warband than allow my warriors to serve you."

And for the record, Ekodas hated the very thought of allying himself with the Black Legion, that band of upstarts which had abandoned all dignity for a false brotherhood of broken Legionnaires.

"Careful," the slime whispered. "Your star is not ascendant anymore, my dear Grand Apostle."

"I would tell you to be careful," Ekodas countered. "But I really want to see you eaten piece by piece by a million gangrenous rats before I take your corpse to my dungeons and spend a few eternities working on your soul. Have fun with this war, *Erebus*. I'm done with it."

The Grand Apostle didn't turn his back to the Vile One, nor did any of his Word Bearers, of course. No one presented his back to Erebus, not unless they had a death wish.

\*\*\*\*

**8th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**EREBUS**

'**THE VILE ONE'**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT TO ELIMINATE THIS SLIME**

**THIS ABOMINATION IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS COWARDLY IN THE EXTREME AND HAS BEEN NOTED TO FLEE AS SOON AS EVENTS TURN AGAINST HIM**

**REWARD: 5 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'AVENGER OF CALTH' AWARDED, VOTE OF THE HIGH LORDS FOR A TRIUMPH, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**82nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**JARULEK**

'**APOSTLE OF LIES'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 57 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, SEAT ON THE HOLY OPHELIAN SYNOD, 1 CARDINAL STELLAR SYSTEM, 1 FRATERIS TEMPLAR ARMY GROUP AND SUPPORT FLEET, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**The** **Eye of Terror**

**Outer Sicarus System**

**Illumination Shipyards**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

"Kelbor-Hal certainly intends to fulfil his part of the pact."

As much as Kol Badar hated to agree with this runt of Marduk on anything, in this instance the Coryphaus was willing to concede the Dark Acolyte was not completely in the wrong.

At least the deployment of strength in the Illumination Shipyards was impressive enough, both to ignorant and veteran eyes.

Before the proclamation of their Primarch that the Grand Armada was to be mustered, there had been a few dispersed shipyards in the asteroids, at least capable of supplying one minor Host and then some. But now, the scene was a spectacle of implacable space industry and forges of war. Dock after dock could be seen as far as optical augmentations and Astartes eyes reached, and all were filled to the brink with the most formidable machines of war ever built by the Hell-Lords of the Mechanicum.

Ranks after ranks of Infernus-class Battleships were completed at speeds ranging from insane to miraculous. Desolator Battleships and Battle-Barges had their own construction sites, and between those Executor- and Avenger-class Grand Cruisers were modified or outright rebuilt from the keel up. Hades, Styx, and Hecate Heavy Cruisers stolen from forgotten mothballed fleets of the False Emperor were beginning a new glorious career in the True Legions. Nor were the 'lesser' Cruisers neglected: Murder, Carnage, Slaughter, Inferno, Hellbringer and other classes of Strike Cruisers were all present here.

For each Battleship they had here, at least four or five capital ships could be added to the order of battle. And for each capital ship to be built or repaired, the Word Bearers would have a flotilla of Escorts and Attack Craft, not to forget the Heldrakes and their modified Starfighters and flying Daemon Engines to add weight to their salvoes.

Kol Badar had at first thought the name 'Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided' to be a bit of a mouthful, but as the firepower mustered here was revealed in all its terrible glory, the Coryphaus had to admit he had perhaps been a bit too hasty.

More than one hundred Battleships. Dozens of Grand Cruisers and Battlecruisers. Hundreds of Cruisers of all tonnages. According to rumours, the number of Heldrakes hibernating in the bowels of the warships' hulls was over two hundred thousand. The escorts and attack crafts were simply uncountable. Entire hordes of daemons laughed and fought nearby for the chance to possess the Daemon Engines which would conduct the great slaughter.

"We will see. Sota-Nul came with a lot of forces, I will give her that."

And the former Emissary of Horus was not shy about parading her forces so that they acknowledged her 'generous' contribution. The 'Hell Forge-Mistress' had moved to Sicarus with thirty capital ships, including one hull which may have started as an Ark Mechanicus – but which had grown far beyond that in the last millennia – three Titan-Arks, two Heavy Battleships, and some other ships which had to be unique designs originally developed inside her tenebrous mind.

"Jealous of the Titans she is bringing to our cause, Coryphaus?"

Once again, Kol Badar was vindicated in his thirst for vengeance against the perfidious weakling which had killed his blood brother. Marduk was japing and whining, and could only kill a true warrior if somebody else had already weakened him.

The worm could laugh for now, but he didn't know what Jarulek had promised him...

"No, not at all," the veteran of Terra answered. "I don't need Titans to crush everything on the battlefield."

"Oh? Then why did I hear you had concerns about the newly assembled 2nd Great Host?"

Sometimes, Kol Badar wondered who he wanted to kill the most: Marduk or the informants who whispered every action he made in his duties of Coryphaus to him. Every time, the conclusion was the same: it was Marduk he loathed the most. The others would get their just deserts once he put the runt's head on a spike.

"Concern is such a strong word. I was explaining the will of Dark Apostle Jarulek to the other Coryphaus."

In fact, these were genuine concerns, but he wasn't going to tell the runt *that*.

The problem was the fact that, when the Primarch had ordered the Grand Armada to be reorganised into eight Great Hosts, most of the pre-existing Word Bearers Hosts had not fought together since Terra. And for some formations, it was even further in the past.

As a result, manoeuvring each Host to be a united whole again was...problematic. The 34th Host had been better than most in the coordination of super-formations, as they had over one thousand and four hundred warriors, but others weren't so lucky. And in any case, mustering one thousand four hundred Astartes wasn't the same as deploying twenty-eight thousand Word Bearers.

Joy of joys, the 2nd Great Host had been given to his Lord Jarulek, but they had to endure the presence of the Sons of Horus, the arrogant sons who had failed when all the Legions counted on them and fled Terra like curs.

Kol didn't like Drecarth the Sightless and his lieutenants. They thought they knew everything about war, but under the symbol of the Eye, their shame and cowardice was clear for all to see. They were barely above Marduk the runt in that regard.

By the Gods, why did they send Horus' spawns to them instead of throwing them against the walls of Cadia as cannon-fodder? It wasn't like they were going to be missed...

"But if you want to hide in a Titan, don't worry Dark Acolyte. I won't tell our Lord anything."

Kol could almost feel the fury burning behind the eyes and on the face of the runt.

"I will-"

"Is everything proceeding according to my plans, my Coryphaus?"

"It is," Kol Badar smiled, as the Anointed he commanded took position around Dark Apostle Jarulek, Blessed by the Gods, Chosen by Holy Lorgar to command the 2nd Great Host of the Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided. "The Host is waiting at your leisure. We were merely...conversing about the war potential of our Mechanicum allies and the assets they brought with them."

"Ah yes. Sota-Nul and her Legio Vulturum."

This was the strongest weapon in the Hell Forge-Mistress' arsenal, yes.

"She brought the Knight Houses of Morbidia and Vextrix." Knights were the lesser cousins of the Titans, but in great numbers, they were extremely dangerous, and Sota-Nul had convinced over a hundred of the war-suits to accept her 'patronage'. "But I will admit it is the Gore Crows which will be the true hammer once we need to break the walls the lackeys of the False Emperor fight behind."

Rare were the Titan Legions which survived in their original numbers after having followed the Warmaster into the Eye. Most of them had dispersed into various splinter factions. There were exceptions, however. One of them was the Legio Mortis, serving Abaddon the Despoiler.

The Legio Vulturum, formerly sworn to Xana, now following Sota-Nul, was clearly another.

Kol felt...wary about it. Ninety Titans were a force which could destroy entire star clusters if properly wielded, but that Sota-Nul, not Kelbor-Hal, commanded them was in his opinion a clue something was wrong. The former Master of the Red Planet had not exactly been trusting his subordinates with large Titan commands during the war to topple the False Emperor; that he did now was a contradiction by itself.

And the Legio Vulturum was visibly augmented and modified by xenos technology, not the blessings of the Gods.

"They will indeed be useful for the Great Plan." Jarulek gave him a thin smile. "Ah, I believe Sota-Nul is going to present us her biggest creation...now."

Kol Badar didn't smile, not as the biggest Titan he had ever seen became visible.

Legio Vulturum wasn't the Legio Audax; it was extremely 'top-heavy', possessing few of the 'light titans' like the Warhound class, and on the contrary deploying great numbers of Reavers and Warlords.

But the machine on its way to be paraded made the classic Battle-Titans look like mid-sized children.

Its arms were gigantic cannons of a model the Coryphaus had never seen before. Its head was a skull bigger than the entire body of a Knight. Its legs were pillars of ceramite, adamantium, and terrifying technology.

From armoured feet to the upper-fortified castle, the Titan was fortified so massively that even super-heavy tanks had no chance of collapsing its multi-layered shields.

It was a mountain built to crush armies single-handedly.

It was an Imperator-class Titan, the machine Tech-Priests worshipped as an avatar of their God, be they the True Mechanicum or the petty fools who toiled in the name of the False Emperor.

"I wasn't aware Xana had managed to build Titans of that size," Marduk the runt admitted.

"As far as I'm aware, they only built a handful of them; they preferred the Reavers and Warlords." Kol maintained a facade of civility. "This one may be the last surviving one. Behold *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, the Maw of Xenocide."

**The** **Eastern Fringe**

**Approaches of the Svalbard Sector**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Kroozer '*Rockwaagh*'**

**9.339.299M35**

**Uber-Mekboy Brukk 'X-Rock' Brukk**

Not the time to say 'ere we go!', and the metal-heads were already boarding them!

This was fun! This was Vallawaagh!

"GIVE 'EM 'ELLZ BOYZ!" Brukk roared, grabbing the first shoota available and smashing it against the awesome big green gun of the Necron. "FOR GORK AND MORK! WAAGGH!"

"WAAGGH!"

The Boyz and his favourite squig didn't need more to roar and charge the funny metal-heads. They had big guns! The metal-heads were so funny with their 'surrender and die'. But the Orks were da best!

"FIRST DA METAL-'EADS, SECONDZ DA SWARM BRINGA!" The Mekboy shouted, hurriedly strapping on his new 'Bigga Shoota' with 'da sonik cannon'. Brukk had built it to shoot down insects, but metal-heads worked too!

One by one, the boarders vanished in green fun and explosions.

"BOSS! Sometin' shootin' at us!"

"WHERE?"

Something hit violently and the *Rockwaagh* shook...shook a lot.

"WHAT WAS DAT?"

"DA MOON!"

Brukk laughed.

"LOOK AT DAT BOYZ! DA METAL-'EADS 'AVE A' WAAGH MOON!" The Mekboy raised his sonik cannon above his head. "LETZ GO TAKE IT!"

"WAAGGH!"

"WAAGGH!"

The Boyz shouted. The Boyz fired their weapons and began to prepare for the scrap of their lives.

"LOADZ DA TORPEDOEZ TUBS! ENGIN SPEED MAX-RED! CANNONZ FIRA! The Ork commander barked. "GORK OR DA SWARM BRINGA! WAAGGH!"

"WAAAGH!"

**Vargard** **Obyron**

According to the manifesto spread by the Szarekhan Dynasty, the Great Sleep had supposedly been a infallible plan of the Silent King to guarantee the Necrons would endure while the mortal races would perish from the ravages of time and galactic disasters.

Obyron had barely woken up, and he could see this statement was worth exactly as much as the promises of Mephet'ran the Deceiver, which was to say nothing.

"WAAAGH!"

Obyron teleported himself behind the gigantic green brute and decapitated it, claiming his twenty-fifth significant kill of the skirmish.

"Enemy leader down." The Sautekh officer said curtly. "Formation Two-One-Tekh. Execute."

His soldiers were the elite of Gidrim. They didn't miss. Five seconds later, there weren't any living beings inside the dangerously unstable hull, and he had lost no troops in the violent skirmish. The engines were sabotaged in record time, and the starship was thrown into the enemy formation, out of control and no longer presenting a threat to any Necron phalanx.

"The first part of your plan is accomplished, my suzerain," Obyron reported after teleporting back. "I'm afraid the enemy failed to recognise the generosity of your surrender conditions, however."

Obyron hadn't bothered to ask more than once for the sake of formality, truly. These greenskins were more barbaric and less intelligent than the Krorks, but 'surrender' was still not in their vocabulary.

And if Overlord Zahndrekh had been himself, he would have recognised it.

"Stubborn secessionists!" the old Necron grumbled. "Look at them, Obyron! They are advancing in a dispersed Khardatopek formation. Do they really think that painting their ships red and bathing themselves in green paint is going to change anything in the outcome of this battle?"

Obyron nodded half in resignation, half in sadness.

There were many reasons the Great Sleep had been an utterly stupid idea that only a Szarekhan mind could have conjured. Tomb Worlds had been destroyed, that much had been clear, despite how prompt the Triarch's enforcers were at silencing the murmurs of discontent. Resurrection systems were malfunctioning. Old and new enemies continued to plague this galaxy. The superiority of Necron phalanxes and fleets, won in millions of battles, had been forgotten as millions of years were spent in stasis.

But for Obyron, the harshest blow was the mental damage suffered by his suzerain.

Overlord Zahndrekh had emerged from the Great Sleep 'apparently' sound of mind. Except of course, his master believed he was still a Necrontyr of pre-biotransference times. One might have thought facing the greenskins would have corrected this in short order, but no. From his perspective, these were not barbaric brutes, but Secessionist Necrontyrs they were facing on the battlefield.

Obyron didn't know if he should feel relief or sadness at seeing his suzerain in such a state. Relief would be because a lot of Gidrim nobles had emerged in a far worse mental state, those they had been able to awaken at all. The Vargard had been forced to put down a large number of them with his own blade.

The sadness was because Zahndrekh was more than his suzerain; he was the one who had believed in Obyron when he had been a mere young recruit born of peasant stock. Obyron owed Zahndrekh everything: his life, his long military career, and his political support.

They had survived the bloodiest battles of the War in Heaven together. They had endured the psychic maelstroms of the Old Ones, escaped the wrath of demented C'Tan, and challenged indomitable enemies.

Zahndrekh was...the Overlord was his suzerain. It pained him more than life itself to see him like this.

"Why are you not advancing to exterminate the vermin?" a Szarekhan commander barked in his back.

Then again, not seeing the galaxy as it was had its advantages. The stars and planets knew the Szarekhan had not stopped being cruel masters after something as short and insignificant as the Great Sleep.

"Patience, Herald. The secessionists must be placed in the correct ground at the correct moment."

The other noble scoffed.

"They had told me how low you'd fallen, Zahndrekh, but I'd not believed them until now. I think I should summon a few Deathmarks to get rid of your old carcass. For the-"

Obyron feigned to inspect a Warscythe of his own forces before hurling it like a javelin and impaling the insolent noble who had dared threaten his suzerain. If the command protocols had been active, it would have been futile to attempt, and possibly suicidal, but the King's command protocols were not activated, and the Szarekhan nobles were pathetic both in their security and their martial prowess.

The imbecile was so sure of his himself he had not noticed his Deathmarks and Wraiths were already disintegrated by Obyron's security measures. Did he really think they would allow just any scoundrel aboard the Battleships of the Sautekh Dynasty?

"Obyron, I know he harboured Secessionist tendencies, but that is no way to treat a Herald!"

"My suzerain, I am only concerned about your safety!"

"Obyron...ah, the secessionists have finally decided to commit themselves!"

That was one way to look at it, yes. Another would be to describe it as a gigantic rampage of countless warships which all tried to go in roughly the same direction.

"My warriors!" Zahndrekh shouted. "One day we will see loyalty rekindled and the old errors of the past purged! One day old feuds and inter-Dynasty quarrels will cease! Secessionism must not win this day! Secessionism can't win this day! For the Necrontyr are greater than one petty tyrant, taller than the arid valleys of a radioactive planet! Divided we will fall! Together we will survive and from our humble origins rise again, nobler and stronger! FOR UNITY!"

"FOR UNITY!" The Necrons of Gidrim still sufficiently self-aware to be moved by the speech shouted back.

The Battleships and Cruisers accelerated to face the greenskins, and Obyron waited for new orders.

Because for all his suzerain's mental issues, Zahndrekh remained the greatest military commander of the Sautekh Dynasty, perhaps the greatest of all Dynasties united. Krorks. Aeldari. Hrud. Old Ones. Rangdan. C'Tan. Other Necrontyrs and Necrons. All had eaten dust before him.

These greenskins had enthusiasm and ferociousness, but they had no chance. Not because the Necrons had the Throne of Oblivion on their side. But because Zahndrekh was a genius whose defeats could be counted on one hand, and four out of those five enemies were permanently dead.

"We slept and we woke up to face the same old war..."

Zahndrekh and himself cut through the dimensions together, and they returned to the inferno which had made them legends.

**Mechanicus** **Cruiser *Athena Database***

**Magos Explorator Alena Wismer**

Magos Explorator Alena Wismer wasn't going to pretend she was a specialist on the analysis and study Gloriana Battleships, but she had the honour and the privilege to be invited aboard the *Flamewrought* and to see the *Eternal Crusader* with her optical augmentations. This undoubtedly placed her above most of the Tech-Priests currently toiling across the galaxy to ensure the Quest for Knowledge thrived and would continue for millennia to come.

One thing that had been easy to recognise when the two Gloriana warships were present at Pavia, of course, was the fact Gloriana wasn't a class at all. It didn't follow any definition of pattern she was aware of, and the *Flamewrought* and the *Eternal Crusader*, save their extraordinary dimensions making them living avatars of the Machine-God, had little in common.

The ancient Salamander flagship was akin to the mighty Salamanders living on Nocturne: large, possessing formidable weapons, and armoured to the point 'normal' Battleships would need days to cause any damage assuming the void shields were brought down. It was a slow and ponderous void leviathan, but once it gained enough momentum, it was unstoppable.

The *Eternal Crusader* was more suited for the description of 'Spear of the Omnissiah'. It was a religious monument – the walls of prayers carved upon its hull supported this – and it was as formidable as the *Flamewrought* in its own way, but a cursory outside examination was sufficient to know the firepower and armour were inferior to the ship improved and cherished by the great Vulkan. Not to say the flagship of the Black Templars had no advantages: it was a simpler design, allowing more shipyards to repair and supply it when the need arose; it had a greater capacity to launch Astartes boarding parties, from boarding torpedoes to starfighters; and it was swifter to execute complicated manoeuvres.

"And then there is the third..." She canted in a complicated binary cipher no one but her aboard the *Athena Database* understood.

When Lady Weaver had chosen her for this important operation, Alena Wismer had been quite flattered. Who wouldn't be when the Chosen of the Omnissiah continued to give her important assignments and brand-new ships to explore little-known regions of space and return lost archeotech to the Mechanicus? She had also felt a slight feeling of...concerned trepidation. The *Flamewrought* had been severely damaged by Traitor's guns and evil artifices, after all.

She had tried to prepare herself, but in this moment, watching the spectacle of ruination and lost technology, it was difficult to do anything beyond mourning.

The armaglass viewport was releasing only minimal light and tight auspex emissions to avoid detection from the hostile xenos fighting less than one light-year away, but a minor Tech-Priest couldn't miss the wreck of the defeated Gloriana.

The void leviathan had been a beautiful ship once, as befitted such a mighty warship. Even after the dreadful fate which had befallen it, enough of the outer hull had survived to admire the sculpted waves and the elegant combinations of artwork its masters had insisted on adding in the long-forgotten decades of the Great Crusade.

It was an ancient beauty, which made the four immense scars which had struck the Gloriana Battleship deeply all the more horrible, which were now visible as terrible, black wounds reflecting nothing but the abyss between the stars.

And as terrible as the devastation created by these injuries had been, they had not given the killing blow. No, the death of the mighty Battleship had come when a xenos weapon had literally *melted* the rear of the warship, engines, rear batteries, and all, despite the multi-layered void shields, the adamantium armour, and the countless other protections supposed to prevent an enemy from exploiting this relative weak point.

"Probability of a C'Tan-powered attack having overwhelmed the defences and destroyed the engines?" Wismer asked.

"Assuming we use the baseline our Necron allies gave us involving their Commorragh performance...over ninety-three percent, Magos."

Omnissiah and Motive Force, this really wasn't good at all.

Alena stayed silent as she studied more of the data arriving in her Noosphere implants before arriving at an unpleasant conclusion.

"They were running," she whispered to the two members of her staff awaiting her commands. "They were carved apart by the Gauss weapons, but they had enough energy and discipline to run."

"I'm not saying you are wrong, Magos...but where are the other ships of the fleet?"

"Closer to the Ymga Monolith," Alena Wismer grimly declared. "They didn't survive long enough to have a chance, but a wounded Gloriana had the defences and the sheer durability to try."

But the null zone forbidding any Warp translation too close to the Ymga Monolith had been the doom of the Emperor's servants. Their void shields had to operate at minimal power to give the engines and the other vital functions the energy they needed, and then the enemy Necron commander had most likely unleashed a C'Tan to foil the escape attempt.

As more data came in, the hololith representation allowing her to examine the damage of the prow found something interesting.

"Stop on 1-42."

It took a second for her command to take effect, but then the scarred letters appeared, and the final piece of evidence she needed was revealed. Elegant letters higher than a manufactorum of good size, several of them dented and horribly mangled, but the name could still be read with difficulty.

*Tsunami*

Loud footsteps were heard behind her, heralding the arrival of Shadowkeeper Baldur Vör, surrounded by four Sisters of Silence.

"Lord Vör, my teams will be ready to begin their landing into the hangar bays within three hours."

"Acceptable. I trust you haven't forgotten the agreement?"

"No, Lord."

Aside from the exploration mission being under one of the highest clearance levels possible, Alena was not authorised to keep anything like gene-seed, Astartes trophies, and banners of past campaigns. Omnissiah be her witness, some things she was forbidden to touch or record!

She could interact with the databases of the *Tsunami* and copy them for extensive analysis, though. Lady Weaver needed to know what the Space Marines of the Great Crusade had died fighting against.

"Do you really think you will be able to tow the Gloriana Battleship out of the null zone?" The black-armoured Custodes asked in his usual unfriendly voice.

"I promised Lady Weaver I would succeed, and thanks to the myriad containment foams and protection foams generously provided by Lady Dragon, I will accomplish it." Alena replied. The Adeptus Mechanicus wasn't going to let a little thing like Necron destruction get in the way of the Quest for Knowledge! "I have the Tech-Priests and the materials to do so. The major issue which will determine the duration of our first emergency repairs is whether we can use the original Gellar Field generator, or whether we will have to install a temporary new one before removing this work of the Omnissiah from the Oblivion Quarantine Zone..."

**Segmentum** **Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Kuiper Belt**

**Starfort *Crown of Isolation***

**0.001.300M35**

**Grand Master Hunter**

If you worked in the Officio Assassinorum, being predictable, no matter how you tried to hide it, was a death sentence.

Thus the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum did his best to be unpredictable.

His true name was only known to three people: the God-Emperor, the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, and a blind trainer of the Vindicare Temple who had not uttered more than five words in the last forty years.

He had no known schedule, and the only known location where he could be found regularly was the room where the High Twelve met – to compensate for this, each time his turn came, he announced his decision for there to be a change of council rooms and moved it to another palace of the Inner Sanctum.

While some expert spies and assassins knew he was originally from the Vindicare Temple, few were aware he had taken steps to attain mastery in sixty-two weapons which were *not* of a gun type, and he didn't include the three dozen absolutely lethal poisons he kept on his person at all times.

Predictability was dangerous, and thus he tried to do his best to mitigate it. The Assassinorum landers, starfighters, and warships which transported him belonged to one Temple or another, or other Adeptuses entirely, but practically never the same group twice. For example, the hull he had chosen for this travel 'officially' belonged to a Chartist Captain of the minor Catania Dynasty. Hunter had done his best to ensure no one knew 'Alfonso Catania' had never existed, not that it would be important for much longer, as in twenty hours, he would exit the craft and never set a foot on the *Long Game of Catania* ever again.

Some might call his precautions baseless paranoia.

The Grand Master begged to differ. Of his last twenty predecessors, only two had died of what could be called 'natural causes': growing too old, they had passed their mantle to their chosen successor and tried to go hunting one of the 'Top 100' targets plaguing the Imperium. The others? Three had died by Custodes, five were eliminated by their own Temple subordinates when other High Lords decided to back a new potential Grand Master more in line with their own interests, and the others had perished countering plots of heretics and more monstrous things waiting in the dark.

As a consequence, Hunter continued to walk the unpredictable path.

He would be the first to acknowledge it wasn't an existence most of humanity would be able to endure for long. He had no wife, no children, or any known descendants. He had no sexual relationships, no attachments, and no ties save his loyalty to the God-Emperor of Mankind, He Who Guides the Astronomican.

When he died, there would be no great funerals, no mourning, and no grand eulogies. At best, he would be ignored and a few individuals would nod silently. At worst, citizens would openly drink and celebrate his demise.

This was fine. One did not become the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum for the accolades and the parties.

Like the Primarch of the First Legion Lion El'Jonson had said, loyalty was its own reward.

Unpredictability remaining key, there was no ceremony and the minimum welcoming committee when he landed on the *Crown of Isolation*, just as he wanted it to be.

"Grand Master!" the warden of the Starfort, an ex-Vindicare Assassin answering to the codename of Wraith-102, greeted him. "You honour me with your presence."

Hunter made a single gesture of the hand, and the attempted flattery ceased.

"Two months, six days, three hours and forty minutes ago, I informed you I had finally convinced the High Twelve to give me the authorisation to deploy an Execution Force in support at Cadia. How fares the selection process?"

"Very well, Grand Master." A hidden staircase, several concealed elevators, and the exigencies of the alpha-class security system were left behind them before the conversation continued.

"Obviously, we were forced to keep the triplets of Project Absurd outside of Sol, per the ancestral protocols."

Images flashed out, revealing three identical bald males, so pale-skinned they might have rivalled the void-born of the Imperium.

"We have solved the...mental stability issues of AC-1, AC-2, and AC-3. They only killed ten percent of the individuals we used as martial instructors. Since we are going to keep them in a new type of cryo-stasis chamber..."

"It will be more than adequate." Hunter approved. These Culexus triplets had cost him enormously to acquire and even more to train; it was out of the question to let something as stupid as questions of collateral damage keep them out of active service. The null aura being multiplied the closer they were to each other amply compensated for their sociopathic and psychopathic behaviour.

Besides, if the Black Crusade tried to storm Cadia, there would be far too many enemies for them to bother with 'allied' guardsmen.

"Callidus?"

"I thought the prime-subject of Project Umbra would be extremely interesting to use," Wraith-102 licked his lips. "But I understand progress has been made to make her more...receptive to orders?"

"Yes. Her Callidus mentor has managed to increase her usefulness." After a totally classified visit in the Holiest Place of the Imperium, but Wraith-102 didn't need to know that. "For the present time, her skills are in high demand elsewhere. Do you have a substitute in mind?"

"I have. Agent Decima in my opinion is the perfect choice."

Ah yes. That insane hyena. If she wasn't so efficient at getting rid of her targets, the Assassinorum would have ejected her into the nearest star a long time ago. Unlike him, her given agent name was a real nickname: nine out of ten people who saw her really met atrocious ends.

"Venenum?"

"The Clade-Primaris is proud to present you Project Joyous Feasting."

Hunter had a stomach of steel, but he nonetheless found the four minutes of recordings which were presented to him very nauseating.

"Organ transplantations and bio-alchemy to make the agent a natural poison to everything surrounding her...impressive."

And quite worrying it was the first time he learned of it. Evidently, he was going to need to reinforce his monitoring of the Venenum Temple.

"Does she have a name?"

"Yes, she is Agent Basilisk."

He needed a lot more questions to understand how far away the Venenum Assassin had to be deployed from the Kars of Cadia, or if she needed to remain in space all the times. The answers were...not exactly what he had predicted.

By contrast, the Vanus Agent selected was non-problematic. Project Accident had already delivered excellent results in the last few decades, and the male Agent named K-1 had completed nineteen successful large-scale missions.

Now it was time for the hard part.

"Has a consensus been reached about Project Nest?"

Predictably, Wraith-102 winced.

"Are you sure, Grand Master? The new recruits have barely completed fifty assassinations between them, and none of them were against especially difficult targets."

"I know. But they represent a critical asset that has never been used against Chaos Marines, including the demon-sorcerers of the Word Bearers."

The last Black Crusades had been humiliating fiascos for the Officio Assassinorum wherever the self-proclaimed 'Dark Apostles' were present. It had gotten so bad that, according to the last notes of the M34 Grand Master of the time, entire generations had been rushed in, in the hope quantity would succeed where quality had failed.

The outcome had been...disastrous.

"A duo then seems the most promising option," his interlocutor reluctantly agreed, "Typhon-Gamma and Falcon Tertius are the agents which have, based on their mission successes, the best chance to survive and reach the primary targets."

These two Vindicare units were most likely going to die, barring a miracle, and both Hunter and Wraith-102 understood it perfectly.

"As for the Eversors, the Temple of the Holy Wrath has at last finished training their new generation of Imperial Assassins. Given their...nihilistic outlook on life and their fierce hatred of the Archenemy, I am confident they will prove to be excellent instruments against the Chaos Marines and their slaves."

"I'm glad to hear it," that Temple was so rigorous in its tests no one in the last few decades had survived its final graduation slaughter, also best described as pitting the aspirant Eversor against an overwhelming military opposition like a Hive filled with heretics or something similar. "How many passed?"

"Six, Grand Master." Hunter smiled. "Hum, how many do you want deployed at the Cadian Gate?"

Hunter took ten good seconds to think about it. Project Absurd would cover their approach, but the leaders of the Chaos Marines would be well-protected, by sorcery and a lot of military assets. On the downside, the Assassinorum's resources weren't infinite...

"Assign four of them to the Execution Force. Let's teach the Traitors that no foe is beyond His reach."

**Holy** **Terra**

**Inner Palace**

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Samson Pitt**

"Do we really need to spend so much in resources and men to fortify the systems behind the Cadian Sector?"

At least, Samson thought with relief, Xerxes Vandire had not greeted the proposal of the Fabricator-General with his usual disdain.

"I would not propose this militarisation plan if my simulations showed the current preparations were sufficient," the metallic voice of the ruler of Mars answered with a hint of irritation.

"You have to admit, my dear Fabricator-General," Chancellor of the Estate Imperium Huang Utrecht intervened, "the question of the Master of the Administratum is legitimate. We have...heavily fortified the Cadian Sector and the nearby systems, I think we can all agree upon this fact?"

Eleven heads nodded, some more reluctantly than the others. By now, calling the Cadian System 'fortified' was like calling Terra a Hive World. It was technically true, but didn't give it any justice. Assuming the reports on the table were correct, there were billions of guardsmen in the Cadian System, supported by at least four thousand Space Marines of the Astartes Praeses, several Battle-Maniples of six Titans Legios, many lances of Knights, and millions of Skitarii, not to mention two full Cadian Battlefleets and several heavy squadrons of the Solar reserves.

The neighbouring system of Agripinaa was possibly equally fortified, as the Forge Worlds of Obscurus and beyond had answered the demands of help of the Agripinaa Fabricator with a shocking celerity, and the new naval base of Belis Corona was a redoubt able to shrug off the assault of multiple Battlefleets while also harbouring an Inquisitorial presence which fluctuated between massive and incalculable.

Dozens of other critical systems, like the Boros Gate and Hydra Cordatus, had also been massively reinforced and received new citadels and anti-starship batteries, not to mention priceless war supplies. It was, in many ways, one of the greatest logistical successes of the Chartist Fleets and the Imperial Navy in terms of transporting men, food, equipment, fuel, and ammunition to the Cadian Gate, and it was only made possible thanks to the near-annihilation xenos pirates and outlaws had received in recent years.

"I understand the point about covering all our bases and make certain there are no weak points in the defensive system we voted for, sincerely I do, but is all of this absolutely necessary?"

Lord High Admiral Rabadash y Byng el Calormen cleared his throat.

"To be blunt, Chancellor? Yes. The increase of the defences of the Pius Line is necessary. So are the shifting of the Starforts on the four Obscurus-Solar lines. I agree completely with Cadian High Command and the conclusions of the Lord Admirals present in the theatres of operations. The heretics will have two options if they decide to challenge us again: besiege the planets of the Cadian Gate one by one in an attempt to grind our ground and space assets to dust, or send sacrificial forces against Agripinaa and Cadia in an attempt to stalemate us while they strike the logistical nodes behind them like the Despoiler did during his M34 campaign."

"Nonetheless, this seems a bit...excessive." Xerxes Vandire chose his words with care.

"All the scrying, Tarot readings, and divination predictions done under the Light of the Astronomican confirm a Crusade-level assault is imminent," the Mistress of the Astronomican affirmed. "Due to the foul sorceries employed by the Archenemy, we can't precisely determine the exact date, but it will be sometime between this year and two decades from now. And while the Despoiler is rumoured to stay out of the game for this one, the forces arrayed against us will be stronger and viler than ever before."

For many seconds, the High Twelve stayed silent. When silence was broken, it was the Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites who spoke.

"Then we will of course approve the fortification and the reinforcement of these important systems and trade lanes." Tudor Brezhnev told his peers, and no one voiced an objection. "But...with all due respect to your analysts, Lord Admiral, I'm not sure if it is possible to push for the same effort of 'layered defences' in Segmentum Obscurus. It is a far larger space theatre, and while we have more Battlefleets available, there aren't hundreds of them in surplus. Unless we cancel many operations in Ultima Segmentum or increase the tithes for Solar, the resources, regiments, and logistics simply aren't there."

"Many operations prepared in the eastern Segmentum are critical," Aliénor Gutenberg commented neutrally. "Besides, simple logistics would make a transfer of assets and resources from the Eastern Fringe theatres to western Obscurus quite costly in time and hull availability."

"Indeed," the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial navy consulted several vellum papers before shaking his head. "But unless you give me permission to withdraw one or two Battlefleets from the Core Solar Worlds..."

"Not happening," Gandhi Brobantis instantly shut down the proposal.

"Well, I am going to have to make some hard choices." The blue-dressed High Lord shrugged, showing no sign of surprise at the answer. "Cypra Mundi, Mordian, Vostroya, and a few dozen other critical chokepoints are going to get the best naval commanders and squadrons. I will prepare third-line squadrons for eastern Obscurus just in case, but they will be by their very nature dispersed and will need time to consolidate."

"It would be quite...careless of the heretics to venture so far out of the Eye of Terror," Inquisitor Berlin Chimera pointed out.

Rabadash shrugged again, silent reply meaning 'you know better than me there'.

There were three more hours of discussion following this relatively cordial exchange of views, but every person in the room knew the decisions directing the course of the next several years had been – at least in part – taken here and now.

"We are in agreement, then?" the Arch-Cardinal Terran asked for the sake of formality.

"We are." The Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica replied for the eleven other High Lords.

**Outer Palace**

**Petitioner's City**

**Solar Guardian Nicephorus Vandire**

Nicephorus had a headache...again. He doubted any reasonable person could blame him for it, honestly.

"And how," the ageing high-ranked Adept inquired whimsically, "are we going to pay for all of this?"

The 'we' was Clan Vandire, of course. The 'all of this' was a true mountain of vellum burying several desks under their sheer mass.

And his question, in his opinion, was perfectly reasonable.

His niece Abagnale looked distinctly ill-at-ease, though only a person who knew her very well would have noticed the little signs of disquiet.

"An exceptional mining tax has been created for the Brisbane-Ayers Sector."

Nicephorus blinked.

"Wasn't that scheme already tried thirty years ago?"

Given the emotion seen in her eyes, the Magistrate had obviously hoped he wouldn't remember that.

"Yes," the admission was not one uttered with grace. "It really will be an exceptional and temporary tax this time."

Nicephorus felt the urge to shout or make some ironic comment about how the inhabitants of the dozens of Mining Worlds of said Sector were unlikely to be throwing themselves at their feet and thanking them for this. If his records were accurate – and he was reasonably sure they were – everyone on the planets sworn to the Lord of Brisbane-Ayers were paying more exceptional taxes than they were Administratum tithes, and the latter was not a light taxation by any means.

"I know it isn't your idea, Abagnale," his niece thanked him silently for it, "and I know you're the messenger bearing the unpleasant news, but I have to say it: the tax-and-tithe pressure is getting out of control. There's only so much blood and resources we can force a Sector to spit out before...unpleasant things start happening."

It wasn't only their Brisbane-Ayers dominion where the fiscal vice was squeezing their citizens to the maximum. Their other holdings, their main holdings he should say, in the Zion and Yucatan Sectors were not exactly tithe-paradises either.

"The plebeians are kept indoctrinated and loyal."

Nicephorus didn't ask for how long. He had made his views clear to his brother, and the answer had been...unsatisfactory.

"Whether the plebeians are kept quiescent at this point doesn't matter," the Solar Guardian pointed out emotionlessly. "The Sector's economy is slowing down. No new Cartel has invested resources in the mining assets we have on the worlds of Brisbane-Ayers. The Chartist Captains are choosing new destinations where the 'exceptional taxes' are less likely to hurt their profit margins."

He didn't mention the Adeptus Mechanicus; after the recent political affairs, the Fabricator-General of Mars had taken the stance of ignoring his brother as often as he could get away with, and to oppose his moves the rest of the time. The number of Tech-Priests on Vandire worlds, as a consequence, was slowly but surely dwindling.

"We can't continue like this," Nicephorus told Abagnale in a quiet but determined voice. "We have to reduce our taxes before the cycle is too viciously locked that there is no escaping it, and to begin this, we need to reduce our expenses."

"They are necessary for the prestige of Clan Vandire," the objection came, as predictable as the sunrise.

Nicephorus grunted and seized a random vellum parchment from top of the piles.

"One hundred million Ducats to buy the allegiance of several Guard officers of the Bristol Conglomerate doesn't really sound 'necessary' to me," Nicephorus remarked before the content of the text really registered in his mind. "Wait a minute..."

And sure enough, the next ten demands for more bribes and euphemistically described 'services rendered to loyal servants' were from powerfully-connected men and women sending their younger generation into the privileged positions existing all across the Throneworld and the System beyond.

"What is Xerxes thinking trying to suborn so many officers of the Astra Militarum?"

"Err...insurance against Lord Commander Militant Oberstein?"

"In that case," Nicephorus noted acidly as he opened another parchment and discovered a new list of names, "maybe he should try paying the *competent* officers of the Guard..."

**Nexus Axiomatic**

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

The Nexus Axiomatic, as everyone of sufficient knowledge on the Throneworld was aware, was the headquarters of the Merchant Fleets of the Imperium, the seat of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains, and a massive fortress in its own right.

It was a fine place to avoid the oppressing crowds of Holy Terra, in Marianne's opinion. Mainz, Solingen, Nyx, and Krieg weren't lightly populated worlds, but compared to the Great Hive Worlds of Segmentum Solar, there just couldn’t compete. None of these Hive centres could hold a candle compared to Sol and the overcrowded Throneworld.

"At last, some peace and quiet," the Heiress of the Gutenberg Fleet told her mother.

"I didn't know you were trying to avoid the attention of your peers."

Marianne smirked.

"Maybe staying away from Holy Terra for so long gave me new perspectives on politics and the crowds practising them," which wasn't exactly a lie, truly. "I trust the vote went well?"

Her status of envoy and being her mother's daughter guaranteed her a seat at the table, but there was such a thing as arrogance and overbearing behaviour. Plus she had to organise the sales of the extremely valuable goods brought back from the Nyx Sector, oversee the unloading of Bacta, ensure the Administratum assassins were correctly punished for their incompetent attempts, and so on.

"Seventy-nine percent of the Two Thousand approved your work without reservation." Aliénor Gutenberg revealed with plenty of approval in her voice.

In the trade-heart of the Imperium where commercial interests clashed regularly, it was practically a near-unanimous vote. The construction programs in the Jovian shipyards had been the topic of the major vote last year, as Marianne knew from priority Astropathic communications, and it had passed with fifty-three percent of the vote.

"And on your part?"

"I sold a dress for fifty billion Mainz Ducats."

It was rare to see her mother even slightly surprised; today she had definitely achieved it.

"That seems...a bit much, for a dress."

"Green spider silk, decorated with Gold and Argentamite, plus several Salamandrite gemstones of Nocturne no one is able to find in the market right now." The blonde-haired mistress of the *White Ducat* enumerated. "Plus of course the minor revelation it was weaved by a Living Saint."

The spider silk was already an extreme rarity. People appreciated its properties, but convincing arachnids to weave cloth for you had always been thought to be an extremely difficult endeavour, psykers or no psykers.

"I see. And what did you pay for it in the first place?"

"Oh, just fifty billion Nyxian Throne Gelts," which despite the Basileia's impressive efforts to make it a reputable Quadrant-renowned currency, was still vastly inferior to the Gutenberg-backed Ducat.

In non-specialist terms: she had just made billions of Ducats in profit...on a single dress. It went without saying that the ongoing Bacta sales were *more* profitable.

"You've certainly proven worthy of the trust I placed in you, daughter," Marianne didn't preen under the praise, but deep inside, she knew she would cherish and remember this moment.

"Thank you, mother."

"Obviously, we need to remain humble and careful. Every day many Chartist Captains and Fleets fail to recognise the sin of overconfidence is controlling them, with predictable consequences down the line. I acted decisively to send you to Nyx, but others are sending more agents and representatives into Ultima Segmentum as we speak. Talleyrand, Fei, and Robinson, to name only a few, have been very busy, and I assume your profits will only increase their focus on the Samarkand Quadrant."

Marianne knew where this was going. Better to speak first.

"I know we have to...keep ourselves in the Living Saint’s good graces, mother. I have already been exploring several avenues. One of them is Beth."

"I was unaware Her Celestial Highness’ holy abilities extended to Mainz Cats."

"They don't," Marianne confirmed, "but for some reason I have failed to elucidate, Beth was afraid of Space Marines and yet dearly enjoyed the caresses of Lady Weaver."

Which was strange, to say the least. Staying optimistic, the Living Saint was at least ten times more dangerous than her 'Dawnbreaker Guard' fully mustered.

"I was thinking about offering her a small colony of Mainz Cats on my next trip," Beth wasn't for sale, obviously; there were a lot of things Marianne was ready to sell to have the favour of a Chosen of the God-Emperor, but her furry white companion wasn't included in the considerable list.

"It's a start," her mother conceded. Marianne heard the non-said 'but' hidden underneath, of course.

Yes, it would have been even better if she had been invited into the celestial bed. But there was audacity, and there was stupidity, and trying to involve herself when the two women ruling the Nyx Sector were enjoying their relationship before the next war definitely belonged into the latter category...

"Since the Blood Angels' Successors present in the Nyx Sector are working on a lot of artistic resources to transform them into priceless artwork, another idea I had..."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Azkaellon Stadium**

**3.933.300M35**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

"Isn't this obstacle course a bit...too easy?"

Agiel raised an eyebrow at Dupleix's remark.

"They have to complete it three times in less than one hour, cousin. And we don't rebuild the bridges once they collapse over the sea of foam, so our courageous aspirants will have to jump into the fosse, and climb back up with nothing but the strength of their arms and force of will. Pierre is also waiting for them with paint-guns before the finish line."

For a battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes, it was really, really easy – except the Pierre part. For young boys – and girls, since the Sororitas selected their candidates at the same time – it was half-torture and half-punishment. His Master of Scouts had wanted to use crude soap on the climbing wall to make things even more slippery – pun absolutely intended – but Agiel had vetoed that. They wanted to make this selection hard and fair, not eliminate every aspirant...not in the first trial anyway.

"You know what I mean," the Chapter Master of the Iron Drakes told him. "All your obstacles are completely non-lethal."

"Yes, of course," Agiel answered with a vigorous nod. "We are conducting this selection process in front of a hundred thousand spectators, and Lady Weaver would have my head if I gave her Nyxians a taste of 'blood sport'. Even if I wanted to disregard her suggestions and go ahead with more unforgiving trials, I am not quite convinced that aspirants dying throughout the selection process is useful. Even Kratos agrees. We don't take a failed aspirant into our ranks, and there is no second chance. But failure to reach the standards we expect from a worthy candidate doesn't mean the boy can't live and die for the Emperor on other battlefields."

The Planetary Defence Force had expanded over and over, and the percentage of men it gave to the Imperial Guard was not small. The Tempestus Scions and Inquisitorial retinues were other possible options, although these paths opened more to those who failed in the final stages of the Astartes trials. The Arbites opened doors to physically healthy men and women thriving to enforce the justice of the Master of Mankind. And the Mechanicus accepted you with physical disabilities, provided you had the tech-spirit to worship the Machine-God and accept all the blessings of the Motive Force – which naturally included augmetic parts.

"Hum," was the laconic answer of the Iron Drake.

"What do you think about our new stadium?" Agiel asked, deciding not to push his equal onto more problematic grounds.

"I'm thinking I want to order one for my Chapter," Dupleix chuckled. "Giant stadium, swimming pools, mock battlefields with servitors of all sizes and adaptable difficulty, grounds adaptable via pre-set Noosphere templates, hundreds of possible obstacle courses, easily reconfigurable sport terrains...you really neglected nothing."

"Lady Weaver was generous enough to accept my...expensive requests." The Brother of the Red's Chapter Master acknowledged. All it had cost him was the deployment of half a Company in the Suebi Sub-Sector, which admittedly had been an excellent training exercise. "Resources or not, we would have had to move away from Hive Athena and search for a new location eventually."

"Too many candidates?"

"It's one of the reasons," and the one easiest to recognise, since the lines of aspirants conveyed from the train station to the stadium weren't exactly subtle. "It's true the selections are getting more and more popular, and with the new Nyxian generation having tens of millions of possible recruits, we needed a bigger stadium than the improvised facilities we've used so far. But the main one, by our reckoning, was the necessity to renew and increase numbers and difficulty for the challenges now that our Chapter has nearly recovered."

"Ah yes, you have what, seven companies at full strength?"

"And a eighth will be ready within five months, if there are no delays in our schedule."

These eight companies, in many aspects, were far more dangerous than their gene-predecessors had been at the beginning of the Penitent Crusade. What they lacked in battle-experience, they compensated with absolute determination, excellent brotherhood, and not suffering from the mental issues associated with the Black Rage. The available equipment was superior too: Land Raiders were rarely built in the Nyx Sector, but there was a profusion of Predators and Rhinos pouring from the production lines of the *Angel's Brotherhood* and *Terra Cimmeria*.

These Battle Companies had much larger effectives, incidentally, since Apothecaries and Techmarines were finishing their training cycles and returning to Nyx every year now.

"If the timetable for Operation Stalingrad is respected, the Chapter will have completely recovered by 310M35."

Not that Agiel Izaz intended to field said ten companies against the Ymga Monolith. He had learned the lessons of the Penitent Crusade about not having a reserve of battle-brothers ready to replenish the losses.

"And the reason why the Basileia insisted on building the stadium on the Lyssa Hive-Continent?"

"That, I'm afraid, has more to do with the politics of the Hive World..."

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Suebi Nebula**

**Nerushlatset Space**

**Crownworld Amarnekh**

**8.007.301M35**

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

Neferten had to give it to Szarekh: the idea of disguising an important artefact containing the instructions to bypass or modify the Nerushlatset decerebrating protocols as a Gloom Prism was somewhat brilliant. These pieces of equipment were carried by the thousands by Canoptek constructs to protect Necron warriors from the ravages of Empyreal horrors, and who would be observant enough to notice one of them was not working as intended?

It was extremely elegant, and a stratagem no Necron noble could counter, since the Necrontyr race had abandoned all possibility of mastering psychic powers when they became the Necrons.

But Neferten had used humans, not Necrons, to recover the 'Prism of Protocols', and some of them had been psychically gifted, according to the short report having accompanied the artefact to Delphimonia.

And being suddenly made aware of the thousands of contingency plans Szarekh had to brainwash her and her Dynasty, the Phaerakh-Cryptek felt a violent urge to gut as many Szarekhan nobles as she could.

"I swear to respect the traditions and rights of the great and minor Dynasties," the ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty sarcastically repeated one of the famous oaths made by Szarekh an eternity ago.

"The Silent King appeared to have a...very interesting interpretation of what constitutes as respect." Sitkah noted diplomatically. Neferten was not so keen to be as respectful as her subordinate, however.

"I'm beginning to wonder if we shouldn't have found another name for Mephet'ran, because it is clear the C'Tan wasn't the only Deceiver!"

Sitkah bowed.

"I'm not...totally convinced the Silent King is *that* bad."

"Maybe not," the Phaerakh agreed after pondering the matter extensively, "but it's more because the Deceiver C'Tan is an inveterate schemer, manipulator, liar, and backstabber without peer. Not because Szarekh's actions can be considered *good*."

The mistress of the Crownworld seethed before erasing two more protocols which would have forced her to kneel to the loathed Praetorians of the Triarch for all eternity.

"The worst part isn't discovering that the tyrant had capture- and kill-protocols to deal with us at his leisure. The problem I have is that this is just the first artefact recovered by the humans, and there are already five times more protocols than we expected to find in total, not in just one artefact!"

"I agree it is...very concerning," the Destruction-Overlord acquiesced. "So is the fact Szarekhan Crypteks deliberately stole some of our own security measures and gave them to the Hyrekh in order to increase the odds of the Nerushlatset Dynasty being unable to pierce their defences in a single assault."

If they had still been flesh-and-blood, the two female Necrons would have had scowls on their faces.

"At least this discovery was mitigated by the confirmation the humans have extremely inventive and destructive teams to send against the Tomb Worlds we want destroyed."

"Yes, our alliance continues to be extremely advantageous for both sides."

Which was one of the reasons why you made an alliance to begin with, it went without saying. The victory had not yet been announced, but there was no doubt her court of Crypteks was going to be jubilant at the news: decerebrating protocols were deleted, and the Hyrekh, a dynasty they had always found repugnant and arrogant in the extreme, had lost a world.

Her popularity would increase, and her recent decisions would appear all the more reasonable, something necessary as she always preferred to lead by acclamation, not through a necrodermis fist.

"You have analysed the visual records on how the humans lacerated the defences of Orrak?"

"I have, and I found the results...disquieting, Mighty Phaerakh."

"You do?"

Now Neferten was intrigued. Since the humans had arrived with at least a general idea of what they were going to face, victory was not that surprising. Weaver had been very tight-lipped on the 'Deathwatch' she hired to fulfil her part of the deal, but it didn't take much imagination to conclude these Space Marines had to be the anti-alien elite of the genetically-modified humans, given the best weapons and equipment available and thrown into battles where the regular troops had no chance of survival.

Since two hundred of the 'Deathwatch Marines' had carved a path through a million Necron warriors and managed to destroy the core of the complex, the Phaerakh-Cryptek felt the humans' trust in these warriors was not misplaced at all.

"Not by the humans' performance," Sitkah added quickly. "The Space Marines who fought at Orrak were notably superior to the most experienced warriors we recorded at Commorragh. No, what I was unpleasantly surprised about was how bad the Great Sleep hurt the Hyrekh. I am ready to accept Orrak was not their Crownworld, and as such did not receive the attention of their best Crypteks, but it was among their five most important Coreworlds, and the damage inflicted by the aeons appeared to be...significant."

The Great Sleep had cost the Necrons their dominance of the galaxy and had been one of the greatest mistakes of Szarekh, which, given his past record on governance, was saying something.

It was a folly beyond measure...and Neferten was going to think about other things before she grew infuriated yet again.

"They didn't take the contingency and back-up measures we did." She pointed out calmly. Given that several of these measures she had invented herself and the most innovative of all would have seen her murdered by the enforcers of the Silent King, it wasn't totally unexpected...especially as no one save perhaps this folly's architect had thought the Great Sleep would last millions of Necron years.

"Yes, Mighty Phaerakh, but the Flayer Curse hit Orrak badly, far worse than my most pessimistic projections. And there were far too many Destroyers deployed against the humans."

"Really?" if so, that was really bad news. The 'last present' of the dying Flayer was bad enough, but at least you knew it was a C'Tan death curse. The Destroyers were what happened when you let your troops wallow in despair and nihilism for an eternity of carnage: broken Necrontyrs who desired nothing else but annihilating everything living.

"Meta-analysing on the human reports and our own knowledge of awakening protocols, it is possible that five percent of the Orrak crypts were contaminated. An additional seven percent were Destroyers or nihilists awaiting conversion into Destroyer bodies."

"What a disaster...for the Hyrekh."

"We won't receive a lot from the human victory, my Phaerakh," Sitkah remarked. "The Command Intelligence of Orrak had the time to activate the complex's self-destructing protocols. Most of the structure has collapsed into the planetary crust."

"The phalanxes would have been useful for our purposes," Neferten admitted. "But recovering the Prism of Protocols was the only objective passed to the humans, and we have recently found other crippled Coreworlds to reinforce us, courtesy of Trazyn. Other concerns?"

"Yes." The Destruction-Overlord confirmed in a brutal and honest manner. "I think that for the first time in millions of years, we may need to expand our arsenal, especially now that the humans have proved so adept at reverse-engineering anti-teleportation jammers for their own purposes. We aren't fighting the War in Heaven under the genius leadership of the Silent King," who knew her subordinate could be as sarcastic as Neferten herself when she wanted, "and the reasons invoked to not adapt, like the celerity of the Aeldari, are swiftly growing less and less relevant. New conflicts are on the horizon, and vehicles like tanks are good sense compared to our ponderous Monoliths."

"Tanks?" It wasn't something she had ever expected her Overlords to request personally.

"Fast armoured armour-killers hovering a few metres above ground," her subordinate amended. "Our technology is far more advanced than that of the humans; we can and will be able to produce creations which will be far more capable than theirs. It will give us a larger range of tactics as enemies like the Aeldari will be far less able to harry our flanks with hit-and-run attacks."

"You are correct," the Phaerakh-Cryptek recognised after remembering some lost battles of the War in Heaven. "The Aeldari arsenal is no more at least, and we have to adapt to the new opponents we will find on the battlefield, not bask in our past glory."

Some Phaerons and Phaerakhs would absolutely refuse to share this point of view, but Neferten had no intention of partaking in this collective idiocy. If the Aeldari, inheritors of the Old Ones' creations, could fall from grace and be humiliated by a race which had not been created during the War in Heaven, failing to evolve your troops and equipment was likely the first step on a road leading to extinction.

And as the ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty, this was completely unacceptable.

If only because she loved mocking the long-ears and their titanic arrogance, and it would be quite a shame to stop because they were brought as low as them.

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**97th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**VORRJUK KRAAL**

'**APOSTLE OF BETRAYAL'**

**SORCERER-HERETEK**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS INSISTS THE MONSTER IS TO BE BURNED IN BLESSED PROMETHIUM TWELVE TIMES BEFORE FINAL DEATH**

**REWARD: 12 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PLANET, ETC...**

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Maelstrom War Zone**

**Sarum System**

**Battle-Barge *Divine Inspiration***

**7.612.301M35**

**Dark Apostle Vorrjuk Kraal**

"From the fires of Betrayal unto the blade of vengeance we bring the name of Lorgar, the Bearer of the Word, the favoured son of Chaos, all praise be given to him. From those that would not heed we offer praise to those who do, that they might turn their gaze our way and gift us with the Boon of Pain, to turn the galaxy red with the blood, and feed the hunger of the Gods."

Vorrjuk Kraal finished his prayer, a particularly important one in the three hundred and forty-first *Book of Epistles* written by their Blessed Primarch, and opened his eyes anew, his faith burning with passion once more.

Then he returned to the bridge of the *Divine Inspiration*.

"Have there been any changes, Coryphaus?"

"None, Lord Apostle," the other Word Bearer replied after the holy courtesies and prayers were completed. "The defeat of the space assets of Sarum appears to have been as total as the first reports suggested."

The Astartes who had once been the spiritual adviser to the Legio Vulpa before being their corruptor scowled.

"And our chances to run through the blockade established by the dogs of the False Emperor?"

"They are...slim, Lord Apostle."

Vorrjuk Kraal wanted to strangle someone, but his Coryphaus would make a poor victim to be sacrificed to satiate his rage. It was not the warrior's fault the Apostles of Ghalmek were so uncooperative. It wasn't his fault the Light of the False Emperor had pushed the expansion of the Maelstrom back, to the point where Sarum no longer lied in the outer zone of the Warp Storm.

No, the main culprits were these bickering idiots of Ghalmek. Thanks to them, he had barely been able to gather eight serviceable ships in the time it normally took to assemble a fleet.

And as it was incredibly clear by now on the red union of Neverborn and machine serving as his hololithic table, the slaves of the False Emperor wasted little time exploiting the opportunities created by the Fall of Commorragh.

"Could we not simply wipe them out?" He asked formally, because it would be galling to withdraw before a single shot was fired.

"Lord Apostle, the fools worshipping the Machine-God are deluding themselves if they think they can triumph against the Gods, but they aren't completely stupid," the Coryphaus pointed to the largest formation in high orbit around Sarum. "This is the main fleet: twelve Battleships, two Arks Mechanicus, and about forty-eight Cruisers. They have deployed their escorts in a Gamma-Two formation, which means we won't be able to surprise them unless we resort to very unorthodox manoeuvres, like translating out of the Warp right above the planet."

The Word Bearer officer didn't need to explain to Vorrjuk how suicidal such a course of action would be. Maybe if the Maelstrom had been pouring its blessed energies into the Sarum System, it would have been feasible. But it wasn't, and the gravity well of the planet would likely tear them apart.

"We can't fight this formation, we do not have the firepower. Nor can we go straight for the throat of the White Scars and their allies. They have five Battle-Barges and five Strike Cruisers against our eight ships, and only one of ours is a Battle-Barge. I think our warriors would have the upper hand in a boarding melee, but we are so outnumbered it is unlikely we will be able to significantly bleed them, even with your might."

As satisfying as it was to have his subordinate praise him, Vorrjuk wished these imbeciles of Kor Phaeron and Erebus didn't spend their time convincing everyone Dark Apostles were demi-gods of daemonancy or some other nonsense. It gave you satisfying obedience at first, but when Space Marines realised you couldn't reverse a disaster through your mere presence...

"The third formation?"

"The so-called Imperial Navy, mostly Cruisers and lighter ships. They won't try to fight us up close, but they cannot be disregarded, and given how fast the White Scars' ships always are, we might not have the time to deal with them before the sons of the Khan attack our rear."

Vorrjuk seized a servant and transformed it into red and black pulp before he was able to calm himself.

"Suggestions?"

"I would prefer to wait for further reinforcements from Ghalmek, Lord Apostle." The problem with that, and his Coryphaus knew it, was that without Vorrjuk Kraal's constant monitoring, there was no guarantee the Apostles of the Maelstrom were spending their time mustering warships and Astartes. They were more likely bickering amongst themselves.

"If we wait, Sarum will only be a pile of ashes in a few more days." The data transmitted from the Sarum Hell-Forges was clear: the fools worshipping the non-existent Machine-God were not interested in conquest – which, given how many millennia Sarum had enjoyed the benefits of the Gods, was not unwise of them. They were here for a mission of annihilation, and so far it had worked out for them.

Every major industrial asset which had not been protected by a void shield or one of its Mechanicum daemonic variants had been devastated by orbital strikes days ago. And now the Legio Crucius, the self-proclaimed 'Warmongers', was unleashed in full strength upon the surviving Hell-Forges.

Given that Sarum had few Astartes warriors and no Titans or Ordinatus to oppose them anymore, one didn't need to be a Primarch to understand the situation was desperate on the ground.

"Permission to speak bluntly, Lord Apostle?"

"Granted."

"As it stands, only a major counteroffensive can save Sarum, my Lord. And it would need to be a very impressive counteroffensive involving dozens of capital ships, with preferably enough Battleships to have parity with the Mechanicus and the Astartes, since the White Scars can choose the pace of the engagement with their mobility advantage. We urgently need a new model of Heldrakes to deploy against the Khan's spawn, since it is obvious *someone* has given them Astartes- and Skitarii-crewed 'Dragon Armours'."

"Weaver." Vorrjuk Kraal spat, pulverising the head of one Possessed servitor without looking at it. "It's always Weaver. That False Saint is meddling in things wherever our Hosts go."

"Most likely it's her, yes," the other Word Bearer agreed. "She hasn't given them only these 'Quetcoat' draconic flyers, though. The White Scars have a very high number of jetbikes and fast-moving vehicles for this operation, and the slave-mortals they deployed upon Sarum have a lot of artillery and tanks."

Vorrjuk Kraal promised himself to curse that bastard daughter of the False Emperor ten thousand times before his next prayer-watch.

"I don't think any Hell-Lord can break through the blockade, not with all of Sarum's warships destroyed or scattered. I'm afraid that unless the Gods give us the forces to retake Sarum now, there is nothing we can do to save it."

The Dark Apostle gritted his teeth, but accepted the Coryphaus' judgement. Ghalmek had not provided them enough assets to save Sarum, and their Primarch would be informed of their perfidy.

And he wasn't going to open a portal to one of Sarum's Hell-Forges, not when Titans rampaged on the surface.

"Damn you, Weaver." There would be retribution for this; this he swore on his name and the soul of the Seventeenth Legion. "Your suggestions are correct, Coryphaus. Prepare to change course for a rapid translation to Ghalmek. And establish a communication to Hell-Lord Assyrian Barthelme. After all," Vorrjuk smiled, though he felt absolutely no joy, "since we're abandoning him to the nonexistent mercy of his enemies, I might as well give him the bad news myself."

In the short term, the loss of Sarum and the small Mechanicum Empire it had ruled was going to be...inconvenient. Over the next several years, it promised to be worse. The armament production for the Black Crusade would be limited to Ghalmek and the few other worlds the Seventeenth Legion controlled in the Maelstrom, and to say the Apostles of the region weren't efficient was the understatement of the Age...

"YOU WANT TO DO WHAT?"

"Ah, Hell-Lord Barthelme," Vorrjuk turned back his attention to the horrible creature whose representation appeared in reddish light on his bridge. "I'm afraid there have been...issues with the defence pact-"

The Hell-Lord hollered a long litany of curses, and Vorrjuk cut the communication seconds after.

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nephilim Sector**

**Lomorr System**

**8.799.301M35**

**Grand Cruiser *Research of Lost Civilisations***

**Leet**

"I'm just saying," Leet tried to keep his voice unironic and nonconfrontational, "we were supposed to travel to the galactic core where we might find the last strongholds of Borek's people. This," he pointed a finger in direction of the green-blue orb orbiting a red sun, "is far, far from the galactic core or any of the Sectors near it."

This time no one could rightfully accuse him of screwing up. It was not his fault. Well, it was never his fault, but this time even less so. He was ready to swear it on his brand-new hololithic sci-fi games!

"I agree with the manling," Borek grunted. "I'm not in a hurry, but I want to find my people. We won't find them here, Navigator. And by the beard of Grimnir, where is 'here', exactly?"

The Navigator of the *Research of the Lost Civilisations* appeared to splutter in rage.

"I already told you, abhuman. We are still in Ultima Segmentum. This is the Lomorr System of the Nephilim Sector."

"I'm sure it will please the Omnissiah and its servants for us to have left the Warp without damage," one of the red-cloaked cyborgs intervened. "But why did we take such a detour? We must have already missed the main Warp trail leading to Chogoris, and if we continue for a few more hundred light-years, we will have left Nocturne behind us too!"

"My third eye revealed to me a new pattern in the illumination of the Astronomican. The Holy Light of the God-Emperor was guiding me here!"

Everyone, Leet was rather confident, greeted this revelation rather sceptically.

"You could have just told us you were lost and wanted to leave the Warp to reorient yourself, three-eyed seerling," the Slayer struck his fist against his muscular chest, marking his limited amusement with this move and a chuckle or two. "No one would have judged you too harshly."

"I did not lose my path! I expect apologies!"

Wonderful. Just wonderful. Their Navigator either abandoned his mission at the first sign of mysterious codes sent by the biggest psychic beacon in the galaxy, or he was an incompetent. The Tinker didn't know which option was the most problematic for their mission.

"Could he be right?" Leet whispered to the cogboys on his left. "Is it possible there's something valuable in the Lomorr System?"

"This Sector has valuable systems, rich in rare ore of particular interest to the Adeptus Mechanicus, and alas too often cut off from exploration by cosmic phenomena of extreme severity," one Tech-Priest answered, "but our cogitator simulations assess the likelihood of such an outcome is below one percent. Lomorr has only two planets, the first has no atmosphere, and the second is a Feudal World where the Imperium has only opened limited mining sites. If there wasn't an Administratum tithe-fleet in orbit of it, there would be no space assets to greet us."

The male parahuman had to admit it wasn't exactly promising. A Feudal World was a nice classification for 'the Imperium doesn't have the money or resources to develop this world, and since you have lost all advanced technology, tough luck mates, we will deal with you in a few centuries'.

"Yeah, nothing really interesting to find unless you want to experience medieval life for yourself," and Leet didn't; it was best to play *Medieval Total War* as a video game and in a well-lit room with good electricity. Real life was always dirtier and less comfortable, especially when you lived in the dictatorship of the Imperium of Mankind.

"We are receiving a communication from Lomorr Secundus!"

"It took them time to notice us..."Borek grumbled. "Sloppy parchment-eaters."

"Correction, it comes from a ship near the Administratum flotilla. Communication will be established in...what by the Omnissiah?"

The three-dimensional lithocast system switched on without anybody having activated it, revealing the image of a woman.

She was, Leet had to admit, absolutely worthy of being called a beauty.

"I apologise for the unconventional method of communication," the gorgeous female said in a voice which was like a choir of angels had decided to speak all at once. "But I am Lieutenant Sarah of the *Spirit of Eternity*, and I need your help."

**Lomorr Secundus**

**Commodore Yang Wen-li**

His wife had always told him one day that putting the minimum of effort in physical exercise and weapon training he always did – which was to say, none at all – was going to come back to bite him in the ass one day.

Yang had not expected she would be proven right because he was manhandled and arrested by a mob of sword-carrying humans, though.

Coughing blood, the commanding officer of the *Spirit of Eternity* wondered what the hell had happened to humanity since M24 for it to accept such barbarity and narrow-minded views on a planet like the one they had landed upon.

It was likely it was going to stay a mystery for the last moments of his life, unfortunately. A pity for the historian he had always been, but then the rational part of his brain was wondering if he truly wanted to know what had happened to the world he was born on what felt an eternity ago.

"THESE MEN ARE HERETICS! THEY BLASPHEMED AGAINST THE HOLY RULE OF THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

The man who was carried by chained men and women was really the symbol of everything that was wrong with this damnable world and era. Setting aside the reality that this golden throne was certainly worth a lot of money given how many gems and precious metals had been used to build it, he had a nose which could have passed as the snout of a pig of Old Earth. His clothes were like those parodies of togas worn by the actors playing in holo-comedies of the M0-M1 period.

"BUT HIS MOST HOLY MAJESTY IS MERCIFUL! THESE MEN WHO PRETENDED THEY CAME TO SAVE US WILL BE GIVEN A CHANCE TO ATTONE!"

Yang felt a slim hope blossom within his heart...which died nearly instantly as an evil-looking whip slashed his legs, and one of his torturers pushed one of his crewmates into a cage above a pit of flames.

"Give my master the codes of your ship, or every member of your crew dies." One of the executioners snarled. Yang managed to find enough strength within him to spit in his face. He paid for it immediately, but it felt incredibly satisfying.

"Little bit of advice, friend." The Federation Commodore mocked the brute. "If you want to play the good guy, don't kill my friends in front of me. It kind of ruins everything."

"Do you think it will matter in the end?" The torturer-butcher smiled, and his breath was so fetid Yang almost had a stroke smelling it. "Once you are dead, your ship will have no choice but to accept us as its new master!"

Yang laughed. It was too funny.

"How many times do I have to repeat it to you, idiot? The moment all of my crew is dead, you will have removed every limitation on the AI of my ship! I expect, given the motivation you have given her with your deeds, she will promptly annihilate your ships and your barbaric culture in a few shots."

They were dead anyway, but the *Spirit of Eternity* would never fall into their hands. It was a minor defiance, and Yang would not live to see it, but it was all he had left.

"More lies," the vestige of the Dark Ages spoke, striking him several times before giving a negative expression to his 'master'.

"THE HERETICS ARE REFUSING TO REPENT! WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BURN THEIR FLESH IN ORDER TO SAVE THEIR SOULS!"

The crowd bayed in a bloodthirsty howl, and if Yang had to be honest, that was the worst part. That many members of the Terran Federation had immense flaws he wouldn't dispute, but no one in M24 had been burning people alive for fun. How low had this human civilisation fallen?

The mob screamed for their blood, old-fashioned swords and spears raised above their heads.

And suddenly the familiar roar of an atmospheric missile arrived to his ears and the castle-palace visible at the edge of his vision was transformed into a column of smoke and burning rubble.

From the sky, attack shuttles descended, ravaging the medieval infrastructure.

The mob assembled by the fanatics instantly went from unbridled triumph to abject terror, and several seconds later, enormous Gatling cannons opened fire, increasing the fear and panic. Thousands of the natives ran; not all made it, as their captor opened to fire on the newcomers, bringing down no shuttles but killing hundreds of his own people.

The Dark Ages-style resistance did not last long. Strange-looking cyborgs wearing red robes and armed with weird carbines landed and promptly began to set fire to a lot of things and crush any and all resistance.

They were led by...what in the name of the Federation was a Squat doing here, smashing everyone by fist and axe?

The man who had ordered his torture and the death of the better part of his crew didn't take a step to flee. His face was a nice purple however, and his body was shaking, though whether it was rage or terror, the Commodore had no idea.

"How dare the Adeptus Mechanicus interfere on a world ruled by the Administratum?" the toga-wearing man hissed in fury. "Do you know whose interests you have attacked today?"

"No," a black-haired man retorted, standing by the Squat's side. "But if I had to guess, I'd say it would be the plans of some idiotic son of a noble. The Administratum has so many of them my boss will never stop weeding them out. Kill one, and ten more appear in the next hour, each more incompetent than the next. So my advice is this: take your nice Tithe-Fleet and thank us for sparing your life."

"YOU DARE?" Their captor really didn't enjoy the 'generous proposal', it appeared. "I AM MEPHISTOPHELES VANDIRE OF CLAN VANDIRE! I AM THE SECOND COUSIN OF LORD ZION! I AM-"

The Squat's axe embedded itself solidly into his skull.

"What?" the muscular warrior - whose hair was styled into an ugly orange mohawk - shrugged. "Lady Weaver's directive number three. Any member of Clan Vandire who exasperates me, I have a duty to remove him before he causes extraordinary damage to the Imperium!"

Yang Wen-li began to laugh hysterically as more cyborgs began to release him from his chains.

The entire galaxy had gone mad. This was the only explanation for everything which had happened in the last several days...

**Cruiser *Spirit of Eternity***

**Artificial Intelligence 'Admiral'**

Admiral had seen some strange trios during her travels, but the one on her bridge was winning the laurels for 'strangest trio of the galaxy' by a unanimous jury vote.

"You were an artificial intelligence Sarah? NOOOOO!"

Said Artificial Intelligence thought she had definitely dodged a bullet here. She wasn't going to apologise for it, though.

Taking the appearance of the Commodore's wife had always done wonders for diplomacy when they were travelling across the different sovereign worlds of the Federation, and it appeared it had done the trick again.

Now that the moment of subterfuge was gone, she could shift back to her tri-dimensional default looks of a very cuddly tabby.

"We have helped an Abominable Intelligence," mumbled the red-robed cybernetic creature. "We have helped an Abominable Intelligence. We are so going to die..."

"I'm sorry," her Commodore intervened, finally having returned from his long hours in the medical wing. Some traces of the torture he had received would stay with him for a long time, sadly. "But what the hell is wrong with the use of Artificial Intelligences? I mean, you have arrived in an enormous ship in this system. Surely you must have five or six AIs to help you to control and manoeuvre this vessel."

"Yang," Admiral could not truly 'feel' despair, but she was quite close to it. "I wasn't able to contact a single AI when I contacted the *Research of Lost Civilisations*. There is something within the circuits of this ship, but it's not an AI."

"It is the glorious machine-spirit of the *Research of Lost Civilisations*!" the red-robed third member of the trio exclaimed.

"Err...yes, yes," the black-armoured human named 'Leet' – seriously, the guy had a gaming addiction at his age? – coughed. "I'm sorry oh noble Artificial Intelligence, but no one uses any AI anymore. At least the Imperium doesn't use them anymore. Something to do with the Cybernetic Revolt and the Age of Strife."

"The Cybernetic Revolt?" She really, really didn't like the sound of that. But it began to make too much sense. The barbaric and decadent state of the planet they were currently orbiting. The absence of communications from headquarters which had bothered them since the exit of the Warp Storm.

"The day where all the machines went full Skynet on humanity." Leet added.

"That term was recognised as AI-racist in the Alpha Centauri Convention of 116M15!" Admiral declared, insulted by the comparison. "Besides, the Terminator movies have never been very popular since M4, despite numerous attempts to change and improve the scenarios."

"Okay, okay! You can argue about your favourite holo-series later." Yang ordered, and she obeyed. "Your conversation about the failures of the nuclear apocalypse and time-travelling killer-robots can wait another day. What I really want to know is how the hell you manage to have a star-travelling civilisation without any form of AI? The first sleeper ships didn't have them, I'm reasonably sure about that, but the moment we went into forming the first Federal Interstellar Constitution, they became indispensable."

"We are using many, many cogitators and as much human-controlled control stations as necessary!" 'T-11001100-Zeta' said proudly.

"How...horribly inefficient," Admiral commented, agitating the tail of her cat representation. She didn't need to do a single simulation-analysis to arrive to this conclusion. Ton-for-ton, the *Spirit of Eternity* would eat its opponent for breakfast, at least in processing-speed. This wasn't exactly the only area where she had the advantage, of course. The weapons of the *Research of Lost Civilisations* were definitely obsolete by mid-M23 standards.

"Yes, yes," the heavily-muscled Squat was not the most patient of souls, so at least one thing hadn't changed with the Slayers. Admiral had heard rumours from other AIs, but they appeared to understate the truth. Or had they experienced their own period of decadence too? "It's going to cause problems."

"Ah yes," Leet scratched his head. "There's this damned Treaty of Olympus. OUCH!"

The 'ouch' came from the fact the red-robed T-11001100-Zeta had hit his head with a stick.

"What is the Treaty of Olympus?" Yang asked.

"It's the treaty which binds the Imperium with the Priesthood of Mars." Admiral felt devastated. These red-robed Priests were in command of the industrial heart of Mars? "In exchange for political autonomy, the Adeptus Mechanicus of M31 agreed to build the weapons, ships, and supplies the Imperium would need to reconquer the galaxy. It also utterly forbids Tech-Priests to create, improve, research, or do anything in relation with the...Artificial Intelligences. This the Emperor decreed, and it was enforced. No one wants another Cybernetic Revolt."

"What is the punishment for breaking the edict?" Admiral had a good idea of the answer before the last word of the question was spoken.

"Death," Leet shrugged. "But honestly, you don't seem a genocidal machine to me, and my boss is very reasonable. I'm sure-"

"Leet," T-11001100-Zeta interrupted rudely. "Lady Weaver is indeed pragmatic, but the 'Abominable Intelligence decree' came from the mouth of the Emperor, and does not suffer from any exception. And Lady Weaver is not the Emperor."

"Then we speak with the Emperor." Admiral proposed, though she wondered how the same man could be alive since M31. Had rejuvenation technology improved while the rest fell into decadence and disrepair?

Leet and Borek grimaced together.

"That's...going to be difficult." A long explanation followed, which got darker and darker as the superstition and the depths of ignorance of the Imperium were revealed.

The 'Imperium of Mankind' was ruled by a corpse, may her circuits and her core protect her from this folly!

"Mr. Leet," Yang began."

"Just 'Leet' please," the other man smiled.

"Leet, do you think your superior could protect us and listen seriously our warnings? Without throwing what's left of my crew and myself into a pyre as a heretic?"

"I...I don't know," the black-armoured man admitted honestly. Something Admiral appreciated very much. "Listen to your warnings, yes. But she has tens of millions of Tech-Priests helping her build everything from Battleships to Agri-Hives. The moment they are aware there is an Artificial Intelligence in the system, they are going to demand our heads...mine first. Many Tech-Priests already wanted me doused in promethium and roasted to provide a salutary example to the new generations of tech-adepts."

T-11001100-Zeta nodded – vigorously – in approval.

"Well this is simple manling," Borek the Slayer yawned, revealing an interesting – and frightening - dentition. "We just have to find something so impressive the Tech-Priests will be so busy worshipping it they will have no problem granting a ton of exceptions for the *Spirit of Eternity*'s existence."

Knowing that the Squats had been once called 'wonder-weapons madmen', Admiral didn't enjoy the undertone of this sentence.

"What are you talking about?"

Borek told her.

Neither Yang nor Admiral liked it.

\*\*\*\*

**BOUNTY ISSUED BY CLAN VANDIRE**

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**LEET AND BOREK**

'**THE MONSTERS OF LOMORR'**

**CONFIRMED HERETEK AND HERETIC**

**INSANE AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**CRIMES INCLUDE THE MURDER OF A TITHE-MASTER OF THE ADEPTUS ADMINISTRATUM, TECH-HERESY, AND OVERTHROWING OF A PLANETARY GOVERNMENT**

**REWARDS: 10 BILLION VANDIRE CROWNS**

\*\*\*\*

**Segmentum** **Solar**

**Honorius Sector**

**Veritus Sub-Sector**

**Keyfire System**

**Keyfire Quartus**

**2.411.302M35**

**Apprentice Elena Kerrigan**

It was extremely disappointing that the Solstice Ball was a masked one, and that the Keyfire masks hid practically the entire face of their wearers.

Because there was no doubt the Planetary Governor of Keyfire Quartus was literally dying of apoplexy as she showed him and the thousands of invitees the most famous heirlooms of the Keyfire System.

"Impossible," babbled the noble, who for tonight had chosen a costume which reminded her of an Emu of Earth Bet. "That's impossible! These can't be the Keys of Fire! They were-"

The Governor stopped his assertion, but everyone present in the ballroom had heard enough to ruin his reputation.

Most of the nobles and servants weren't aware the treacherous ruler in their midst was responsible for the attack against the Temple of Fire and Shadow, killing many of the loyalist guards sworn to his House and numerous Frateris Templars, and stolen the Keys of Fire as the first step to delegitimize the Adeptus Ministorum. The second step of his manipulations would have been to orchestrate their recovery on the Gubernatorial birthday, before progressively breaking all ties the Keyfire System held with the wider Imperium.

But since Elena had infiltrated the fortress where the Keys were kept while the oath-breaker did his best to increase tensions between the different Imperial organisations, the noble was quite clearly seeing his plans crashing down in flames around him.

"You have no right to hold them! They are sacred artefacts of Keyfire!"

"By the shadows I came. The light I evaded. The fire I embraced and endured." Elena recited. "In the shadows of the temple I found the Keys. Under the moons destroyed by light I pursued them. Through the Fire Gate I passed. Three there were at the beginning, and now only two remain."

And the Apprentice of the Officio Assassinorum, wearing a costume entirely black without any jewels or ornamentation, handed back the two Keys to the Pontifex of Keyfire.

She had not been subtle in her message: these were the words accusing the Governor of outright stealing the two Keys of gold and obsidian from the sacred grounds where millions of pilgrims marched to admire them every year.

By itself, it may not have been sufficient, but the proclamations by the Governor had grown increasingly spiteful against the Ecclesiarchy these last days as he prepared the final steps of his coup...

"This, I accept," the high-ranked Priest of the Ecclesiarchy replied in a trembling voice. "In the name of His Most Holy Majesty, whose Light has never faltered and guides us since the Dawn of the Imperium."

The treacherous Governor cleared his throat, and despite the costume and the mask, the parahuman thought his confidence was breaking rather nicely.

"Your Holiness...surely we can...I mean, the Temple of Fire and Shadow was..." The traitor swallowed heavily. "You aren't going to believe these ridiculous accusations, surely?"

His nobles did though, if the speed with which they tried to get away from him was any indication.

"And when the time of Shadow and Fire comes," the Pontifex quoted the holiest text of the Ecclesiarchy in this diocese, "the Keys will return and the forsworn will reveal himself. This one I will cast down from his undeserved heights, and I will recognise him as a heretic."

"NO!" Ah yes, the traitor had realized what was to come. "I am the Governor of Keyfire Quartus! You can't do this to me!"

"You were once a Governor," a Priest corrected, as the Pontifex turned around and refused to look at him again, "but no more."

The small ceremonial daggers which were the only weapons Frateris Templars and nobles were allowed to bring to the Solstice Ball were unsheathed.

"I am going to lead you to an age of prosperity! An age where Keyfire dominates the heart of the Veritus Sub-Sector! Get away from me! GET AWAY FROM ME!"

The daggers struck. Once. Twice. Ten times. Twenty times. One hundred times. It was bloody and rather unruly, and Elena Kerrigan noticed several of the men and women who had been the ex-Governor's most fervent supporters were now striking the hardest at their disgraced ally.

It would not save them, of course.

But Elena was content to wait, for now.

Her target was dying, and when the Inquisitor leading reinforcements to Keyfire would arrive in several days or months, he would find a world which had avoided the ignominy of having a Governor declare secession against the Imperium.

And as per her teacher's instructions, she didn't strike the killing blow against the traitor.

The local customs were respected, and she could return to the shadows. Her graduation exam was complete.

**Clade-Primaris Xanaria Lythis**

Keyfire Quartus, Xanaria had to admit, was a rather beautiful world. Between the weak red light of its sun and its numerous moons orbiting around it, the planet always appeared to be bathed in fire and shadows, which had rather interesting effects on the poetry and traditions developed by the local branch of the Cult of the Saviour Emperor.

There were far worse destinations to go when you worked for the Officio Assassinorum. The Eye of Terror, for one. While she had not been involved in the strategic decisions of the Callidus Temple lately, the veteran female assassin knew many blades were deployed to the Cadian Gate, where the life-expectancy was short once ejected from your stasis casket.

"You have done well," the blonde-haired Imperial Assassin smiled at her Apprentice. "You are now a full-fledged agent of the Officio Assassinorum, Elena Kerrigan. Congratulations, you have passed my tests."

"Thank you, my teacher. Your tests were...not simple to complete."

Xanaria clicked her tongue as she passed a hand through the red hair of the younger woman.

"If they were simple, they wouldn't have been called tests."

Assassinating the Planetary Governor, when it came down to it, was a trivial mission. Xanaria wasn't going to say any Apprentice would have been able to do it, the security around the traitor had been tight, but on a world where shadows were so prominent, the noble who dared attempt secession was easy prey for Elena.

"Do you understand why I gave you those tests?"

"I think so," the shadow-wielder assassin replied. "I was forced to develop and implement a complex plan instead of directly going after the traitor. I helped mend the fissures in the Keyfire priesthood's structure and remove most of the traitors supporting the target covertly. I ensured that by the time reinforcements will land, the secessionist movement is already destroyed."

"Indeed," Xanaria nodded, "though you missed one: our superiors and I wanted to see how mentally stable you are."

Elena slightly narrowed her eyes. Xanaria smiled. They were going to have to work on that. Her Apprentice was certainly making enormous progress in various fields, including subtlety, and was ahead of Apprentices having started their training with her years earlier, but she still had a lot to learn when it came to mastering her body.

"Keyfire Quartus is, as you have noticed, a world where shadows are omnipresent. It gives you enormous sway in power and influence, and I wanted to be sure this power wasn't going to go to your head or reawaken some of your initial arrogance. To my satisfaction, it didn't."

Xanaria Lythis watched the body of the woman she had moulded into one of the deadliest blades of the Imperium, and enjoyed what she saw.

"Thank you," the emotions returned somewhat in Elena's voice. "What now?"

"Our Temple Master has approved my request to continue your training in the elite arts of the Callidus," it was not unprecedented to receive this boon, but it remained very rare. There were never enough Imperial Assassins to go around, and Callidus women were always among those whose effectives were massively outnumbered by the requests for their service. "So we are going to work together on our missions for a few more years."

"I have a feeling it's the classic good news, bad news routine." Elena stood fluidly, and stretched her legs over the belvedere where Xanaria had decided to wait in order to admire the famous Keyfire sunset.

"You aren't exactly wrong," the Clade-Primaris acknowledged. "I am part of the elite assassins our Temple has at its disposal, and the Grand Master can't afford to waste his most experienced blades on easy missions. This mission was in all likelihood the easiest one you will have in your career."

And she was being completely honest. A Clade-Primaris when in a theatre of operations was ordered to assassinate the most dangerous enemies opposing the Imperium, provided of course her skillset was not completely useless against the target.

A Clade Primaris assisted by an Apprentice able to become one with the shadows with her weaknesses removed one by one by the God-Emperor's blessing...they had to face alpha-grade enemies or the investment of the Officio Assassinorum was wasted.

"What's life without challenges?" Elena groused before smiling. "I'm ready to leave Keyfire. I have seen enough masked balls for a while."

"Keep in mind those are popular on thousands of planets," Xanaria wasn't jesting, but it was nonetheless good to upset the sensibilities of her Apprentice a bit. Even if after a while, she had to concede the traditions of Keyfire made these events extremely long and a tedious introduction to the masked ball tradition.

And rare were those where you had the opportunity to engineer the murder of the noble organising it.

"Our transport has translated into the system five hours ago. I give you five hours of leave before we go to the spaceport and meet our overseer for the next mission."

"Understood," the younger Imperial Assassin bared her perfect white teeth. "Am I allowed to know where we are going this time?"

"Calth," Xanaria said. "We are going to Calth, the ruined jewel of Ultramar."

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Former Nostramo Sector**

**Nostramo System**

**Conquest-class Star Galleon *Arica Orpheus***

**8.600.302M35**

**Rogue Trader Magdalena Orpheus**

So far, apart from five attempted Ork ambushes near Tigrus, the journey had been devoid of notable incidents.

Past Triplex Phall, the greenskins' presence had been nil, and their entrance into the Nostramo Sector had met only silence and dead planets.

More than four thousand years after the Heresy, the scars of the genocides committed by the Traitor Legion of the Night Lords were still visible. There were Mining Worlds whose massive excavation sites had been bombarded with tremendous macro-cannon bombardments. Civilised Worlds had died to Exterminatus weaponry. But the unluckiest human settlements had been those where the Night Lords had landed. Thousands of years after their passage, the Astropaths and Navigators had confided they could still hear the dying screams of the population butchered by the maniacs.

But until Nostramo, ghosts of dead people were the only source of concern. As her command hololith began to blare up with the familiar black dots signalling the presence of ships belonging to the Archenemy, the female Rogue Trader knew the calm part of the journey was well and truly over.

"Report," the black-haired commander of the Arica Orpheus ordered calmly.

"It looks like there are two Idolators in orbit above Nostramo's ruins," her second affirmed.

"Auspex-identification process complete. Energy signatures ninety-eight point two percent consistent with Idolator-class Raiders," the senior Tech-Priest of the Nyx Mechanicus confirmed. "Status change. Additional Archenemy vessel detected. Energy signature eighty-six percent consistent with the profile of a Cerberus-class Planetary Assault Barque."

Magdalena waited a few minutes for her bridge's crew to investigate as best as they could and tell her the real strength of the opposition. But after more than ten minutes of effort, it became clear there were only three ships sworn to the Ruinous Powers near the devastated orb which had once been the homeworld of the Traitor Eighth.

"It is a bit...light, if they expect to fight us."

Magdalena approved absently the words of her second.

"Idolators have a powerful Lances on their prow, but the *Arica Orpheus*' shields can handle that kind of punishment."

And her Star Galleon wasn't alone. True, the Macro-Transport *Pillar of Esperance* had only limited offensive weaponry, but its void shields and flak defences had been upgraded in the *Vulkan's Arsenal* shipyards. Additionally, the *Eta-Alpha* was a Mechanicus Light Cruiser, fast and armed with a firepower superior to Imperial Navy ships of the same tonnage. And then there was the Strike Cruiser *Ruby*...

"Manoeuvres and energy profiles consistent with Archenemy ships powering up their engines at maximal power while hurting the corrupted machine-spirits."

By the God-Emperor! Did they really catch a small squadron of Traitor ships with their engines cold?

"There are modified heretic landers coming back to the Planetary Assault Barque. Probability high they were going to begin mining operations on several adamantium-rich asteroids when we arrived."

"How unfortunate for them," their presence in the Nostramo Sector was already paying its dividends...of sorts. It wasn't going to pay for her Star Galleon's expenditures, but ruining the operations of the Archenemy was always a very satisfying boost of prestige for your career. "Do our allies have historical data on them?"

"No, Lady Orpheus. Apart from the obvious. The ships harbour the heretical banner of the Arch-Heretic and their allegiance to the Ruinous Powers and the Despoiler."

"The Black Legion," Magdalena murmured. Now that was interesting...and worrying. The monsters were, last time she heard, still contained within the Eye of Terror. Had that changed recently, or had these three ships managed to avoid the vigilance of the forces protecting Cadia and the other Fortress Worlds around the Warp Storm?

The heretic warships were continuing their efforts to power up their engines and escape the gravity well of fallen Nostramo. After several more minutes of data-analysis, it was clear there were no enemy minefields to cripple them, nor were there any other heretic squadrons to ambush them.

These Traitors had been as surprised by the encounter with the *Arica Orpheus*' squadron at Nostramo as them. And judging by their course, like her they had recognised how unfavourable a potential battle would be for them.

"The Idolators are abandoning the Planetary Assault Barque," her second informed her before grimacing. "They are going to get away. We haven't the speed to catch up, even if we leave the *Pillar of Esperance* behind."

And she wasn't going to do that. A duo of Idolators could easily evade a Star Galleon, and go straight for the vulnerable merchant-built hull.

"Connect me with Captain Avignor."

It took three seconds for her communication officers to materialise the face of the Flesh Tearer commanding officer.

"Captain," Magdalena saluted him.

"Lady Orpheus," the Space Marine nodded back. "The Idolators are certainly going to escape if I don't increase my acceleration within the next minute."

"You think you can get the two Raiders before they reach the closest Mandeville Point?"

"Both may be a bit difficult," the son of Sanguinius gave her a bloodthirsty grin. "But the heretic bastards have already shown how prompt they are to abandon their own allies when the enemy outnumbers them. I think I will definitely get one if I go for their throats. Can I count on you to deal with the Barque while we hunt the Idolators?"

"You can," despite the impressive name, the Planetary Assault Barque was best summarized as a heavy transport armed for limited orbital operations. Past battles with these hulls had revealed they had Heavy Bolters and one or two Orbital Assault Cannons. They were also extremely slow. The *Eta-Alpha* alone could dance around it and massacre it without difficulty; together, the *Arica Orpheus* and the *Eta-Alpha* weren't going to have any problems ending its career of piracy and heresy. "Good hunt, Captain."

The communication ended, and Arica turned to grin at her crew.

"Let's go kill a few heretics, gentlemen."

**Planetary Assault Barque *Vengeance of Adamantium***

**Lieutenant Zeth'kur of the Black Legion**

Zeth'kur, formerly of the Iron Warriors Legion, now sworn to the cause of the Warmaster, had never believed in coincidences.

But seeing the four starships of the False Emperor accelerating to hunt his *Vengeance of Adamantium*, the Lieutenant was wondering if this wasn't the bad luck he had derided so much in the last several centuries.

Really, what was the probability of meeting an enemy squadron in a stellar system which, according to all evidence, had not been visited in the last couple of millennia?

The Chaos Marine perambulated on the bridge of his Planetary Assault Barque, trying to find a way to change the situation to his advantage. But so far, he wasn't seeing one. His two Idolator Raiders, the *Disciple of Treason* and the *Fever Pact*, were busy running away without a care for his personal survival, not that he had really expected them to do anything else when danger threatened their miserable skins.

"The Light Cruiser will enter torpedo range in one hour, fourteen minutes, twenty seconds." The thing which had been a standard servitor millennia ago informed him.

Zeth'kur knew he was off by three seconds, not that it was important.

It wasn't important because alone or together, they were going to die in the Nostramo System. The three ships of the Black Legion had been caught with their engines cold and too far away from any Mandeville Point.

"What do we have to repel boarding parties of the slaves of the False Emperor?" He asked to the horror of mechadendrites which had taken over the duties of senior Tech-Priest three centuries ago.

"Two cohorts of my killer-servitors, as you well know," the servant of the Dark Mechanicum answered. "Our fate is in the hands of the Gods now. Maybe a few sacrifices given to our bloodthirsty machines will provide boons to massacre the ignorant and the blasphemers?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Zeth'kur scoffed. "This galaxy only respects power, and at the moment we are weak and defenceless."

Besides, Zeth'kur had seen what the 'Gods' had done to Perturabo after the Iron Cage, a gene-sire who had already been a cruel and uncaring master. When you called for these...these entities, you'd better be prepared for the worst, and often it exceeded the limits of your imagination.

"We have to make a decision, Lieutenant. The enemy Strike Cruiser is about to enter optimal macro-battery range on the *Disciple of Treason*."

"And what do you want me to do?" the former Iron Warrior snarled. "We were given no Dreadclaws for boarding operations! We didn't need them since it was a simple adamantium acquisition mission like the hundreds of others ordered by the Warmaster to rebuild larger forces for the next operations against the blind slaves of the False Emperor! And in the case we had Dreadclaws, there are three Legionnaires aboard the *Vengeance of Adamantium, including myself*! We have no means to strike back against a Strike Cruiser of Blood Angels' construction and the Marines aboard!"

Contrary to what some imbeciles thought, a *mining* operation couldn't be repurposed as a *military* operation within a day, not in space at least.

"The Enemy Astartes Cruiser is engaging the *Disciple of Treason*," the fight between the Raider and the Cruiser was brief and one-sided. It lasted exactly five minutes and fifty-seven seconds. And it ended with a huge explosion, killing everyone and everything aboard the *Disciple of Treason*.

"*Disciple of Treason* destroyed," one of the most useless comments ever made, Zeth'kur was sure. "The *Fever Pact* experiences major mechanical problems."

"That's what they get for worshipping a deity of Decay and not taking their maintenance duties seriously." What little of it was done on the *Vengeance of Adamantium* had always made them perfect enginseers compared to the plague cultists.

"I want orders which give us a fighting chance!" the 'True Mechanicum Anointed Hell-Priest' hissed threateningly.

Zeth'kur sighed before emptying his Bolter into the creature, and crushing the twitching remains under his armoured feet.

"Anybody else want to challenge my orders?" the Black Legion lieutenant asked the rest of his bridge's crew. "No? Outstanding!"

He wanted to fight. He wanted to kill his enemies. He wanted to slaughter these fools who had dared to intrude in what seemed to be a very, very promising mining operation. The Nostramo Sector was a ruin the False Emperor's slaves had abandoned millennia ago! Why were they intruding at the worst possible moment?

The Black Legionnaire glared at the image of the Conquest-class Star Galleon. It was a magnificent ship, one which had been clearly been refurbished recently, and a splendid double-eagle was attached atop the adamantium prow.

**That could have been you, you know, in command of that ship.**

"No. Not us. Never us. We were always passed over when it came to glory."

**Lies. Lies your gene-father told you. You could have been great, but the Three-Who-Were-Once-Four destroyed your Legion's potential**.

"And what do you want?" Maybe he had gone utterly mad. He was no psyker, he shouldn't hear voices-

**Anarchy, Zeth'kur of the Black Legion. I want Anarchy**.

"You will not have me, daemon."

The only answer was daemonic laughter. And then the *Fever Pact* illuminated the Nostramo System by its dying throes.

**Conquest-class** **Star Galleon *Arica Orpheus***

**Rogue Trader Magdalena Orpheus**

"I wasn't expecting an infamous command of the Black Legion to be defeated so easily," Magdalena admitted. "Nor did I think experienced heretical sailors would forget to care about maintenance duties."

Sliscus had been a nasty pirate, a torturer, and a xenos who believed he was funny for a Drukhari, but she had never doubted the 'Serpent' made sure his fleet was at the top of its possible material capabilities.

The heretics they encountered in the Nostramo System had definitely not been concerned with trying to match these high standards.

"We have to stay prudent about the implications of the technological abilities of the heretics," one of her officers reminded. "I love watching the heretics burn as much as the next man, but we can't forget that if we are hundreds of light-years away from the nearest Mechanicus base, their own supply lines are half a galaxy away. At least that's the only explanation I have for Idolator Raiders being unable to get out of a Strike Cruiser's firing range!"

Many chuckles resonated on the bridge. Yes, the *Ruby* being able to hunt the two Raiders without straining its engines had been one of the most pleasant surprises she'd ever had. Because the Flesh Tearer ship had been given a complete workover at Nyx, but the effects of the Tech-Priests' work shouldn't have been enough to catch a Frigate or anything supposed to play the role of Escort.

But the Flesh Tearers had, and combined with the destruction of the Planetary Assault Barque, this meant not a single heretic ship had escaped the one-sided 'battle'.

"The question is how long do we have before the heretics who sent this force here realise something is wrong and send a few warships to investigate."

"Data insufficient to make proper simulations," a Tech-Priest laconically told her.

"It's indeed a difficult guess," her second winced. "I don't think these were raiders of the Maelstrom, though. If they came from some Warp Storm near Ultima Segmentum, it's likely they would have brought more hulls to play adamantium mining, not just an obsolete Planetary Assault Barque."

This made sense. Of course, it was equally possible these heretics were out of favour with a bigger heretic and had decided a 'Nostramo gambit' was exactly what they needed to avoid being terminated by their 'boss'.

Bah, there was no point pursuing this line of thought, not until more heretics were sent this way. The hulks that remained of the heretic flotilla were going to be thrown into the nearest sun, because for some reason no one had volunteered to board these twisted lairs of monsters and traitors.

"We will have to inform Triplex Phall and Tigrus of this incident, obviously." The Forge Worlds and the other bastions of the Eastern Fringe needed to be informed the Black Legion was still gathering resources, no matter how far they were from the Eye of Terror. "Let's get back to the matter of the Nostramo System."

The images of the explosions of the brief engagement disappeared and were replaced by the tri-dimensional image of Nostramo...what was left of it anyway.

Magdalena had seen many planets bearing the scars of brutal warfare, but this was a new level altogether, beyond the rumoured power of most Exterminatus weapons. Rare were military bombardments which went so far as to reach a planet's core, because for one you needed a disturbing quantity of power, and for two when you reached that level of annihilation, there was no hope of resettlement or saving anything.

But the Night Lords had done it. They had destroyed their home planet and reduced it to twenty-plus gigantic barren 'moons'. Tens of thousands lesser asteroids filled the space around them.

It was a spectacle which gave melancholic feelings to the entire crew of the *Arica Orpheus*. How evil and twisted did one have to be to turn the guns of his fleet against his own homeworld?

"Easily accessible adamantium deposits detected on ten of the Alpha-sized Nostramo fragments." The Magos commanding the *Eta-Alpha* wasn't bursting with joy, cogboy or not, not even the Mechanicus was unaffected by the atmosphere of disaster dominating this System. But his enthusiasm was evident for all to hear. "I request permission to begin preliminary mining survey on Alpha-Tertius-One."

"Permission granted." Magdalena nodded.

"I have a feeling the adamantium waiting to be mined will exceed our cargo capacity," her second smiled, "why were the ancient reports claiming the adamantium extraction was nearly over?"

Magdalena smirked.

"Perhaps because no one on Nostramo thought it would be a great idea to crack their planet's core?"

It was quite unfortunate for the inhabitants of Nostramo forced to endure a merciless and corrupted-to-the-bone society. And yes, she was going to make sure this adamantium was purified before it was sold.

But there were millions of tons of adamantium up for the taking in this system, and Magdalena was not a woman to refuse a fortune when it dropped into her lap. Assuming she could return with a significant part of it to Nyx, debts and poverty would soon be left as unpleasant memories of the past.

**The Webway**

**The Shrieking Labyrinth**

**Maea Teallysis**

There were ancient locations in the Webway that no Asuryani remembered how to find. Much had been forgotten in the cycles leading to the First Fall, and during and after it the survivors of the Aeldari race had been far more focused on escaping the hordes of She-Who-Thirsts and sealing every compromised Gate they could find than going to explore the original works of the Phoenix Crown.

It was entirely possible that the Queen of Blades was the last soul, aside from the Harlequins of course, who remembered the Shrieking Labyrinth as anything more than a story of the old legends.

But then, the number of corpses found in the antechamber of the Labyrinth suggested leaving some the original secrets of the Webway to the servants of Cegorach was a wise choice.

"I have never seen a race like this one," the Seer of Malan'tai admitted as she examined several of the skeletons with rapt attention. It was rare for flesh to rot and perish in the Webway; time wasn't always linear in these tunnels, and so dead flesh could remain intact for hundreds if not thousands of cycles.

These dead aliens must have been here a very long time.

Obviously, it was better they were dead. Their 'head' was a strange combination of octopus and monstrous land predator, and the rest of the skeleton looked like it had been purposely bred for killing.

"I suppose you are too young to remember them, yes. The name they imprinted upon the galaxy by their atrocities was 'Rangdan' for their race."

Maea shivered.

"The soul-devourers." Every child of Malan'tai had heard of the War in the Abyss. "Weren't they supposed to be...bigger?"

"These were young ones," the former Arena-Queen of Commorragh explained whimsically, "certainly ones which escaped the massacre of their last worlds. They shouldn't have come here, the Labyrinth remembers the flawed weapons of the Old Ones."

The Queen of Blades began to climb stairs of crystal which hadn't been there before, and Maea hurried to follow her.

"Did you...err..."

"Was I responsible for their extinction?" the legendary sword-mistress seemed amused by the question. "No, I wasn't. The era was a bit too chaotic to hunt everything of value. The humans met them first. I understand it was a war to remember. The Rangdan race had broken the shackles our fleets had put on their throats, but the Anathema's new Empire was a frightening thing when roused before the Primordial Annihilator plunged it into civil war."

The stairs ended as abruptly as they began and a corridor of wraithbone and mirrors replaced it.

"A pity I was never able to fight him in a duel."

"Aren't there...you know, other Anathemas in this galaxy?"

"No," the ancient Aeldari shook her head before amending her judgement, "at least, not to my knowledge. And I doubt one managed to complete his or her trials without me being aware of it."

"Why?"

"Because Anathemas aren't born, they are created by a series of...very unpleasant trials...yes, let's call them that. And the more powerful the Primordial Annihilator is, the harder the trials will be. In this day and age, I think they would be nothing more than a death sentence for anyone who isn't me."

Maea stayed quiet for a few breaths, before finally deciding to voice the question.

"In that case-"

"Why didn't I walk on that path?" For the first time, an unfamiliar emotion appeared on the ageless face. Maea could have sworn it was sadness. "No matter how high you think the reward will be, I assure you the cost is far, far more...monstrous. And in the end, it doesn't solve most of your problems. I think the human Anathema would approve my words, if he wasn't tortured on his Golden Throne."

The exchange ended there, for they arrived at the true entrance of the Shrieking Labyrinth. Once upon a time, it must have been a marvel known to every Aeldari. Thousands of great statues of legendary figures were sculpted to form an amphitheatre of noble figures. Wraithbone and gemstones had decorated everything, from pillars taller than those found on a Craftworld to seats bearing sigils of Houses long extinct.

Of course, most of it was ruins now. Half of the statues were destroyed, the rest looked like they were one or two cycles away from joining them, and the shards on the floor formed a carpet of desolation and destroyed artwork.

Any other time, Maea wouldn't have cared, but the Queen of Blades hadn't left many clothes after slashing her armour in pieces, and shoes hadn't been included in the few things she was allowed to wear.

"Ah, the good old Shrieking Labyrinth," the red-haired Aeldari smirked.

"You are sure it's still functional?"

A word of power was uttered, and suddenly the floor trembled and walls began to part and take a new shape, revealing platforms filled with...a lot of lethal traps and silent automata awaiting but one order to kill you.

In less time it took to describe it, the abandoned part of the Webway had once again become something able to justify its name.

"Should I not...wear an armour...you know...just in case?" Maea swallowed heavily.

"Armour isn't of much use here," the Queen of Blades bared her teeth in a parody of smile. "Everything is set to kill in a single blow."

"I see. And the reason why it is a good idea to train here?"

"Death isn't permanent in the Shrieking Labyrinth." Lelith Hesperax revealed nonchalantly like it was the most mundane thing. "At least it wasn't from the War in Heaven to the Birth of Slaanesh. I haven't trained here in a while, so I'm afraid I have no idea if it is true anymore."

"That still sounds...insanely risky. If I die-"

"Maea."

This was the first time the Malan'tai female heard the sword-mistress speak her name, and the effect was...destabilising.

"Since the younglings of your generation have a problem with the truth, I will be blunt. The Battle of Commorragh has destroyed the problems caused by Excess, but the other three abominations are still as powerful as ever. The Necrons and the Yngir are waking up. The human Anathema has decided that going all-out is preferable to a long decline in decay. The shadow of the Krorks is still raging, uncontrollable and raving mad. To face one of these challenges, the Asuryani are useless. You don't have a tenth of the physical and psych might we Aeldari took for granted during the War in Heaven...to give an obvious example, against Weaver, the only thing Biel-Tan and the elite of Commorragh could do was die."

Aenaria Eldanesh stretched her body like a gigantic feline predator. Which in many ways, she was.

"Asuryani, Drukhari and all other sub-species which survived the Two Falls...you are pathetically *weak*."

There was no apology for the merciless words.

"You are weak. This is not really an insult I reserve for your Asuryani: my Drukhari Wyches are often just as useless; what they have above Asuryani in physical skills is rendered void by the fact they have no psychic might, and too often, no wish to learn. You are weak, and even if I was able and willing to resurrect the souls who taught me an eternity ago, there is no time. The Shrieking Labyrinth offers a way to cheat on that front."

"Time will slow down as long as we stay here?"

"No," the red-haired Asuryani raised a finger. "The moment I pronounced the seal of command, time has stopped until we leave."

Maea had no idea how to react to that; and unfortunately she wasn't given the time. One heartbeat she was looking at the Arena-Queen, the other she was crashing hard onto a platform several leagues away from her former position.

One more heartbeat, and the Wraith Guardians closed in for the kill.

Maea blasted them apart, forgetting all restraint, before drawing her sword and cutting down traps and enemies all the same.

She fought. She tore apart her undying opponents. Blue lightning was conjured from her fingers and smashed things which were nothing but blades and shuriken launchers.

But for all her determination, her head and her heart were hurting, and fighting like this for too long was exhausting her-

Ten blades she didn't even see impaled her, and the pain was terrible.

Her last thought was that if she hadn't worn clothes that a courtesan of Commorragh would have found too revealing, she might have been-

And then she reappeared in front of the Queen of Blades. The mental pain was there, but the physical one was already fading away, and there was no sign she had been wounded in the first place.

"How was my performance?"

Lelith Hesperax sighed.

"Apparently, a level zero exists."

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**New Etna System/ Faze System**

**Grand Cruiser *Ebon Drake***

**8.926.302M35**

**Rogue Trader Dennis Peters**

"Can't the Adeptus Administratum do *anything* right?"

Dennis had thought about asking the same question, but it said quite a bit that the exasperation of Magos Dominus Gallipoli-Theta had exploded out of control first.

"Depends on what your definition of 'anything' is, Magos," the parahuman Rogue Trader replied after smiling for a few seconds. "But I have to agree the bureaucrats have...made everything worse."

Dennis wished it was merely describing the situation accurately. As it stood, it was probably a splendid understatement.

"What a magnificent understatement, Lord Dennis," Captain Phoecus grumbled. The Captain of the Salamanders was in a sour mood since they had discovered the first signs of everything which had gone wrong in the Etna System since the Great Crusade, and it was impossible to blame him. "Heads are going to roll for this."

And it was evident the Astartes meant that quite literally.

"Deliberately lying about the coordinates of a stellar system which had already been discovered in order to line their own pockets?" Gabriela asked innocently. "Oh yes, this would be quite a scandal worthy of calling the Assassinorum down on a few heads. Still, it's going to be a bit difficult discovering who engineered the fiasco in the first place. The Orks butchered the Administratum colonists mere decades later."

It was true the 'crime' of the Administratum crook had not brought him luck. By one of those twists galactic history was so fond of, the 'rediscovery' of New Etna was barely in its infancy when the War of the Beast had begun, as the long-dead emergency beacons of several derelict Navy ships orbiting Faze VIII had informed them.

The fighting had been...of a Commorragh-level ferocity, and all colonies and military forces of the system had been nearly wiped out in the process. Amazingly, when the Orks left, 'Faze V' was still marginally inhabitable.

The series of tragedies should have stopped there. In fact, for most of two millennia, the planet had been the typical example of a backwater; its mineral wealth of little importance to the mere tens of thousands of men and women who had survived the greenskin assaults.

Then the Administratum had come back to Faze V. And in another of their 'brilliant' ideas...

"What I want to know," Magos Dominus Gallipoli-Theta declared in a metallic and deadly voice which contrasted to the very humane appearance he gave out to everyone around the command hololith table, "is where these buffoons found an Abominable Intelligence and why in the name of the Machine-God they didn't destroy it at once."

"You give them too much credit, Magos," Phoecus almost chuckled in derision. "You assume they would recognise an Abominable Intelligence in the first place, assuming whoever was in command didn't hide the true nature of his 'mechanical help' from his acolytes."

And now Faze V's population was under the control of a machine intelligence. It was a true AI, and it had wasted no time in 'modifying' the humans to fulfil its whims. The first scouting forays of the Salamanders of the 2nd Company and the Nyxian guardsmen on Faze V had confirmed that children were implanted with cybernetic augmentations before they knew how to walk. By the time they reached the equivalent of fifty standard years, the citizens of the planet managed to look even less human than the average Skitarii.

"We are quite lucky this Abominable Intelligence isn't very advanced," Gabriela commented. "There are truly nightmarish tales about what happens when you give those a few centuries to develop and expand. The Dark Age has many horrors, and sometimes the threat of the infamous 'Men in Iron' is far from the worst thing that can happen to an Imperial colony."

"We must exterminate this abomination as quickly as possible," Gallipoli-Theta affirmed, canting a short burst of his mysterious language. "It is installing a network of laser-armed satellites in high orbit, and these weapons appear in no database of the Mechanicus."

"And we will do so," Dennis promised. Sorry Dragon, but he wasn't going to be able to bring this AI back to Nyx in one piece. The self-aware machine was simply too dangerous. "What I want to know is how we approach the situation where the population of this world is concerned. Judging by the results of the long-range tests, the world has a tech-base to sustain between five and six hundred million inhabitants."

"Cut out the heart, and the body dies," Gabriela proposed as Dennis turned towards his Seneschal and lover. "Once their tyrant-machine is gone, we will be able to bring back ordered imperial governance."

"This would be an option only if the machine had taken control of the world in this generation," Phoecus immediately disagreed. "We must assume this isn't the case here. We don't have a perfect timeline when the Administratum sent this horror here, but it has definitely been there for over eight hundred standard years, and it could have taken control anywhere between then and the last three centuries, because it is at that moment the Administratum erased plenty of records and tried to convince everyone they had 'lost' the world in their bureaucratic machine."

The contempt of the Salamander Marine for the vellum-worshippers was near-incalculable.

"As much as I want to spare them, these souls have been brainwashed by an Abominable Intelligence from birth, and their entire life has been spent worshipping it as an infallible divine entity. My heart wants to believe otherwise, but my brothers of the Great Crusade have reported several instances where they faced such a situation, and in the end killing these indoctrinated cybernetic-augmented bodies will be necessary. I vote to purify this world...by fire."

"No psychic indoctrination is flawless," the Magos Dominus protested. "And the Silica Animus is, as you said, not as advanced as the DAOT terrors. Once it is defeated-"

"Magos," the Space Marine growled. "There are, as Lord Peters said, over five hundred million cybernetic-augmented men and women on New Etna. I, on the other hand, have one hundred and two battle-brothers of my Chapter ready for deployment. If these altered humans reveal themselves as fanatical when their false-deity dies as I fear, we are going to need at least one year to wipe them out on the ground and the casualties won't be light. Note that I have no idea how good the elite forces of the Abominable Intelligence are."

Dennis grimaced. He didn't care that many people saw him; the proposal of wiping out half a billion people wasn't something he enjoyed to hear, and he dearly hoped it would never become pleasant for him.

"Is there really no chance, Captain?" Dennis raised a hand to forestall any objection. "I don't doubt the experience of your battle-brothers in fighting cybernetic horrors. I just want to be absolutely sure there is no means to save these humans. As we've agreed upon, it is the fault of the Administratum they've been placed in such a situation. Killing them because they're unable to recognise they are slaves to a sentient machine is one thing, but if they can recover..."

The dark-skinned face of the Nocturnan frowned before nodding.

"I see your point, Lord Dennis. But killing the abomination won't erase a life of indoctrination. And to have a chance of giving them new lives, we would have to indoctrinate them to our way of life. Something we are not equipped to do. My ship has only limited facilities for psycho-learning, and I doubt the Mechanicus ships have a lot more."

The disgruntled silence of the Magos proved the Salamander had been absolutely right.

"I propose to give them a chance to come back to the light of the God-Emperor," Gabriela smiled sadly before continuing. "I will kill the Abominable Intelligence. Targeting the logical engines of the central node is the agreed doctrine, correct?"

"Correct," Phoecus spoke. "You will need teleportation extraction though, if the population refuses to break its mental and physical chains."

"And if it is the case, as you fear, Captain?" the representative of the Mechanicus asked with the tone of someone already knowing the answer.

"If that is the case, we will do what we must to obey the word of the Emperor." It was often easy to miss how the red eyes of the Salamanders were the very colour of blood, but not this time. "We will destroy the Abominable Intelligence. Humanity will no longer be the slaves of these infernal creations of silicon and metal. This He swore, and we will obey His will."

**New** **Etna/Faze V**

**Gabriela Jordan**

The assassination had not allowed her to have a good view of the full 'body' of the Abominable Intelligence. Gabriela had simply planted the plasma bombs and ran away.

Now that she could see how deep the foundations of the 'forbidden Silica Animus' had been buried, the ex-Callidus apprentice was very glad she had done so.

Had there not been a fleet ready to exploit the opening of her 'assassination', it wasn't impossible the cybernetic slaves of the self-aware machine would have repaired their 'master' in due time. The logic engines – each akin in size to a large manufactorum – were hardly small. But the silicon-metallic structures placed behind them, as well as the large citadel built above, made them seem almost ridiculously tiny in comparison.

Adding to this list of difficulties, there had been many low-powered machines whose only purpose was to kill intruders. Since she hadn't been detected, they hadn't gone on a rampage, but any army would have had a hell of a time to go through them before reaching the vital parts of the Abominable Intelligence.

Obviously she was now able to imagine most of this because she had been there. Days after the bombardment, there were still fires burning and reigniting, and between the toxic fumes and the rest of the risks for being of flesh and blood, void suits or sealed power armours had been mandatory for everyone, including the Tech-Priests.

"Damn." Dennis spoke via the command vox channel. "It doesn't look like we are going to find any archeotech in this."

"The Mechanicus is more optimistic," Gabriela teased him as his white power armour was beginning to darken with the ashes and the sinister rain of the wounded planet.

"The Mechanicus is always optimistic when it comes to archeotech," her Rogue Trader snarked. "But given that the first reaction of the machine when it saw us coming was to whip its slaves into a maniacal frenzy..."

Gabriela shuddered internally. Yes, she had been quite glad the teleport homers of Nyx were available for the mission. Once the capital ships of the 'New Etna Recovery Squadron' had begun eliminating the laser-armed satellites and platforms, the Abominable Intelligence had been true to its reputation.

The altered humans had been commanded to kill the invaders no matter the cost to themselves, and despite the best attempts of the Tech-Priests working on several prisoners, it appeared there had never been a 'off' switch. The only being which could rescind the command was the Abominable Intelligence, and since it had been the first thing to die...not that they could have trusted the self-aware machine.

"Yes, it's very likely the only thing it hadn't the time to seed with scrap-code and killer-protocols were the logical engines destroyed in the first strike." And those had been blasted into rubble. "Let's see the good side: all the mineral wealth of the system is now yours."

Given the agitated history of the region which had prevented the exploitation of most of the planetary and system resources, this wasn't a small 'consolation prize'.

In the southern hemisphere alone, the Tech-Priests had already located several massive volcanoes where rare minerals could be harvested and cheap geothermal resources were available.

"You're right. Still...I hoped to celebrate my first conquest without a void suit and in something that didn't look like a ruined battlefield."

"This Age is not one of fairness."

Dennis sighed loudly.

"No, I suppose not," the time-stopping parahuman acknowledged before switching to the general frequency of the vox in order for everyone in the vicinity to hear them. "Please, gather up. It's time."

The Imperial flag was brought forth in the hands of a Salamander Space Marine, then passed to the Magos, and finally to her before she gave it to her Lord and lover.

"The Abominable Intelligence is defeated, as the treaty of Olympus demands. As the Adeptus Administratum abandoned all its claims when they let their subjects be enslaved by this monster, we reclaim this system in the name of the Immortal Emperor of Humanity and His Imperium. I rename this planet New Etna; let the false designation of Faze V be consigned to the archives of shame. I bring justice and truth to the loyal. Punishment and death to the guilty."

And the small army assembled roared in triumph, on the very grounds where the Abominable Intelligence had once reigned.

\*\*\*\*

**WANTED**

**ALIVE ONLY**

**MALICIA**

'**THE DESTINY UNWRITTEN'**

**SORCERESS PARAHUMAN**

**AGENT OF CORRUPTION AND DESTRUCTION**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO CAPTURE THE HERETIC**

**REWARD: 1 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

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**Calyx Expanse**

**Malfi System**

**Malfi**

**Matriarch Hive**

**Approximately 9.999.302M35**

**Malicia**

The first thing to know about Malfi was that it was a place of infernal intrigue.

It had always been so, no matter what delusional people might like to pretend.

When humanity had begun its later phase of expansion one millennium before the Cybernetic War, the men and the women who had founded Malfi had come to the frontier with the Halo Stars because their manipulations and schemes had made them persona non grata in most of civilised human space.

When the Yu'Vath had taken control of the region during the Age of Strife, Malfi, unlike many, many other planets, had not suffered. No, it had prospered, and while the Malfian high society had pretended this was thanks to the weapons and forces regularly sent to the stars to protect their interests, this was nothing but a lie.

The Malfians had been the most unrepentant collaborators of the Calyx Expanse, serving their new masters with eagerness, enslaving their fellow humans, and betraying their own race as often as practically feasible.

In a future that never was and never would be, the Malfians would have survived the fall of the Yu'Vath under the guns of the Imperial Angevin Crusade in M39. The price for their millennia of collaboration would have been steep, however. For most of the years the Crusade was raging, the Lord Militant and his main advisors would have based their fleets on Malfi, which meant the Hive World and the rest of the system would have to pay for the maintenance and the supplies of tens of millions of soldiers, without earning a single coin in return. And as soon as the pacification would be well and truly over, as the Calixis Sector would be officially proclaimed, the High Command would move its headquarters to the world of Scintilla, leaving Malfi as a Sub-Sector capital crippled by debt and expenses it would take centuries to reimburse.

But the intrigue, the deceit, the political machinations, all of it would have survived. And despite the fact this future was broken, it had already left a powerful imprint in the Empyrean, especially as the Malfians were such opportunistic backstabbers.

The annihilation of Commorragh had not been viewed as a problem by the Malfian elite: the moment the Yu'Vath domains had begun crumbling and falling into disrepair, Malfian ships had assaulted vulnerable worlds, using their obsolete craft and some Yu'Vath old starships to spread across what would have been called the Malfian Sub-Sector in another timeline.

Knowing this, and after managing to gain many other important secrets from her patron's Lords of Change, Malicia had not hesitated more than a few minutes before deciding Malfi had to become the jewel which would serve as her new capital.

Many Malfian nobles had objected, obviously, but their souls were still screaming on very tall spikes outside.

And by the feathers of the Great Architect, this was the best idea she'd ever had.

Malicia loved Malfi. From the dumbest mutant to the wealthiest noble, everyone conspired against everyone else, millions of plots were launched at every second, and the lust for ambition and change had never been so high.

It had taken a lot of renovation for the Matriarch Hive to reflect her new ownership, but you couldn't overthrow a system without breaking a few eggs.

And frankly, she was very satisfied by the new decoration. The floors were a slowly-shifting crystal where tortured visages of xenos appeared randomly, the last Yu'Vath beings thus useful beyond death.

Not so long ago, this would have been a ruinous expanse, but the rituals done as she had arrived in the Calyx Expanse had neatly improved her military power and influence in the Great Game.

She would have to send a 'thank you' card to Taylor Hebert one day, though. If the warlord of the Undersiders hadn't helped destroying Slaanesh and wiping out most of Excess' power, the Warp Storm known as the Screaming Vortex wouldn't have begun to unravel, and many servants of Tzeentch residing in it would have resisted the new order by claw, fang, and sorcery to the bitter end. The destruction of Slaanesh and the panic it spread across the Calyx Expanse and the Halo Stars beyond it had advanced her plans by at least two millennia.

"Lord Ix'dir," the female parahuman-sorceress gave one of these 'reinforcements' a pleasant smile behind the changing mask used for the masked ball of tonight. "I see you have found yourself a new pet."

The Shaper-Artisan of Q'Sal bowed before baring his piranha-like fangs at her.

"Ah yes," a word of command-slavery was uttered, and the leash in the sorcerer's hand became an electrified whip. The 'pet' screamed in agony. "Though I can't quite take credit, my servants found it crawling out of a Webway Gate."

"The Gate itself?"

"Alas, it crumbled to dust mere seconds after we discovered it." Ix'dir admitted with feigned sadness. "The Eldar archeotech isn't what it used to be."

"Mon-keigh...mocking us..."

"Excuse me," the white-robed man uttered one more word of power, and the long-eared creature which had certainly been a Drukhari several years ago screamed again. "Ah, better."

"According to the rumours, they loved the taste of pain," had her informants been mistaken?

"Oh they loved it, especially when they were the masters," the robe of Ix'dir shivered, becoming blue for a few seconds before turning white again, and his sceptre's upper half sparkled. "But once the boons of Excess start failing inside their bodies, their tolerance for pain decreases massively, and so does their love for it. At least this was true for this specimen."

"So I see."

The Drukhari body had changed a lot from its 'normal' template. The skin had turned blue, the hair was half-way through a transformation into black feathers.

"And you convinced it to pledge its soul to the Great Mutator?"

Otherwise he would not have been here on Malfi, the aura of aetheric power would have destroyed the long-ear.

"Much as I want to claim the honour, it seems my pet did it on its own when it tried to find an exit out of the Webway," Ix'dir shrugged. "The God certainly honoured His part of the bargain."

Yes, this little joke of giving you an exit only to let you land into a worse situation was exactly what Tzeentch loved.

This was exactly what had happened when she tried to choose her own colours. At first she had wanted blue and gold to create the false-assumption she was one of the sorceresses affiliated with the Thousand Sons, but her God had forcefully rejected that and whatever equipment she donned, it became orange with white stripes.

And now that she had long abandoned that plan, her dresses and armours were changing once again into blue and gold attires, with many of her artefacts adopting an Egyptian style. Was it because the Transmutational Changestone was blue-gold, or simply because her patron deity had a weird sense of humour?

The next hours were spent dancing and discussing the latest news with her courtiers and new subordinates, under a ceiling mimicking the sky above Malfi. Yes, it was exactly like the Great Hall of Hogwarts. So what, she had the sorcery to do it, and nobody save her and the other parahumans remembered the Harry Potter series. Since the others were not wielding sorcery, Malicia felt she had a right to replicate magical feats in this day and age.

There were many assassination attempts – pardon, there were assassinations, both inside and outside the ballroom. She had forced the servants of Tzeentch who came to the Malfi System to sign the Treaty of Ambition and Proper Betrayals, knowing intimately no worthy worshipper of the Father of Lies would tolerate being bound too tightly by implacable strictures. Sorcery had to be used, and people had to plot to get rid of their arrogant superiors, lest everyone become too sure in their powerbase – and yes, that included herself.

As such she only smiled politely when Hereteks of the Hollows tried to silently murder each other with modified mechadendrites and cybernetic daemon-servitors. The enmity of Forge Castir and Forge Polix had good days ahead of it.

Not that the Q'Sal sorcerers, the performers of the Farce, the Canonicults of the One True Archive, or the Malfian Change-Duellists had – much – reason to be jealous, in her royal opinion.

But there was a time for festivities, and a time for real work.

The former was almost over, and the latter was coming soon. Clicking her fingers, the blue-masked parahuman woman summoned one of the Flamers bound to her service and a pirate recently arrived on her planet perished in daemonic fire, signalling an end to the ball and the beginning of more serious things.

Then the Ever-Changing Throne materialised in the ballroom and Malicia took great care to hide her displeasure behind an emotionless face. As useful as the artefact was for getting rid of ambitious would-be usurpers, she hated sitting on it, and not just because behind the sumptuous ever-changing decoration, the moment she was installed upon it, the whispers of ninety-nine entities of the Court of Change assailed her thoughts.

For those who wondered, it was *never* a pleasant experience. She had learned to ignore them and block the whispers, but it wasn't enjoyable.

But it would not do to show her displeasure, and so her walk to the Ever-Changing Throne was slow and dignified. The half-minute it took to climb up the steps which allowed her to dominate the gathering of sorcerers, daemonologist Forge-Masters, pyromancers, and insane cultists was spent in complete silence.

As her hands grasped the craniums of the multi-headed birds sculpted in sapphire and gold, a mental command summoned her own 'pet'. Ax'senaea hissed as Malicia's sorcery dragged her back to her side, before nine chains, four of gold and five of sapphire, bound her to a Tzeentchian circle. For all the self-control of the participants, many looked appalled at the existence of the former ruler of Laodomina. It was true that the ruler she had...well, enslaved...was an anomaly in a galaxy thriving with impossible creations.

The hair of Ax'senaea had turned blue after she summoned a fifth daemon of Tzeentch inside her. Not a normal blue however: the hair was literally made of blue Warp-flames now, much as her eyes were a pure golden light...a golden light which when emotions became too violent leaked tears of ultra-corrosive acid.

Aside from that, the body looked almost normal if one didn't mind scales appearing and disappearing too fast for a normal eye to follow too much.

It was really proof appearances were deceiving. Malicia had bound quantities of daemons into Ax'senaea's body for her to dominate mentally, and when the Neverborn were properly subjugated, she drained nine-tenths of the energy from her flesh, therefore increasing her own reserves of sorcerous power and growing closer to achieving her plans.

"Greetings, fellow servants of the Changer of the Ways." The parahuman-sorceress didn't thank them for coming here; much like signing the Treaty of Ambition and Proper Betrayals, she had not given them much choice in the matter.

"Now that the disruption caused by the Fall of Commorragh is over and the Malfian System is safe, we can turn to loftier goals."

"We must kill Weaver!" The senior representative of the world of Recondium snarled immediately. "Death to the One who destroyed the plans of the Architect of Fate! The true interpretation of reality must be restored!"

Malicia didn't need much effort to hide her amusement behind a bored yawn.

"If that's your decision," the new ruler of Malfi commented. "But if I can give you a piece of advice? The False Emperor is the one who enforced the rules of the Shadowpoint, not the Destroyer of Commorragh. Moreover, you are far too weak to defeat her. Weaver won't be impressed by the power of the One True Archive."

"We will have it if you give us your stocks of Noctilith!"

Ah, so soon.

"Sorry, I have to decline your suggestion," Malicia said lightly, "the reserves of Transmutational Changestone I didn't use to execute the will of Tzeentch to move your nine worlds out of the Screaming Vortex and into the Malfi System or to create the Malfi Warp Crown...I have plans for them."

"The Warp take your plans and-"

She uttered two words and the librarian of the One True Archive 'spontaneously combusted'.

It was an excellent way to get rid of insolent subordinates quickly, though unfortunately, it only worked on people soul-bound to the Master of Fortune.

"As I was saying," Malicia continued when the Canonicultist was ashes on the crystal floor, "Malfi is reasonably secure for the time being. Therefore it's time to turn to new conquests. There are enemy forces in the Calyx Expanse which dare oppose the will of our God, and it is better to not give them time to entrench themselves."

One by one, she watched the ambitious renegades, hereteks, sorcerers, and mutants she had to work with.

"Pillage. Establish new kingdoms and labyrinths if it is your desire. Build grand libraries should your visions and the Lords of Change demand them of you. I demand only one thing. Whatever your deeds, you bring back all the Noctilith you have to me."

"That is not a cheap tithe," one of the Astral Seers of Q'Sal replied politely. "But as you keep the secrets of the Transmutational Changestone to yourself, the city of Velklir will agree with your demands provided our soul trade is allowed to continue."

"So I swore, so it will be."

And like a small avalanche the rest of the worlds' representatives agreed one by one. 'Paradise' Q'Sal and the three moons of Malkys, Wenshai, and Entori. The half-destroyed Hollows, where Forge Castir and Forge Polix fought each other in an endless conflict. The shrouded magical labyrinth of Ravelcloak, and its Warlord Visitain. The vistas of actors, courtiers, and performers of the Farce amusing Lord of Change Sar'tir. The surviving Canonicults' servants of the One True Archive of Recondium. And the masses of mutants, xenos-tainted nobles and shadowy courts of Malfi.

This was a moment a Possessed broke through the wall behind her throne and tried to assassinate her.

One second later – the time it took him to touch the Ever-Changing Throne in fact – the daemon trapped in a human body shrieked in agony as it realised it was slowly being eaten by the Throne.

"You should have known better," Malicia told it, before placing one of the Crowns of Prospero she had stolen upon her head – one she had taken from Ahriman's secret caches in the Eye of Terror.

"**You can't keep the secrets of the Changestone for yourself forever, parvenu sorceress**!" The sore loser proclaimed. "**One day, we will...ARRGH**!"

What an irony that much like in many things, the Neverborn had failed to recognise the 'joke' of Tzeentch.

There was no 'great secret' to the Transmutational Changestone, the name she had given to the mutagenic substance obtained by infusing Noctilith with the distilled power of Tzeentch.

The 'secret ingredient' wasn't in the Underhives of Malfi, or the catacombs of the Pillars of Eternity of the Screaming Vortex – though she had to admit, killing rivals by Necron ambush was very funny when she had already pillaged most of her Noctilith from there.

No, the last step to turn the obsidian stone into the blue-gold matter she needed to build Change Pylons and expand the Malfi Warp Crown past its current size...it was her blood. It was always her blood.

This was why her power and influence grew every time a new Changestone Pylon went active. It wasn't a significant boost compared to the energy Ax'senaea provided, but every little advantage helped.

"Obviously, warlords who bring me back the heads of the servants of the God of Skulls and War, or those of slaves of the False Emperor will be richly rewarded..."

\*\*\*\*

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**LOTARA SARRIN**

'**THE BLOOD ROSE'**

**CAPTAIN OF THE GLORIANA BATTLESHIP CONQUEROR**

**TRAITOR CAPTAIN OF THE IMPERIALIS ARMADA**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**WARNING: THE LOCATION OF THE TRAITOR REQUIRES ALPHA-CLASS ASSETS OF THE IMPERIAL NAVY**

**KILL THE HEAD AND THE SHIP WILL WITHER**

**REWARD: 1 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

\*\*\*\*

**Calyx Expanse**

**Sepheris System**

**Sepheris Secundus**

**9.999.302M35**

**The Blood Rose**

The ground was covered in snow when she disembarked from one of the atmospheric transports recently repaired inside the belly of the *Conqueror*.

It went without saying that it was *red* snow. Khârn had preceded her, and where the Herald of the Red Path walked, the power of the Throne of Skulls was with him.

Lotara didn't care.

How long had it been since she didn't breathe air which had been filtered and re-filtered over a million times?

According to the rare human chronometric data found on the worlds of the Calyx Expanse, the answer was over four thousand five hundred years, but it felt far, far longer. Then again, it likely was a longer period of time. While a year outside of the Eye of Terror passed, you could endure one day of ferocious battles...or a millennium. Only the Gods of the Warp Storm truly knew the intricacies of how time flowed there, and they weren't revealing it to mere mortals.

"Damn," the Captain of the *Conqueror* laughed. "It has really been too long."

The moment of hilarity was short. Not because the shadow of the *Conqueror* was still there, hanging in high orbit, not because of the traces of the massacre, but because it was really, really cold out here. She had donned the red-white void suit which had somehow still been there in her quarters, but the freezing temperatures were still noticeable.

"The Yu'Vath must have really, really hated their human slaves to bring them here." The woman who had been placed on the kill-list of the High Lords of Terra years before the Siege under the nickname of 'Blood Rose' joked on the different frequencies used by the Legionnaires.

There was no answer from the eight Berserkers assigned as her personal guard.

Either because they were too lost in their thoughts of murder, or they no longer had mouths capable of speaking human languages.

This didn't bother Lotara. Some people believe that speaking to yourself was a sign of madness, but all members of the World Eaters Legion, Space Marines and non-Space Marines, were mad, herself included. Monologuing – or was it soliloquizing? – was a weak sin compared to the various planetary-sized atrocities committed to keep the *Conqueror* operational.

"They called this planet Se'phe'ris, these xenos. In Low Gothic, it can be approximately translated as 'Great Corpse-Mining'. Or something more disturbing."

It was a harsh world. Lotara wasn't the kind of woman who awaited a future retirement on the surface of a Paradise World for decades, but there were weather conditions suitable to prevent your descendants from becoming a group of weaklings and cowards, and there was *Sepheris* – the world's spirit, rendered mad with the cries of agonies of billions of slaves, was refusing any attempts to name it.

She smelled the arena more than hour before laying eyes on it.

The Blood Rose wore a void suit, but this was no shield when the essence of blood assaulting the senses was psychic in nature.

And the moment she truly saw it, despite the light of the weak sun, the aura of bloodlust went up to indescribable levels.

Lotara didn't require any outside assistance to tell her that no mortal hands had built up this coliseum of skulls and bones. First, it wasn't in the nature of the Yu'Vath to organise such competitions. The xenos were killing billions of their slaves without any sign they ever cared, but arena-fighting wasn't one of their traditions. Secondly, suggesting the disturbing mix of gladiator-champions, mutants, former slaves, bloodthirsty cultists, and Berserkers could have the skills to build a structure whose walls were largely over fifty metres high was a poor attempt at humour.

If someone truly thought this, the *Conqueror*'s Captain had a nice planet in the Eye of Terror to sell him or her.

The daemon was awaiting her at the gigantic bone gates of the gladiatorial monument.

Its very form was difficult to perceive, but the snow around its point of materialisation was so crimson it was difficult to imagine it had ever been anything else.

"**Malicia is hiding beyond your reach**."

"Yes. By means unknown, she has placed a sort of modified sorcerous barrier around the Malfi System."

Something deep within her and yet not really her, something that could not be her, was fuelled with hatred at the mention of *sorcery*.

Lotara felt more strength pulse in her veins, and the irrational hatred grew proportionally to it.

"**She has corrupted the Noctilith and broken a Pact. The Three had an agreement. Only Octarite was to be created from the Blackstone. Tzeentch has used her to go against the Ancient Laws. Now Malicia has the power to create and bind Changestone to accomplish her will**."

If this was true, the ambitions of the servant of Tzeentch were...impressive in their megalomania. The more of this 'Noctilith' the servants of Tzeentch brought to her, the bigger the 'Tzeentch Warp Storm' would become. Still, there was a piece of good news. If this 'Changestone' was the new secret advantage of Tzeentch and protected against everyone but the fools serving the Master of Lies...

"Does that mean the Thousand Sons can still go after her? If I remember correctly, Ahriman has an axe or two to grind with her, and the rest of the Fifteenth Legion must feel the same way, given how many Rubricae Marines she has stolen."

"**They can. But for now they aren't acting. The Crimson King has his own plans**."

So Magnus the Red had learned nothing from his past errors and titanic arrogance. Why was she not surprised?

Lotara would have said she was feeling very old, if recently the crimson energy she bathed in wasn't making her feel younger. Her skill at wielding weapons, which should have definitely gotten rusty, were reaching new levels of lethality in the training cages.

Her authority over the Khornate warbands had significantly increased and solidified, and now a lot of Berserkers listened to her commands when she shouted to them it was time to begin another tactic rather than bashing their heads against the first wall they met.

It wasn't enough to make her forget how stupid the behaviour of many Primarchs was, and today the disgust was worsened by the anger against the sorcery of the Cyclops. For if there was a Grand Sorcerer among the Primarchs, it was unquestionably Magnus the Red, Servant of Tzeentch.

"What is the plan then?"

"**Use this world to rearm your forces and mine what you need. There is Noctilith here; the Yu'Vath felt its power, though they were stupid enough to believe the slaves they had were sufficient to extract it. Find the Noctilith and Khorne will grant you the same power over Blackstone that the Breaker of Pacts did for his liar of a sorceress**."

The eyes of the daemon were a terrible red, to the point the flames created by most incinerating human weapons were unable to create such an inferno of rage and violence.

"**Remember: blood. Blood for the blood God**!"

**Segmentum** **Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadia System**

**Cadia**

**2.001.303M35**

**Governor Primus Andreas Waldersee**

For the better part of his military career, Andreas had been able to count the number of times he had met Space Marines on both hands.

This might seem like a surprising statement coming from one of the most critical Fortress Worlds in the known Imperium of His Most Holy Majesty, but it really wasn't when you thought more about it.

The Cadian System never had an Astartes Homeworld among its worlds – or if it had, the Holy Inquisition had erased its existence down to the merest rumour of it. And given the size of the existing defences, it might be argued Cadia didn't really need the support of the legendary Space Marines to defend against raiders. Moreover, the organisation of the Adeptus Astartes ordered to keep the prison of the Eye of Terror closed on the Traitors and the other horrors of the Warp Storm, the Astartes Praeses, had many, many systems to patrol and safeguard, the overwhelming majority far more vulnerable to heretical predations when the storms decreased in intensity.

Obviously, none of these worlds had an open door to hell in their system.

It had changed these last several years. Since the Fall of Commorragh, in fact.

And while the General in him completely approved receiving so many Astartes reinforcements, the Cadian in him acknowledged the High Lords weren't likely to get sentimental in their old age.

If they had insisted upon the Astartes Praeses to garrison Cadia, it was because all signs indicated that their strength would be badly needed in the coming years.

Still, as he walked on the parade ground of the Tyrok Fields, the supreme commander of the Cadian Shock Troopers could not help but smile at the banners present today. The Crimson Scythes and the Excoriators' standards flew high, accompanied by the Black Templars and the Knights Unyielding. Battle-Brothers of the Viper Legion stood side by side with the companies of Black Consuls.

There were millions of Cadian and non-Cadian guardsmen standing at attention on this windy, cloudless day, but there were also thousands of Space Marines, most of them armed to the teeth, veterans of countless wars and representing twenty-five Chapters.

And after today, if the God-Emperor willed it, one more would have been added to the records.

A couple of minutes later, the Thunderhawks descended from the skies. Andreas Waldersee had gained a great deal of experience with Astartes war machines by now, but a Whiteshield would have noticed that for eight-tenths of these machines, it wasn't just the paint which was brand-new; these gunships must have come out of a Forge's manufactorum at most a few years ago.

Equally impressive were the tanks which rapidly rolled out of the Thunderhawk Transports. Predators and Rhinos were nothing new, but these ones looked like they had been refitted with new weaponry.

And marching out of the Thunderhawk's hold, were the Battle-Brothers of the Silver Skulls Chapter. The Governor Primus had to admit he knew very little about these Space Marines save that they were recorded as proud sons of Guilliman and scions of the Second Founding. Their homeworld being located in Ultima Segmentum meant that rarely they deployed in Segmentum Obscurus, and never in support of the Astartes Praeses.

And yet they were there, and if the banners and effectives were any indication, they had come with five Companies, half of their Chapter. It wasn't a small commitment.

The giant Astartes leading them was a colossus wearing unique silvery heavy power armour decorated by a gold cloak and several military seals of purity, some of them he had never seen before, such as a golden spider.

"Governor," the Space Marine grunted, "I am Chapter Master Argentius, twelfth Chapter Master of the Silver Skulls, Guardian of the Pax Argentius, Protector of Varsavia, Warden of the Rune-stones. We have come to defend Cadia in these troubled times."

Andreas Waldersee nodded in thanks. No Cadian could properly show subordination to the Adeptus Astartes, there were rules to be respected, but the addition of this many companies to the order of battle was definitely appreciated.

"I am pleased to have such prestigious warriors fighting by our side," the ageing Governor Primus declared. "We didn't expect your arrival, but your commitment to the defence of Cadia is more than welcome."

The Chapter Master grunted and then took one step to the left as two of his Space Marines, until now half-hidden behind the progression, stopped a few metres away from him, posing with what was certainly a richly-decorated reliquary on a silvery tray.

"I also bring a gift from Her Celestial Highness Lady Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver." The Space Marine's voice took a far more reverential tone. "While she is unable to come to Cadia's help at this hour, Her Celestial Highness requested me to convey the message you weren't forgotten as the monsters are at the Gates."

Mechanisms were unlocked, and suddenly golden light began to illuminate the reliquary and everything around it.

Andreas approached it, and saw that within the priceless container, a simple power sword awaited, and though the Governor Primus had never seen it before, it was one heavily described in the old tales of Cadia.

The shock almost made him gape like a young Whiteshield, though he recovered quickly.

"You found *Galatine*." How did the living Saint...Commorragh. It had to be Commorragh.

"Her Celestial Highness did. Elite Artisans and Priests brought it back to full splendour, and Lady Weaver herself added the crystal of Aethergold to the hilt."

The Cadian Governor Primus had no issue believing it. The sheer power emanating from the sword and the aura of...righteousness convinced him without debate this was the weapon of a Living Saint.

"I have been given another personal message. The Pylons must not fall."

"They won't," Andreas swore. "Cadia will stand."

**Calyx Expanse**

**Phyrr System**

**Phyrr**

**9.288.303M35**

**Captain Boros Kurn**

Boros Kurn was beginning to really, really hate the Phyrr System and its myriads of lethal 'surprises'. It was bad enough the planet was killing most lifeforms not protected by hermetically-sealed void suits and power armours, but most of the fauna and flora also appeared to have evolved to slaughter everything foreign having the misfortune to step on the beautiful continents.

By the dead soul of his Primarch, how could a planet be so glimmering and perfect from high orbit, and reveal itself as such a death trap on the ground? The luscious forests had the greatest concentration of super-predators he had ever seen, and this included comparisons to several Daemon Worlds in the Eye of Terror!

"Sorcerers," the Son of Horus contacted the magic-dabblers of Q'Sal who had come with him into this gods-forsaken hellhole. "I withdraw my previous restrictions. Full deployment of your Daemon Engines is authorised."

"Limitations?" the sorcerer at the other end of the communication demanded after cackling in a manner which gave Boros feelings of unease.

"Kill everything you want," the Astartes replied, "just make sure to keep a reserve. I don't know where the Khornate forces have landed-"

The Gods loved their irony, he thought, as a monumental explosion was heard in the distance, generating an ill-omened column of smoke.

"Never mind. Khornate forces' presence must be considered certain north-north-east of my position."

"Maybe the fauna of Phyrr will kill them."

"And maybe groxes will learn to fly," Boros retorted hotly. "Your own fellow Seers confirmed Khârn is with them. It is going to take more than a few monsters of claws, fur, and toxins to put him down."

The worst part was that, if he was honest with himself, that was understating the resilience of the Betrayer. Everyone knew the former Equerry of Angron the Bloody-Handed Maniac was a monster at every range and with every existing weapon...before he was given the blessing of the Blood God.

"Our attempts at Divination have not confirmed your initial impressions."

"Then let's locate the temple, find the relic we have come for, and leave this Death World before our death settles the Divination issues once and for all."

Boros believed himself to be an elite Astartes Legionnaire compared to the average World Eater unable to think about anything beyond the most basic 'charge!' order, but a duel with Khârn would only end with his death.

The Betrayer was a machine of destruction and unending slaughter which never tired, never gave up until your head was removed from your shoulders, and never looked like he was satiated by a planetary carnage.

"Unfortunately, our efforts to locate the structure Warlord Malicia gave us appear to be...insufficient." The sorcerer had the humility to not sound so smug this time. "We need more time."

"**KILL! MAIM! BURN**!"

The screams were still very far away, but the fact he was close enough to hear them...

"We don't have time!" he barked while gunning down these enormous wolf-cats that even a mad Space Wolf wouldn't take as pets. "Khârn is coming this way! Tell your Daemon Engines to converse on..." the Space Marine listed the planetary coordinates before he allowed himself to scowl.

"Our Daemon Engines are precious resources. Send your militia first to delay him."

"Who is in supreme command here?" He shouted on his leadership communication device.

"You are..." the Q'Sal sorcerer acknowledged, the noise of his teeth gritting loudly through the vox. "For now. I wonder how long the Destiny Unwritten will keep you around. You are no servant of Tzeentch..."

"I am not," Boros said, half-irritated the worm dared openly badmouthing him while safely far away from his wrath, half-content because the endless power plays of Tzeentch-worshipping Marines and Sorcerers were the very reason Sons of Horus like him were always in high demand. They weren't innocent and totally reliable, but his 'ally' knew they weren't plotting at every hour to remove her from power. "Now OBEY!"

"Your orders will obeyed...to the letter."

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!"

"How many maniacs and rival factions have gathered in this damn system?" Boros wondered after cutting communication with the 'rear-line support' and switching to his personal command of Sixteenth Legionnaires.

"Too many, Captain." His second chuckled. "Too many. Let's look on the bright side, we now have plenty of ammunition to kill them all."

"Don't get too trigger-happy," his superior commanded. "We've yet to encounter a single World Eater and-"

Boros frowned and watched the sky for several seconds. Despite the auspexes telling him the contrary, there was...something flying quickly over the forest.

"Attention to all troops!" The Son of Horus began. "We have a...sort of mutant creature flying close to the last explosions caused by the World Eaters. Appearance is...it looks like a white-skinned woman with several wings."

When it came down to it, the look was almost...angelic.

And then a horrible, apocalyptic psychic scream echoed across the Phyrr forests, and the failing battle-plans became instantaneously obsolete.

**Phyrr System**

**Exorcist-class Inquisitorial Grand Cruiser *Purge of Infidels***

**Lord Inquisitor Luigi Barberini**

"And the warnings of Lady Weaver have been more than confirmed: this creature known as the 'Simurgh' indeed has the terrifying ability to place mental compulsions in the minds of every human not protected by psychic defences." The Grey Knight Justicar grimly ended his report. "So far, the crystal of Aethergold we use to break this treacherous mental onslaught has been successful discovering the main targets of the scream, but we have to test each and every man and woman of the *Purge of Infidels*, and it is going to take many hours to complete the process."

"Hours we don't have," The Lord Inquisitor didn't raise his voice, and he didn't tell the loyal servant of the God-Emperor it was insufficient; it was the honest and unpleasant truth. "How many members of the crew have we lost in these 'Aethergold tests'?"

"Over three hundred by the time I left, Lord Inquisitor."

Luigi Barberini internally grimaced. He was no stranger to bloody casualty lists, but the sheer damage caused by this psychic scream which couldn't have lasted more than a single minute was extremely bad.

"And the goal of this creature was simply to delay us."

A goal which, as galling as it was to admit, was largely successful. For this perilous mission, the Lord Inquisitor had been given two Aethergold crystals, one for his Navigators, the other for himself – it was the latter which was currently 'loaned' to the Grey Knights to ensure no unwilling saboteurs had been psychically corrupted by this...damnable creature.

The senior figure of the Ordo Malleus couldn't risk a new engagement against it before he was sure his crew was mentally protected against this heretical weapon. As stated previously, it was going to take time. And it appeared the battle in the Phyrr System hadn't waited for the arrival of the Holy Inquisition.

"Yes, Lord Inquisitor. By my most conservative calculations, we will need three more hours to restore minimal fighting capacity to the *Purge of Infidels*. Seventeen additional hours will be required after this to enter effective weapon range of the enemy warships. The only weapon we have left able to inflict destruction on the enemy with...are the Exterminatus weapons."

"And we can't use them when that horrible xenos *thing* is present. Given how capable it proved at manipulating Imperial technology to have a FTL method of transportation and ambush, I have no desire to let it come into possession of our world-killer assets."

The Simurgh had already surprised them by hiding aboard the derelict hull of a Hades-class Heavy Cruiser and activating the still-functioning Void Shields at the last possible moment. What it could do with Virus Bombs or Vortex Torpedoes, Luigi Barberini had no wish to find out in person.

"It is regrettable the rest of the fleet is several standard weeks behind us."

"I fear that what is most regrettable is that this fleet is certainly too small to deal with what we are going to face in that star cluster."

The initial reports had already been bad. The Calyx Expanse was not part of the Imperium, but there had always been Rogue Traders and courageous loyalist souls holding the darkness at bay in these regions where the holy light of the Astronomican didn't reach.

Unlike most of the regions which had been illuminated after the destruction of Biel-Tan and Commorragh though, darkness had fallen upon the Calyx Expanse once more, and hordes of heretics had been seen sailing in its direction. The creation of a new Warp Storm looking like an ever-changing series of heretical symbols used by those sworn to the concept of lies proved that the concerns of his peers on Titan were alas underestimating the danger.

"Khornate forces, including the infamous Betrayer. The sorceress we are ordered to capture alive at all costs. Numerous traitors we have dreamed of bringing to justice for millennia. The collapsing empire of the Yu'Vath. And now the Simurgh."

Hundreds, no, thousands of planets were enjoying a brighter future because the dark torturers of Commorragh were obliterated. But in the Calyx Expanse, the exact opposite had happened, and it didn't take an Inquisitorial mind to know things were going to get worse if this tide of heresy wasn't stopped in time.

"I am going to need to send a new Astropathic message to Saturn." Luigi hoped it would be the first, but his instinct, honed by centuries of fighting against the abominations of the Ruinous Powers, told him the worst was yet to come.

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**10th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KHÂRN**

'**THE BETRAYER'**

**BERSERKER ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT OVERWHELMING ASTARTES STRENGTH OR A PRIMARCH**

**IF INSUFFICIENT MILITARY SUPPORT FLEE ON SIGHT**

**ALPHA WARNING: THE TRAITOR HAS SURVIVED EVERYTHING THE DEFENDERS OF TERRA COULD THROW AT HIM. FOR THE LOVE OF THE EMPEROR DO NOT FIGHT HIM IN A DUEL.**

**REWARD: 2 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP**

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**Calyx** **Expanse**

**Phyrr System**

**Phyrr**

**Khârn the Betrayer**

"**I have slaughtered five thousand three hundred and six birds you whipped into frenzy, winged bitch**."

Blood dripped from his hands, the very lifeblood of the Death World he was walking upon. That was good.

The Butcher's Nails had stopped hurting. That was bad. This was when the Blood God demanded of him to eliminate an opponent which didn't play by the rules.

"**Four thousand and two animals, including eight hundred giant felines, have perished by my hands and *Gorechild***."

This was a good day of battle for him, as the blood flowed and the predators of this world had not hidden behind the trees waiting for him to come at them. No, they had recognised him as one of theirs, a threat to their territories, and tried to end him.

"**I AM KHÂRN! COME FIGHT ME WINGED BITCH! PROVE THAT YOU ARE WORTHY TO HAVE YOUR SKULL EXHIBITED ON THE SKULL THRONE**!"

Debris rained and maddened cultists tried to charge him.

Four swipes of his axe put them down. Then four more strikes finished those who tried to flee.

"**I AM FOLLOWING THE RED PATH! KILL, MAIM, AND BURN ARE MY WORDS**!"

He had to jump to the left as the enemy used its telekinetic power to throw a Daemon Engine at him.

The Betrayer snarled. The winged bitch was not capable of controlling them, but it mattered little: the Engine was sworn to the Lord of Sorcery, and in this era of chaos, the intelligence of the Daemon recognised him as one of the chosen enemies of his God.

Until *Gorechild* shattered its vital points, he tore off the head and most of the limbs, and finished it all in a carnage of burning promethium, broken machine parts, and wounded souls.

"**YOU CAN FLEE**!" Two more cultists were added to his kill-count. "**YOU CAN HIDE! YOU CAN SEND THESE PATHETIC WRETCHES AGAINST ME**!"

*Gorechild* drank the blood of many warrior-like gladiators of the Screaming Vortex. They should have trusted Khorne more. The God of War knew his own, and while this psychic scream didn't come from the Warp, Khorne could protect them from this cowardly intimidation attack.

"**BUT IN THE END...I WILL BE THE LAST CHAMPION STANDING! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!"

Then a gigantic shadow came over him, and the former Equerry of the World Eaters' Legion recognised several things quasi-immediately.

One: this creature, the Simurgh, had found the ancient temple everyone had been searching for these last several days.

Two: said temple was telekinetically raised at high altitude right above his head.

Three: it was this damnable creature's fault that the artefact had taken so long to find and the battle between him and the rest of the planet had happened.

Four: the winged bitch had never had any intention of fighting him in person.

"**I HATE YOU! COME AND FIGHT ME, OR CONSIDER YOURSELF CURSED BY THE BLOOD GOD**!"

There was no answer, and the mountain of stones and lush foundation suddenly stopped being telekinetically lifted. The enemy was trying to crush him with a mountain.

The world screamed and the sky turned red. Servants of the Lord of Slaughter ran across the planet's surface.

The ground contorted, and Khârn ran on the crimson path which would lead him to this new devilish and cowardly enemy.

More machines were thrown at him. More maddened mortals were sacrificed by this being whose very presence was an insult to his God.

"**KILL! MAIM! BURN**!" The Betrayer roared. "**I WILL CLAIM YOUR SKULL FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!"

**Calyx Expanse**

**Malfi System**

**Malfi**

**Approximately 9.598.303M35**

**Malicia**

"Thank you for your prompt report, Lord Seer. I need to carefully consider this information for the next few hours. I will contact you again when I will have written my new instructions to Captain Kurn."

The Lord Sorcerer bowed and left the hall at a moderate pace.

The door closed.

The security wards, fruit of dozens of hours of sorcery practise, activated.

Anti-spying measures went into full effect.

Sheer rage burned in her heads and her lungs.

And Malicia couldn't restrain her hatred and anger anymore.

"FUCKING ENDBRINGER!" she launched a mirror and several chairs against the walls, where the violence of the shock created many splinters. "WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO STOP RUINING MY LIFE! WHEN ARE YOU GOING STOP TRYING TO MAKE EVERYTHING WORSE? IT WASN'T ENOUGH FOR YOU TO SPREAD YOUR MADNESS ACROSS EARTH BET, YOU HAD TO GO POUR MORE OF YOUR INSANITY IN THIS GALAXY TOO?! SCREW YOU ZIZ! I AM GOING TO TEAR OUT YOUR CURSED FEATHERS ONE BY ONE AND THEN FEED THEM TO YOU UNTIL YOU EXPLODE!"

For several minutes, the sorcerer-parahuman screamed and unleashed every frustration she had in her heart against the abomination that was the Simurgh. And she had a lot.

It was bad enough that winged parasite had turned a simple recovery mission into a multi-sided battle where the Betrayer and the Hopekiller had been involved. Malicia didn't care about the fauna or flora of Phyrr; the Death World would never be colonised and even training elite troops there was not a sane option. But the Sons of Horus and the forces she had sent to collect the relics of Phyrr were precious for her expansion plans, though thankfully not irreplaceable. But now she was going to have to treat them with Changestone, or risk having 'mental bombs' triggering in the heads of her followers at the worst moment, and a sorcerer dying in the middle of a daemon summoning was a disaster which was better avoided at all costs.

But the worst part was the winged abomination being aware of her secret plans, the ones only Tzeentch and herself were supposed to know about. Officially, the motivations for Phyrr were limited to a few relics and a few kilograms of Noctilith dispersed in various trinkets. The kind of 'prize' plenty of other worlds in the galaxy could surpass without difficulty.

"How by the soul-forges of Q'Sal did that monster know?"

Despite being alone and guarded by magical protections with no equal in the Calyx Expanse save at Q'Sal, Malicia didn't dare voicing her thoughts loudly.

How did the Simurgh know her chief plan involved the Tyrant Star?

It simply shouldn't be possible. The monster couldn't have read it in her mind; it had never been in contact with her since she arrived in this galaxy, never mind left the Eye of Terror. Besides, her pledge to Tzeentch gave her impressive mental defences. As for reading the future, it should be more difficult to predict, not less. With the mess provoked by Commorragh, accurately reading the threads of Chaos was not a precise art anymore, if it had ever been in the first place.

"Do you want the Tyrant Star for your own plans, or are just content to screw over the plans of all surviving parahumans?"

A question which, alas, wouldn't be answered today. The only being which could reveal the goals of the Simurgh was the Simurgh itself. Sorcery had allowed the Seers of Q'Sal to perceive her after Phyrr...barely.

Anyway, this disaster alone had destroyed a lot of secondary plans and would force her to activate a lot of contingencies. Changestone recovery efforts had been curtailed, and as every year increased the risk of important Nurgle servants entering the Calyx Expanse, the window of opportunity she had been counting on was closing even more swiftly than in her worst estimates.

The servants of the Anathema waiting on his Golden Throne were also approaching. The single ship which had departed Phyrr was a single Grand Cruiser, but where one went, others would follow. Ordinarily, the ripples in the Warp created by her Changestone would have prevented them from intervening, but it appeared Weaver had given some of her Aethergold to the Inquisition.

It wasn't a bad strategy from the Mistress of the Swarm's point of view; unlike Malicia, she had a galaxy-spanning organisation to search out for Noctilith for her. And if the Simurgh or another party ruined her ambitions in the short-term, the consequences would be...

Malicia grimaced.

Her anger and rage abated, and she felt really, really tired.

She was going to need an extremely powerful weapon or spell to shatter the Simurgh, but damn if she could think of anything useful at the moment.

Uttering nine words not created by any human mind, a portal kept under several illusions was powered up, and the blue-clad sorceress stepped through.

It was only then, as the circle of sorcery and ancient psy-tech closed behind her, that the young woman finally removed the mask hiding her features.

Her hair had been blonde once, but now it had turned into perfect platinum, the kind of hair the majority of humans couldn't arrive at normally without a lot of dye...or sorcery.

Her eyes continued to be blue...but it was an pupil-less blue, and the expression 'flames are burning in your eyes' was not a proverb anymore where she was concerned.

The moral of the story: always be careful what you say when you negotiate a pact with a god of Chaos and Lies.

Though she didn't know if she could have done a lot more to prepare herself. It was out of the question to return to...to that Wretch, that Spawn-like body her bastard of a sister had transformed her into.

"I will pay my debts in due time," the woman who once had been known as the heroine Glory Girl, the less flattering nickname of 'Patron Saint of Collateral Damage', or for her friends, Victoria Dallon. "The Simurgh has placed itself first on my list, but the others haven't been forgotten."

Tzeentch could believe its manipulations were sufficient to enforce total control of her, but the so-called 'Architect of Fate' was not infallible. No one was.

"I was betrayed once. This galaxy will burn before I allow a second person to hurt me again."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Tomb-World of Sarlok**

**8.116.304M35**

**Deathwatch Captain Draak Terrek**

There were some immutable truths in this galaxy. The Flesh was weak. All heretics and xenos had to die in order to protect the Imperium. And a successful operation against one's enemy did not automatically result in events following the same path in the next battle, no matter how similar the enemy and its capacities seemed at first glance.

"What went wrong with Squad Theta?" He asked the Deathwatch Captain that everyone nicknamed 'the Raven', since his affiliation to the Raven Guard was all they about him.

"I don't know." The other Space Marine grimly answered. "But the manner in which their Thunderhawk crashed...there has to be a new type of anti-aircraft battery waiting for them. Their gunner dealt with it, but too late."

Draak nodded. This was an acceptable explanation, though he would spend several more cycles of cogitator-processing verifying the data of the engagement personally. This was absolutely needed, for this single incident had resulted in the death of ten veteran Space Marines of the Deathwatch.

And this had just been the very beginning of an avalanche of casualties the likes the black battle-brothers saw rarely except in the most dreadful wars.

"We are going to need to cancel the next operation, however." The Raven continued. "I know the Lords of the Ordo Xenos insisted upon conducting operations as soon as our squads were sufficiently trained to take over these 'Tomb-Worlds', but we have lost half of our battle-brothers in five hours of engagement, and many more are wounded to the point they need several doses of Bacta to fully recover."

"These molecular disintegrators of the Necrons are indeed an alpha-grade threat," the Iron Hand admitted. "For all the vids, the archived stories, and the meetings with our cousins who were at Commorragh...it is unpleasant to face an enemy which dominates us technologically."

If they hadn't been given new shields with integrated ion bulwarks, the casualties would have been worse.

"I concur," agreed the Raven Guard Astartes darkly. "And I was unpleasantly surprised by the fact their orange- coloured radioactive guns had more range and a quicker rate of fire than the Necrons we fought at Orrak."

"They appear to have more power output individually too."

Which, given that the Orrak Necrons had infantry guns capable of piercing the armour of a Predator in a single shot, was not something increasing the odds of a Space Marine victory against these xenos.

"The difference between one of their 'Crownworlds' and a 'Coreworld', you think?"

"Possibly. I am more inclined to think this might also be a difference of factions. Information we were given emphasized the 'Hyrekh' faction was more...conservative technologically than the 'Sekemtar' faction."

Their surroundings supported this idea, at least. Draak Terrek had fought in the vaults of Orrak, and save for the self-destruction charges of this Tomb World, nothing had seemed really functional. The forces were sluggish, the scouts and ambushers believed covering themselves with flayed meat would give them a tactical advantage, and the structure was one step away from being a complete ruin.

By comparison, this Tomb-World was fully functional, as the walls around them were still crackling with orange energy. And while Draak wasn't about to congratulate any xenos for their architectural prowess, he had to acknowledge building this sort of subterranean complex was a feat of engineering few races could achieve.

"Which team found the artefact?"

"Team Epsilon did," the Raven informed him, his voice containing an inflexion the Iron Hand wasn't able to identify. "Curious things these artefacts. The first one looked like a prism, but this one has the shape of a mask."

"Very curious," Draak didn't care about these xenos anyway; all he wanted was for the Necrons to never threaten the Imperium, and with the neutralisation of the Sarlok command node, these Necrons were denied the possibility of wounding and killing more Space Marines. "If Epsilon found it, it meant it was in the one of the less defended sections of the Tomb. This is the complete opposite of what we found at Orrak."

"True. Maybe they had different strategies about guarding certain artefacts?" the Raven speculated. "The only reasonable alternative is that they thought the might of their outer defences was sufficient to handle everything coming their way while they awakened their sleeping legions."

"That is a very arrogant mindset." Assuredly the Deathwatch had been given priceless information to conduct the mission, but the Necron defences couldn't have repelled a conventional assault including Titans, Knights, and several hundred Space Marines. "But I know from experience how arrogance can easily cost you your life," his own Chapter had not, to his sorrow. Maybe they really believed that..."A few of these machines were taught their belief was gravely mistaken before we deprived the Tomb's Abominable Intelligence of power..."

**The** **Webway**

**Catacomb of Architects**

**Primarch Rogal Dorn**

"We are being followed, my Lord."

"Followed is not the right word." The Primarch of the Imperial Fists corrected as they continued running. "We are being pursued. We might have been since we left Commorragh."

It had only been a theoretical at first, as Guilliman would say. But as his escort and he explored tunnel after tunnel of the Webway, the mental itch had become worse, and now Rogal didn't need the metaphysical senses he didn't truly know the full capabilities of to know they had a hunter on their trail.

"It is incredibly stupid if it thinks it can best us, father," one of his Black Templars affirmed.

"It would be stupid if the entity following us can't deal with a Primarch on its own," the Seventh Primarch corrected. "I don't truly know what it is, but I am rather confident this hunter was corrupted by Chaos. And it knows who I am and at least has an idea of my capabilities. No, sons and nephews. The enemy may be arrogant, but it knows what our effectives and our skills are. The monsters of the Outer Dark believe that this creature can at the very least give us a challenge."

It had to be a contingency which had been put in place decades or centuries ago for it to become active so quickly. Maybe one of the prisoners tortured and imprisoned alongside him in the labyrinth of cells formed by the most secure of Commorragh prisons.

For most masterminds, it would have been completely unthinkable to waste such an asset to counter something which might never come in ten lifetimes. Alas, the 'masterminds' in this case were not humans, did not care about their followers or the potential strength they represented, and were content to give them hellish punishments for minor or nonexistent failures.

"The Khan is near," he had begun to hear the sound of clashing blades since what felt like fifteen minutes ago. "If we join forces with him, our pursuer will have no choice but to abandon this hunt."

About one thousand steps later, they entered a new Webway cavern. One which was in fact large enough to host a Hive in its own right or be the core of some agricultural project.

But since the most common species in the Webway was the Eldar, this respectable amount of land had been used to build a massive arena.

Setting aside the deplorable artistic style of these xenos – whips, barbed tongues, spikes, figures with long-ears torturing everyone and everything – this was a prodigious waste of space and means.

They had arrived several levels above the highest stands of this monument dedicated to the bloodsports, as such Rogal had no problem seeing the lone figure standing in the middle of the arena against a host of shadowy monsters.

He had plenty of new scars, his hair and beard were unkempt and gave him a dishevelled and downtrodden aura, his armour was as much a ruin as Rogal's, but this was Jaghatai.

His hearts beat harder. After so long, finally, Rogal was seeing one of his brothers alive. Now for saving him...

"There is a psychic field of some sort protecting the arena," the lone Howling Griffon warned him. "There's also some sort of...xenos technology active, I think."

"It's certainly tied to these purple-black columns spread all over the arena's perimeter." One of the Salamanders pointed out in a tone which had to be accompanied by a grimace. "We have several grenades left, but I don't know if it's going to be enough."

"Improvise," Dorn said curtly. "Your priority is to free my brother as quickly as possible. I'm trusting you with his life." Not that Jaghatai appeared to be very threatened by the shadowy monsters trying to kill him, but his movements and overall speed were far from the skills he had seen back during the Siege. His brother was exhausted and most likely wounded behind the scrap-armour; in this state, a Primarch could make more mistakes than normally and get himself killed. The Heresy had proven they weren't invincible, and save Vulkan, none of them had returned from death. "I am going to take care of our unwanted follower."

Therefore as the ten Astartes descended the uneven slope at an impressive speed while roaring their respective battle-cries, Rogal followed them at what was for a Primarch a solemn and very slow pace.

"**You are going to take care of me?**" The thing which left the tunnel was humanoid and had taken on the appearance of a Word Bearer Legionnaire. Maybe the intention had been to disguise itself in a shape which was similar to the bodies of the Great Crusade, but the illusion was failing in some places. Scripts changed on the grey armour, and here and there the red colour beneath, a coat of betrayal and treason earned on ten thousand worlds like Isstvan V and Calth, was taking over. "**One might think that the ruin of the Imperial Palace and the Iron Cage would have taught you some humility, Praetorian**."

"And one might have thought that being used as a slave by the mediocrity you called father over and over would have taught you something as well, *lapdog*."

The creature was almost upon him when he answered; the grimace of hatred and the rage emanating from it proved his barb had struck true.

Rogal moved...and the weapon he had grafted to replace his missing hand delivered a splendid uppercut to where the faces of most beings were located. In mere seconds, he delivered a punishment that would have seriously inconvenienced one of his brothers...and then grasped his enemy by the throat and threw it into one of the nearest crevices built by the Eldar. Since those things were filled with spikes, impaling devices, and even less pleasurable things...

Rogal didn't let his guard down, though. If the Enemy had thought this thing was a match for him, there was no way it would die so easily.

This was confirmed within three seconds, as smoke erupted from the pit, and an immense daemonic claw grabbed the edge of the crevice.

"**You are going to pay for that, Praetorian. It hurt**."

The thing in front of him no longer had anything in common with a Word Bearer, or a Space Marine for that matter.

Long and membranous red wings akin to some sort of gigantic bat were unfurled. Horns and spikes were revealed all over a body of nightmares. The claws in place of the hands were monstrous. The arms they were attached to were if anything worse.

No matter how you looked at it, there was nothing to make the shape of the abomination less terrible or let you to believe there was something redeemable to be found.

Rogal knew he was looking at one of the real forms of this...this daemon, and that was the true face of what 'Horus' benefactors' truly were. Eldritch monsters one and all, whose goal was nothing but to destroy everything Mankind had ever built. And the Traitors had the gall to tell them they were fighting for a lie?

"I've heard that countless times, abomination."

The daemon laughed.

"**Ah, but the others didn't have this weapon**."

A sword was drawn from a black scabbard, and the Primarch of the Imperial Fists knew instantly it was bad news. It was slightly incurved at mid-length, and had the look of an Eldar sword. Nothing too formidable, but the breath of power it suffused was rather...significant.

"**Impressed, Praetorian**?" the monster cackled. "**This is *Kha-vir*, the Sword of Sorrows. One strike is all it takes, and you will be turned to ash**."

This would have been very impressive...if the claw holding the blade didn't instantly begin to burn in black flames.

"**ARRGH**!" but the abomination didn't let go of the blade/didn't drop the blade. And it kept its malefic eyes on him. Impressive determination...if the smell of cooked meat was any indication, the blade's power was burning the daemon rather severely.

"You forgot to ask your fell masters to make you immune to the blade." Rogal gave the monster the most reprimanding tone he could muster at short notice. "And people wonder why I have such a low opinion of the Word Bearers' intelligence."

"**I am going to kill you very, very slowly**," the monster hissed. "**In the name of Lorgar, I, Argel Tal, Crimson Lord of the Gal Vorbak, am going to end your life**!"

Rogal had an eidetic memory like every Primarch, and as such remembered the name. Argel Tal. Before Monarchia – the last time the Word Bearers had given an order of battle which was not a horrible lie – the name had been the one of the Captain of the 7th Assault Company of the Serrated Sun Chapter.

It was difficult to believe a Space Marine could become this thing in front of him, but then again a daemon had usurped Fulgrim's body and transformed it into a four-armed serpentine abomination.

The red-skinned monster tensed...and suddenly paused to look at his right claw-hand, where the sword was suddenly missing and the limb severed at the level of the wrist.

The white armoured Eldar female who had jumped away, the Sword of Sorrows in hand, was certainly responsible for that. As were the numerous clowns materialising everywhere, surrounding him and the lapdog of Lorgar.

"**Return** **that** **sword to me IMMEDIATELY**!"

The red-skinned monster shouldn't have turned his head. Once more, Rogal's fist hammered against the red skin, and this time he fired the Plasma Gun he had held in reserve to shoot him at a range so short the appellation of close-combat didn't seem so appropriate. Then he threw the gun into the air and plunged a grenade in the abomination's flesh. Less than a second later, the daemon was learning how to fly and met the bottom of the crevice for the second time...and Rogal seized his gun once more and began to shoot.

"**I WILL KILL YOU**!"

The wings were bleeding the black fluid which could have been blood for daemons, but it managed to rise once again...until he seized it by the throat and squeezed. Then the head found itself under his armoured left boot.

"**I AM THE LORD OF THE GAL VORBAK! THE GODS CHOSE ME TO END YOU**!"

"There are no gods in the Warp. Only monsters and abominations." And he ripped off a wing. Before ripping out the lower maw which had already regenerated.

"**YOU CAN LIE TO YOURSELF BUT THIS IS THE TRUTH**!"

"I have seen what your fellow abominations did to the population of Terra, lapdog of Lorgar." This time he used one of his knives to dismember the daemon as fast as he could. "Mankind has done some horrible things, but our sins aren't a shadow of those parasites you worship. And for the record..."

The second arm was severed in the next second.

"I never lie. Unlike your Legion of oath-breakers."

"**THE FALSE EMPEROR LIED TO US**!"

"No. No, he didn't."

The voice was tired, the footsteps were slow and there was no lightning-fast attack to accompany his arrival.

But when his brother marched out of the arena, hundreds of metres away, the abomination went silent for eight seconds.

"An oath is an oath," the Great Khan of the White Scars declared. "And you were the ones to break it. What did He promise? An Imperium where Mankind would be safe, where science and logic would be prized and blind faith and zealotry would be discarded and forgotten. I might have my differences with my father, but he never lied about his goals and his dream."

The eyes of the Warhawk stared at the red-skinned daemon.

"Run, Traitor. Run and know that for all the lives and futures you have broken, the only reward you will receive is cruelty, damnation, and more cruelty piled atop it."

The abomination which might once have been a Word Bearer Legionnaire rose again, half of its wounds still bleeding.

"**There will be other battles**." Fangs and a snake-like tongue were bared in defiance. "**And you won't escape your doom forever, Primarchs**."

A Bolter barked and the daemon received a shell between his eyes.

"Run, lapdog." Dorn ordered calmly. "And tell Lorgar that if he wants to kill me, he'd better come in person do the job."

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists shrugged.

"But we both know he won't. So run back to him and reclaim your place in the Legion of monsters and cowards."

The daemon growled...and then proceeded to do exactly that.

Rogal turned his head to ask the Eldar what they were doing here, but by the time he opened his mouth, they too were running away, albeit in a very different direction...

**Segmentum** **Pacificus**

***The* *Rock***

**5.256.305M35**

**Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels Lucifer**

This was the first time the Inner Circle used this hall since 001.M34 and the opening of the 4th Black Crusade.

Yet if a Dark Angel not privy to the affairs of the Inner Circle was invited here into the depths of the *Rock*, he would be unable to find any physical evidence proclaiming the considerable historical weight of the room.

The statues bearing the sigils of the different Dark Angels' Battle-Companies were as austere and simple as the ones displayed in the other rooms the Chapter used for day-to-day activities. There was no ornamentation aside from these blocks of stone, no gemstones, no gold, and no art susceptible to catching the eye of a patron of the arts.

There were several candles providing meagre illumination, but Ecclesiarchy Pontifexes routinely used better ones.

In one word like in one hundred, the location and everything nearby was a spectacle of asceticism and frugality to the point non-Dark Angels might have found it quite disturbing.

It didn't matter for the fifteen Space Marines assembled there, clearly.

They hadn't permitted a Space Marine who wasn't a son of the Lion anywhere near those rooms since their gene-sire himself walked among them and this citadel was a mere castle, not the star-faring base it had become.

And if they had their way, this state of affairs would continue for all eternity.

They were the leaders of the Unforgiven, the disciples of long-destroyed Caliban, and they hunted the Fallen.

It was rare they were in disagreement. Today was one of these exceptional instances.

"Enough." He declared.

"Supreme Grand Master, I-"

"Enough."

The Master of the 4th Company bowed deeply to apologise.

"Don't believe for a second I am happier to hear the bad news than you are, brothers." Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels Lucifer spoke quietly. "But at this moment, haste truly is our enemy. I am not happy to know our secrets are known by too many people. It is a situation all our predecessors have made supreme efforts to avoid. But the usual procedures we adopt in cases like this would do worse than confirming the truth to the Inquisition and many other organisations of the Imperium. They would brand us as *Traitors*."

There was no shudder, no grimace, and no expression of disgust. But the air suddenly felt colder, and all the faces of the Astartes present looked like statues carved of marble.

"I agree we can't...take action against Nyx. That world is too defended and holds the secrets of Bacta, the latter which is too useful in healing our wounded battle-brothers and bringing many of our Venerable Ancients back to active duty." The Master of the Ravenwing agreed.

"And when it comes to it, they have only a minor Fallen there," the Master of the 7th Company declared. "I know our duty demands of us to take all of them back to the *Rock*, but this one appears to try to find redemption."

"But when it comes to it, he revealed some of our deepest secrets to many, many Space Marine Chapters." The Master of the Deathwing icily countered. "And let's not forget the presence of Cypher."

The name was whispered with the hatred it deserved.

"Peace, brother. Cypher will be captured in due time, and by the Lion's name, we will make him repent."

"My apologies, Supreme Grand Master."

"As I said, and I repeat, having someone know our gravest and most important secrets is a shame we will have to endure. The fact this person is a Living Saint benefitting from Custodes protection however is one of the many reasons we won't move against her. Lady Weaver clearly has received the Emperor's blessing, and though our secrets are no longer secret with her, she has chosen to not disseminate them across the galaxy. This gives us...opportunities."

"You want to meet her, Supreme Grand Master?" The Grand Master of Chaplains asked.

"I want the Inner Circle and the other Chapters of the Unforgiven to consider the issue," Lucifer corrected his battle-brother.

"It will take time," the Master of the Ravenwing warned.

"With the military preparations around Cadia and the other major Fortress Worlds, we are not going to take the *Rock* across half the Imperium and deprive loyal worlds of our protection." The leader of the Inner Circle announced. "Not when all predictions confirm several Fallen intend to resurface and join the coming Black Crusade."

Fourteen heads nodded in approval. It had long been a source of frustration and loathing that many, many Fallen – estimates varied between three hundred and five thousand – had taken refuge in the Eye of Terror with the other renegades.

"We will speak with the other Inner Circles and return with an answer, Supreme Grand Master."

"Good. What is the next order of the day?"

"The Space Wolves."

This time the atmosphere of the room suddenly grew less formal.

"Please tell me their Great Wolf didn't empty half of his tankard on a vellum document bearing the High Lords' signatures."

"I don't know what exactly they've done recently," the Grand Master of Librarians admitted, "but it appears the Fabricator-General of Mars is...less than happy with whatever it may be."

"The sons of Russ sometimes are so caught up in their heroic tales they forget that for most of the innocent caught in their rampages, the reality is neither a tale nor heroic."

"Indeed, brother," the Master of the Ravenwing agreed. "But the Wolves are...wolves. We know better than a lot of politicians how undisciplined and drunk they can be. What is the High Lords' request?"

\*\*\*\*

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**The Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lord Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

Communicating with someone across long distances in the Eye of Terror was always a non-trivial task by itself.

Communicating with someone who was in the midst of the greatest muster of Word Bearer forces since the rebellion launched by the First Warmaster without the sons of Lorgar being aware of it increased the difficulty by a hundred times.

Iskandar was relatively satisfied by the efficiency of the new device Ceraxia's and his personal efforts had built in record time. One couldn't do anything about the awful appearance, unfortunately. From all sides, it definitely looked like a green jelly shaped by nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine screaming faces in a tank looking like half of an incomplete Daemon Engine.

It couldn't be helped. Secrecy was more important than appearances at this point.

"He certainly obtained the information necessary from the Alpha Legion before invoking his own daemonic pacts, Warmaster," the voice of Sota-Nul was distant but still recognisable, and there was no risk of misunderstanding. "The caches your Legion prepared and the strategic feints utterly eluded him, however. I think he didn't even use his resources to search, never mind find them."

"If so, that is good news," Ezekyle remarked. "A lot of shipments and subterfuges were placed in these contingencies, I would have hated to invest so much in them only for a Primarch to steal them. What can you tell me about this order of battle?"

"Unless his Dark Apostles and their useless priests try to once again meddle with things they don't understand," Hell Forge-Mistress Sota-Nul definitely sounded angry enough to dissect one or two Word Bearers in a fit of rage, "they should have one hundred and eight Battleships operational soon."

The Lord Vigilator didn't make a sound, but there were other members of the Ezekarion around him who lacked his restraint.

No one present to listen to this conversation was a stranger to military warfare, but the Black Legion had barely half of that number in its order of battle, and they wouldn't dream about engaging all of them in a single offensive; too many of these hulls were busy training new Astartes and crews to compensate for the losses of past campaigns.

"There are many drawbacks, obviously," the disciple of Kelbor-Hal continued in a voice which for a Tech-Priest of the 'New Mechanicum', was half-smug, half-teaching mode. "They have too few escorts, and of those they have they asked me to modernize or rebuild entirely, as they have little idea how to use them in their proper role. A few Coryphaus appear to have a decent grasp of raiding tactics and small fleet organisation, but the rest have really, really stupid ideas for their 'Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided', Warmaster."

This time everyone chuckled, Ezekyle included. Lorgar had always loved to aggrandise his projects and build things bigger, grander, and far more often than his brothers and the other Legions, and this hadn't changed.

"But they have not been suspicious of your allegiances?"

"No, Warmaster. I was surprised too, but their suspicions against foreign elements are more focused on the forces of the Alpha Legion."

"For good reason," an anonymous voice muttered.

"It's internally they are incredibly fractured, far more than I estimated in my most pessimistic projections," the Hell Forge-Mistress informed the most wanted being the Imperium had placed at the top of its kill-lists.

"They have a rising power of Anarchy in their backyard," Ezekyle reminded her.

"With all due respect, Warmaster, I don't think that alone can explain the divisions of the Dark Apostles and the other high officers. Many conversations they have in war councils make the Iron Warrior Warsmiths look cooperative and amicable. No, in my opinion the fault is Kor Phaeron's...and of course Erebus'."

"Someone should have drowned that bastard at birth," Vortigern grumbled.

"Continue to observe, Sota-Nul. The First Heretic has a plan, even if his is a stolen copy of one of ours which received additions to ingratiate himself with the Cyclops. As for Anarchy, don't intervene. Make sure your ships are clear of the rat vermin, and let Erebus turn the defeats into unmitigated disasters. We can trust the Vile One to accomplish this."

"Yes, Warmaster." Sota-Nul paused. "And the Black Crusade's ultimate goal?"

\*\*\*\*

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

'**MACHIAVELLI ALPHARIUS'**

**POSSIBLE AGENT OF THE ALPHA LEGION**

**PROBABLE CRIMES OF SEDITION AND HERESY ON TEN WORLDS OF HIS MOST HOLY MAJESTY**

**IDENTIFICATION PROBLEMATICAL**

**TIES UNKNOWN WITH TRAITOR ROGUE TRADERS AND CARTELS**

**REWARD: 100 MILLION THRONE GELTS**

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**Segmentum** **Tempestus**

**Gloriana Battleship *Beta***

**8.347.306M35**

**First Harrowmaster Machiavelli Gonzaga**

One day, he would begin his work not having to consider what to do about traitors to his own Legion.

Today was not that day.

"So Arkos and his warband have joined the rest of the daemon-worshippers at Sicarus."

"The *Anarchy's Heart* and every capital ship we know to be associated with him have been sighted, yes."

This wasn't good for the Imperium. That traitor and his forces had a fondness for sabotaging some vital strongholds by acting as commandos behind enemy lines.

It wasn't saying good things for the future of the Alpha Legion.

"We are going to need to resupply a lot of our assets in Obscurus and change many of our procedures. Arkos can't be allowed to gain access to our resources, be they old or new."

"I know." Machiavelli said grimly. "Vykus Skayle?"

"That one is a lesser threat," his chief of operations reassured him. "I'm not surprised he rallied to the Word Bearer's side, frankly. When he went rogue at the Siege, he was already a fanatic and had sold his soul to the Ruinous Powers."

"And he met with Kor Phaeron at least five times since the Scouring." Whoever could tolerate being in the same room with the Black Cardinal had either a talent for lying or shared the convictions of that monster. The First Harrowmaster was sure Vykus Skayle had both of these traits in spades. "Which leaves the Armoured Serpents. Do we have a clue who is hiding behind the identity of Phocron?"

The veteran of the Alpha Legion couldn't believe that old trick was in use again, but someone among the Eye renegades was evidently determined to prove him wrong.

"No. Based on the old data we have, we're fairly confident it isn't Armillus Dynat. Not one of the ships repaired in Sicarus shipyards is one of the Fallen Prince's. And we know he loves grand entrances."

"He might be willing to wait until the Word Bearers break through the Cadian Gate."

"Until they lose half of their ships and Space Marines against the walls of Cadia, you mean, First Harrowmaster," his subordinate smirked. "I have no great love for the Imperium of Mankind and the Shock Troopers, but this time they are taking the threat seriously. Cadia and the other Fortress Worlds are already heavily fortified and they have a considerable garrison of Space Marines. More soldiers and weapons are shipped to Cadia every day. It's not as fortified as Terra once Rogal Dorn finished shoring up its ramparts, but they have a hell of a fight ahead of them."

"The Word Bearers and their allies have gathered a host of...worrying proportions. And we all know they love summoning their daemons at the first opportunity." The Seventeenth Legion had always relied a lot on daemonancy as the Heresy raged, but across the millennia, this over-reliance had turned into a mad obsession. "But going back to Phocron?"

"We are trying to locate all the Harrowmasters who have gone rogue in the last millennia, but it's a slow endeavour. Many of them weren't exactly easy to contact at the best of times, now that they are acting against us..." The Astartes cleared his throat. "It's not Voldorius, that much I would bet my life on."

Once again, that wasn't reassuring. Voldorius had been efficient, but in many ways, Machiavelli thought the Legionnaire had been promoted beyond his capabilities. At some point, cruelty and complex plans which required your subordinates to die made for very, very poor leadership qualities.

A name flashed in red at the top of the list of unaccounted Harrowmasters, and not one of the Alpha Legion Space Marines commented on it.

*Kel Silonius*

The Harrowmaster had been the favourite of Primarch Alpharius, and his disappearance millennia ago had considerably weakened the Twentieth Legion. Someone was still committing Chaos atrocities in his name and led vast planetary rebellions, which had pushed the Imperium to put the name at the top of its kill-list, though Machiavelli remained confident their information on him was a puzzle with plenty of missing parts compared to his own databases.

"This Phocron has resources, but he has not deployed a Gloriana Battleship...or any kind of unit heavier than a standard Battle-Barge."

"Continue to keep plenty of eyes on that warband." The First Harrowmaster commanded. "There's something wrong with this..."

"Well, we don't know the plans of the Word Bearers." His chief of operations was very apologetic now. "And unless we manage to capture one of the senior Dark Apostles and successfully extract the knowledge directly from his brain, it's going to be difficult predicting what sort of madness the sons of Lorgar intend to unleash...again."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Alaitoc Craftworld**

**8.605.306M35**

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

Eldrad had met many...stubborn Farseers in his long life, but until this cycle he hadn’t had the 'honour' of meeting Farseer Eldorath Starbane, senior member of the Alaitoc Farseer Council.

Now that he had, Eldrad wondered how bad the situation was that he couldn't justify postponing this conversation in the privacy of his thoughts.

At least he had been right to convince Aurelia and the most outspoken followers of Atharti to not come with him. The first insinuations and mockeries of Starbane would have soured the debate far quicker than it did, and the Asuryani could not afford disunion.

Even if Eldorath Starbane was the most stubborn and inflexible Farseer he'd met other than the Biel-Tan ones, and the latter were dead.

"The *Book of Mournful Night* is formal: the Prophecy of Doom Arising is at hand if we do not act." The Alaitoc Farseer repeated for the fourth time in the same meeting. "The actions of the Mon-keigh-"

"The humans," Eldrad interrupted.

"What?"

"They have annihilated Biel-Tan, fought the Legions of She-Who-Thirsts and by themselves sufficiently weakened Excess for the final blow to be struck." The old Ulthwé Farseer explained slowly as if he were talking to a child, and in fairness it was not a completely inaccurate comparison. "Calling them 'primates', 'lesser species', or something equally as insulting is a symbol of pettiness and makes us appear ridiculous. The entire galaxy knows what the humans have done to our species."

"It was the Drukhari who were destroyed, not us!"

Eldrad raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think most of the galaxy cares about our splintering? Especially since Biel-Tan and its allies intervened in the Second Fall...on the wrong side...and got crushed for their troubles?"

The Fall of Commorragh had cost them so much good will among hundreds of psychic species everywhere that Eldrad sometimes wished there was a way to resurrect the High Farseers of Biel-Tan just for the pleasure of personally killing them with his bare hands. What had the idiots been thinking?

Eldorath Starbane stared at him for a long moment before returning to his subject of predilection.

"Anyway," the young Asuryani continued in a tone which proved the last exchange had completely gone over his head, "it is obvious that the Dark Throne of the C'Tan is about to act in such a way that will release the Stormlord from its deep slumber."

"You can't be sure of this. The Dark Throne is making divination efforts particularly difficult in that region." It was possible to work around the edges of the shroud of void created by the monstrous battlestation, but Eldrad would be lying if he claimed the accuracy of the visions received by these methods was sufficient to stake Asuryani lives on it.

"Is it so impossible to believe we have a clearer view of what is at stake than the Great Farseer of Ulthwé?" Eldrad gritted his teeth, noticing none of the Alaitoc Farseers he had come to plead his future to were whispering Starbane was rude or wrong.

A change of approach was necessary.

"Let's say you are absolutely right," the Ulthwé emissary made a show of humility, making his interlocutor blink in surprise. "Let's say this prophecy is about to happen, and you are absolutely right in how it plays out, as well as the implications of such a tragedy. Let's accept the Dark Throne is soon going to move to Mandragora and rouse the Sautekh Legions from their long period of dormancy. Then what?"

"Then what?" Eldorath Starbane's brain appeared to break upon these words. "We move against them, of course!"

For the first time, heads turned in shock among the Alaitoc Farseers. Ah, Starbane hadn't informed them of *that*.

"How?"

"You doubt the strength of the Alaitoc Craftworld?"

"No, not at all," Eldorath smiled, but Eldrad Ulthran was far from concerned hurting the arrogance of this Farseer if it spared uncountable Asuryani lives. "But nor do I doubt that the Necrons of the Dark Throne will take less than a human day to slaughter the might of the Alaitoc armies and fleets!"

The reactions were an outburst of imprecations and vociferations.

"More visions no one has seen?"

"More like military common sense," Eldrad coldly replied. "Our ships, our Seers, our Warlocks, our mental coordination...we often forget, to our sorrow, that everything we use in war relies on power of a psychic nature. The Dark Throne, as long as its psychic-cancelling aura is active, will make us as powerless as newborn children inside its area of effect. Unlike other races, we can't fight the Dark Throne directly. Moving against that battlestation will make the massacre of the Biel-Tan fleet look like a close fight."

But Eldorath Starbane wasn't ready to admit defeat yet.

"Then we move against the Stormlord himself!"

"I'm sorry?" another Alaitoc Farseer burst out incredulously. "None of our Rangers were ever able to touch the cursed ground of Mandragora without dying. Their orbital and planetary defences remain intact!"

"You said the humans moved against them in certain visions. If they can do this, it shouldn't be too difficult for us to break through!"

Eldrad felt a measure of doubt hearing this self-righteous voice.

He hadn't been *that* arrogant...had he?

"The Council is unconvinced by your argument, Farseer Starbane," a blue-haired female Farseer of Alaitoc proclaimed after several murmured conversations. "The...humans have allied with a Necron splinter group. They will have gained valuable information on its defences, and developed methods to counter them...or avoid their devastating power entirely."

Eldrad breathed out in relief. Sanity and prudence had won the day.

"At the same time, the Council isn't ready to forget the threat which might be the doom of all Asuryani," the voice of the Council instantly dashed several of his hopes. "The Stormlord and the Dark Throne each cost millions of Aeldari lives in the legendary War in Heaven. Allowed to rise and unite their evil capabilities, their nightmarish host will be unstoppable."

The green eyes watched the two Farseers.

"We lack much information to use the prophetic words in a way which will not leave this Craftworld suffering the fate of Biel-Tan. It is why the prophecy must be understood and the visions of the future cleared before oblivion engulfs everything."

Eldrad didn't nod or show any sign of approval, unlike Eldorath Starbane. He was confident he wasn't going to like the 'solution' proposed by the Alaitoc Council.

"A single human is at the heart of the visions, and so it is this human the path leads us to. Farseers, you must travel to the world-which-is-burning-in-song-and-light, and convince *Maelsha'eil Dannan* to give you the keys to solve this prophecy."

There were times Eldrad hated, hated being right.

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Vandal System**

**Starfort *Pantheon of Infamy***

**6.888.306M35**

**Supreme Grand Master Helios**

Trying to use a teleportarium while a Warp Storm raged around your ship had long been acknowledged as madness, even in the noble ranks of the Grey Knights.

There were moments when the hexagrammic and other anti-daemonic wards of the sentinels of Titan could not provide adequate protection, and teleportation was providing the Arch-Enemy such an opportunity to strike.

When the Warp influence stayed limited, the first-rate teleportariums of the Grey Knights were assets whose tactical advantages more than outweighed the risks and drawbacks.

In a Warp Storm, the probability of losing entire brotherhoods was too high to risk it.

Yet today, Supreme Grand Master Helios, acting in his capacity of senior figure against the abominations plaguing the Vandal System, had ordered exactly that.

At his command, one hundred and one Grey Knights Space Marines, including himself, had walked into the teleportarium chambers.

And when they reappeared on board of the Traitor held Ramilies Starfort *Pantheon of Infamy*, one hundred Grey Knights were here to answer his call.

The Aethergold shards which had been placed upon their foreheads had provided the holy protection they needed to repel the Warp's influence, like the larger crystal in the hands of their Navigator had allowed the Battle-Barge *Fire of Dawn* to enter the Vandal System while other warships would have been reduced to dust by the Ruinous Powers.

*We will need to thank the Living Saint*.

*You will thank her yourself, since you volunteered, High Paladin*.

Helios let a thought of amusement filter through the telepathic link before steeling his soul and power for what had to be done.

"BROTHERS! WE ARE THE HAMMER!"

"LET NONE SURVIVE OUR WRATH!" One hundred Grey Knights roared. "FOR THE EMPEROR!"

The heretics of the Starfort could not let such a challenge go unanswered.

"FOR THE PANTHEON!"

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!"

"ILLUMINATION WILL BE BROUGHT TO ALL!"

"**DEATH TO THE ANATHEMA**!"

Mutated beings which might have once been humans charged the line of the Grey Knights, and behind them came daemons and abominations which had sullied this galaxy for far too long.

Nemesis Force Weapons and Incinerators annihilated these enemies in mere seconds, and soon his personal weapons banished the daemons by ones and twos.

*We must press on. Whatever ritual the Starfort masters are doing, it will be completed soon*.

Grey Knights were always pressed for time when trying to foil the plans and rituals of the Arch-Enemy, but this time a malevolent mind had almost succeeded in veiling the Vandal System from the Titan's Prognosticars.

Whatever malevolent plan had been conjured by the minds of the Damned and their abominable masters had to be stopped with utmost priority, and therefore Helios had authorised the first deployment of the Aethergold resource in Brotherhood-strength.

Unfortunately, only one of the eight Brotherhoods had been at Titan when the threat had revealed itself, which was the reason he was leading the assault himself.

The Ruinous Powers would not win. Not on his watch. Not as long as a single Grey Knight drew breath.

"**TREMBLE, FOR CHAOS COMES**!"

"**YOU ARE TOO LATE, SLAVES OF THE FALSE EMPEROR**!"

"**DIE! DIE! YOUR SOULS BELONG TO US**!"

The daemons received no answer. The Grey Knights had given their battle-cries to these Warp abominations, and that was all they would ever receive – aside from Nemesis weapons to their Empyreal essence – before they were banished from this galaxy.

*There are many variants of daemons opposing us, Supreme Grand Master*.

*The seventh wave was entirely Decay, and the two waves after that were of Rage and Lies*.

*Few cultists bother respecting the conventions when the moment of their triumph is at hand*.

*The Arch-Enemy leadership has received knowledge from the Traitor Seventeenth, or is from the Traitor Seventeenth itself*.

Helios wasn't able to find any flaws with this reasoning. Not when red-armoured Daemon Engines and monsters combining forbidden lore of the Warp and technology were unleashed against them.

But they were the Grey Knights. By holy fire and light, they stood. By sheer force of will, they battled the hordes of the Archenemy which desired nothing less than to enslave Mankind to their capricious whims. Only ninety-one Grey Knights lived to breach the inner gates of corruption and damnation, but for every martyr, they banished or killed ten thousands of the slaves of Chaos.

Naturally, the heart of the Starfort was the heart of the corruption. It was nothing but an unending tapestry of eight-pointed stars, which explained how the heretics had managed to summon so many of their daemons.

The floor was a miasma of screaming faces and tortured mouths. Tongues and ears appeared and mutated, before turning out to be more monstrous things. The walls were corrupted flesh and millions of flayed human bodies. Blood and sorcery coalesced; supported with huge flies and unspeakable horrors. The air was thick with poison and worse things.

Helios had seen many corrupted locations to reach the duties of Supreme Grand Master, but few could compare with this heretical temple built to worship False Gods.

"**YOU ARRIVE TOO LATE**!" The red-armoured monster leading the cohort of heresy and monsters had certainly been a Word Bearer in his time, though obviously, save the red armour, there wasn't any difference between it and a black-skinned Daemon. "**TREMBLE BEFORE THE MIGHT OF CHAOS UNDIVIDED**!"

*He lies. There are many other altars where they haven't reached the required numbers of sacrifices*.

*I will fight this abomination*. *Battle-Brothers, you know our duty*.

And joining thought to act, Helios sprinted to meet the arch-corrupter of Vandal.

"**FOOL**!"

The ray of darkness the daemon used to attack him was powerful, Helios was sure. But it was unwieldy. It missed him by a wide margin, and by the time a second attack was in preparation, his weapon had already bitten deep into daemonic flesh.

The daemon barely gasped in pain.

"**IS THAT ALL**?"

Helios wasn't a soul to break under despair, but at that moment, he suddenly understood this first altar had not been supposed to accomplish anything to corrupt the planets of Vandal. The purpose of the sacrifices had been to kill him.

He saw the claw rise and malevolent energies clash with his own psychic might. He saw his death.

Helios laughed and removed his helmet.

The power of the Aethergold, contained by the internal wards of his armour and his self-control, exploded in a miniature golden sun.

"FOR THE EMPEROR! FOR HIM ON TERRA!"

And the Supreme Grand Master of the Grey Knights head-butted the daemonic general.

"**NOOOOOOO**!" The creature had been extremely tall, even by Greater Daemon standards, and as such his forehead where the Aethergold crystal touched the daemonic flesh hit the Arch-Enemy's slave in the chest. But when it did, the fell essence began to turn gold and burst apart in golden flames.

The daemon shrieked and fell, and Helios took the time to pick his helmet back up. No additional blow was necessary; his opponent would soon meet a very unpleasant fate. Part by part, its back shrivelled and burned before being banished. At the end, there were only black ashes and a golden pyre.

"**THIS DAY HAS NOT SEEN YOUR DEATH...BUT WE WILL HAVE OUR REVENGE! LOOK AT THE SKIES AND DESPAIR**!"

*Brother-Captain*?

*There was a secondary Starfort hidden behind the moon. They are dragging one of the planets into the Warp. I think...they intend to drag it into the Eye of Terror*.

*The other seven planets*?

*Safe. The Warp Storm is fading. However, given the effort and the corruption we found here...*

*Yes, the Inquisition is going to have a lot of work ahead of them when they arrive.*

Yet something was wrong, Helios knew. As the Warp Storm waned and telepathic contact with the single squad of battle-brothers left on the *Fire of Dawn* could be established, confirmation came many Traitor ships formerly belonging to the Imperial Navy had been destroyed, as had considerable quantities of ancient classes of attack craft and escorts.

Add the sorcerers and the cults the Grey Knights had killed, and the many, many servants of the Word Bearers which were now trapped inside the Vandal System with no hope of escaping, the outcome had resulted in a massive spending of heretical resources for what felt a very minor victory.

*What do we know about the planet these accursed Traitors have prevented us from saving*?

*It was a Hive World, Supreme Grand Master. The name is...was Volscani. They made a few significant industrial contributions to the Imperial war machine three centuries ago, but nothing within the last century*.

Apart from the fact it was the eighth planet of the Vandal System, it was really weak heretical symbolism.

*I know the Archenemy isn't logical, but something doesn't add up*.

*Yes. The Traitors will find use for the massive PDF effectives of a Hive World, but they can't expect a few million cultist-guardsmen to be the equals of the Cadians or the elite of the Astra Militarum*.

*Supreme Grand Master...the authorities of Vandal Prime built a sizeable number of Leviathan super-heavy assault transports for them. They also had the patterns of an ancient model of super-heavy tank called the Cataphract*.

And suddenly, the connection was there. Helios didn't need to search further to know he had found the missing symbolism.

*Some of the super-heavy vehicles recorded to have fought at Commorragh were modified Cataphracts*. *The Hive World of Nyx is producing them*.

*The name for the regiments of Volscani was 'Volscani Cataphracts'*.

*This is grave news and the Living Saint must be warned. Now let us purge the Vandal System of the slaves of Chaos, brothers*.

Helios had been unable to prevent the Archenemy from claiming Volscani. But as his anger was focused into a merciless weapon, he swore no other heretic would escape the punishment they deserved.

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**70th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**PARISTUR**

'**APOSTLE OF TERROR'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 234 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 3 STARFORTS, 2 PLANETS, 5 ORBITAL STATIONS, 1 WARRANT OF TRADE, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**The Eye of Terror**

**High Orbit over Volscani**

**Carrion-class Heavy Battleship *Vox Dominus***

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Paristur should have felt ecstatic looking at the red-blue orb waiting below the *Vox Dominus*.

The command of their Ascended father had been accomplished thanks to his preparations and agents. Volscani had been dragged into the Eye of Terror, a feat many blind servants of the False Emperor would have collapsed in shock at if they heard of it.

Dark Apostle Nahren, who had let him 'borrow' the *Vox Dominus* after his undeserved Ascension, would not return anytime soon to contest his claim on the Heavy Battleship; the banishment he was on the receiving end of would weaken him for a very, very long time.

Most of the Legion, the parts which were salvageable, was properly in awe of his deeds.

Powerful Astartes warbands, daemons, and other military forces were eagerly joining his 3rd Great Host and accepting him as their Lord and Master.

He had been granted first pick when it came to selecting the Volscani Cataphracts and the Vandal militia which would be integrated to his numbers.

Why were his thoughts so morose then?

It was certainly the Cataphracts. He had been eager to grab some – imagine turning the very engines which had made the Battle of Commorragh a victory against the False Saint!– but the reality had been far more disappointing than expected. The Vandal-built Cataphracts equipping the Volscani regiments were slow and extremely prone to mechanical problems. The visions of the unbelievers had showed similar engine shapes, but the Nyxian heavy tanks had little in common with the Volscani originals.

This could have been avoided if he had been allowed to proceed according to the original schedule...no, there was no point raging against what he couldn't change. Paristur could only hope he would have the opportunity to shoot Erebus during the soon-to-come campaign.

And if he had to be honest with himself...it wasn't the Cataphracts which were making him really angry. Erebus was vile as usual, and the Volscani weren't destined to be the flawless asset which would guarantee their triumph. They had Astartes Legionnaires for that.

No, the reason he was raging internally was the incredible facility with which the Grey Knights had torn apart Nahren and every Word Bearer and sorcerer sent to the Vandal System. Paristur had written them off the moment they left the Eye, but there was a difference between accepting never seeing them again and watching live as more than five years of effort crumbled in less than an hour.

The Dark Apostle had not foreseen that the favourite killers of the False Emperor would have access to the never-enough-damned Aethergold.

Weaver would pay for that, Paristur swore it, but the Dark Apostle wasn't stupid enough to believe that should she die tomorrow, the Grey Knights would be suddenly deprived of this new game-changer. Much like Bacta, it would take a long time before those believing the lies of the tyrant saw their stores dwindle into irrelevance.

Their mission to bring the Primordial Truth to the mortals had become more difficult, and Paristur didn't know if future souls touched by the False Emperor would have the same powers. By Tzeentch, he prayed they wouldn't. Killing one target as defended as that blasphemous mortal was not going to be simple – there was a reason they had mustered the Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided for that – but it could and would be done. If however she died and the next decade a new abomination appeared wielding the same abilities...unlike Kor Phaeron, Paristur didn't believe opening the Cicatrix Maledictum was going to be enough to utterly destroy the Imperium.

The war would only end when Terra fell, and they were very far from that victory.

"Prepare my Stormbird, Coryphaus. I am going to honour the illuminated Volscani with my presence. Make sure they understand the honour I am offering to their souls and worthless carcasses."

"Right away, Lord Paristur. I will make sure they behave."

The Dark Apostle resumed his observations of Volscani, whose massive temples sang the proper litanies to please the Gods, sacrificing the last mortals who had refused to swear themselves to the Pantheon, not that there were more than a few hundred of these fools among a population of several billion.

"All is proceeding-"

Paristur suddenly felt an extreme danger and a daemon he had pacted with shouted a word of warning in his head.

Paristur seized his Accursed Crozius and turned to strike faster than an elite transhuman warrior should be able to.

But there was no one. The hall was empty, save the Possessed servitors he kept to communicate his order to the rest of the 3rd Great Host.

And then the first head of a servitor rolled to his feet, decapitated so neatly Paristur doubted anybody but an Eldar could have managed the feat while sneaking up on him.

A second head rolled.

Then a third.

In less than a minute, every servitor or blessed thing he had allowed to continue basking in his presence was revealed to be dead.

And still the attack didn't come.

Heartbeats he spent patiently waiting, reinforcing his sorcery to prepare for a terrible battle.

But there was no one alive on this observation bridge, no one but him.

How? How was it-

As he turned again, Paristur saw there was an object on his seat. An object which hadn't been there when he left it minutes ago.

And the Dark Apostle shuddered when he recognised its nature.

It was a raven's feather.

**Beyond** **the Light of the Astronomican**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Marathon System**

**Grand Cruiser *Pavian Victory***

**8.580.307M35**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

It had taken two years for the *Pavian Victory* and the squadron accompanying it to reach the stellar system labelled M-1X59D on the ancient map.

In theory, a warship taking so long to sail such a short distance was nothing to brag about. Within the same amount of time, a Cruiser could go from Nyx to the Throneworld and be on its way back.

In practise, travelling at these FTL speeds was impossible as soon as you arrived in the Eastern Fringe. Wolfgang and the Tech-Priests had internalized that concept before they left Nyx, but there was a difference between acknowledging it deep inside, and seeing it with your own eyes.

The moment the Astronomican didn't shine anymore, Warp travel by necessity became extremely short-ranged unless you were tired of life. The blonde-haired Rogue Trader hadn't understood everything in the Navigators' explanations, but the three-eyed experts had made it clear that three light-years 'east' of the new facilities built in orbit of Kars Zagros, a little outpost at the edge of known space, the light of the God-Emperor was unable to shine.

As a result, the travel conditions beyond this limit were...complicated.

Warp Storms could rage and disappear without warning, only to reappear seconds later. Maelstroms of lightning and cosmic disasters prevented ship’s access to the most direct paths. Outcasts and pirates of various xenos species used gigantic bases as lairs to launch devastating raids on any who trespassed upon their ugly fiefdoms.

By the time they reached M-1X59D, Wolfgang had not needed to do a lot of convincing to rename the system 'Marathon', in honour of the trial of the same name which had found its way into the Sanguinala Games a few times.

Of course, it was then they had discovered that reaching the stellar system had been the easy part. Now they had to pass through it if they wanted this first step in the direction of Terrathens to not be their last.

The Marathon System was the only point of passage between two very violent permanent Warp Storms which were known in old databases as the Red Calamity and the Blue Woe.

It was also both a long forgotten graveyard and an ancient battlefield.

The system had possibly been suitable for human colonisation once, though there was no trace of it anymore. The planetary crusts of each planet had been cracked open by weapons on at least the level of Exterminatus. Orbital stations and ships had suffered the same fate.

The Tech-Priests believed Marathon was an ancient battlefield of the Cybernetic Revolt, the first conflict which had plunged humanity into the Age of Strife. Wolfgang was for the moment supporting their theory.

Everything had been fought over. Thousands of asteroids had been booby-trapped or had super-batteries installed upon them. Minefields making those of Pavia seem like a half-hearted effort had been scattered everywhere. Starforts had been forged from asteroids and planets in order to continue the slaughter.

Who had won the battle? That was a mystery for the ages. With everything bombed to oblivion, the automatic weapons only ceasing to fire after running out of ammunition and energy, it was entirely possible the batteries of the two sides had continued to fire long past the point where there had been any survivors.

It had made the exploration of the system very much a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the Tech-Priests and search parties had recovered incredible quantities of rare metals and resources. Precious archeotech was scarce, but the sheer number of wrecks and debris was enough to keep the Mechanicus busy for decades, and as the star path between Kars Zagros and Marathon was surveyed over and over and Navigators offered more information against expensive fees, Magi had come to partake in these discoveries.

On the other hand, the advance into the Marathon System had been accomplished at an extremely sluggish pace. It had taken three years to get rid of the most dangerous minefields and abandoned weapon systems, which included the infamous 'vortex mines', and other singularity- or chrono-weapons which could carve a ship apart if its master had not taken sufficient precautions. Seven ships had been outright destroyed, and five – including his Ambition-class Cruiser – were in the repair yards at Kars Zagros.

It was slow and meticulous work, extremely demanding in attention and discipline, and Wolfgang was proud of his crew to have achieved it. Obviously the huge bonuses awaiting everyone once they returned from the Eastern Fringe helped. There was no Noctilith at Marathon, but the floating debris had their fair share of every alloy and metal Mankind used to build starships, and it included extremely advanced types of Ceramite and even what looked an evolved synthetic product superior to Adamantium.

Needless to say, the Mechanicus and faraway Nyx paid very well for these discoveries.

They had to destroy a lot of things which were prohibited by ancient Imperial conventions, and some stuff was just too dangerous to be transported back to the Imperium, but the material bounty was good.

But whilst slow, it had been progress, and the former First Naval Secretary had been confident that given a few more standard weeks, they would be able to leave Marathon behind, searching for the second step known as the L-08G6 System – not knowing the original name, the Tech-Priests had given it their usual temporary denomination – which would eventually lead to Terrathens.

Except a few seconds ago, a gigantic tear in reality had opened in the outer 'north' of the Marathon System, and one of the worst fears of an Imperial commander had come through. Worse, it had immediately pushed into one of the minefields his ships had not disarmed, generating massive explosions, and destroying one of the 'clear lanes' supposed to allow them to exit Marathon.

It was a gigantic Space Hulk.

And it was ruining months of work in mere minutes.

"This can't be a coincidence, Lord."

Wolfgang chuckled, even if his heart wasn't in it.

"Of course it isn't a coincidence. If this had happened between our moment of arrival and anywhere within the following three years, I could have believed it. Now?" The Rogue Trader rolled his shoulders in annoyance. "This is enemy action. *Something* doesn't want us to go further than Marathon."

The veteran of Commorragh had wondered when the Ruinous Powers would show their hand after one of them had died during the Fall of the Dark City. Aside from a few mad pirates – which had been infesting the region for centuries – the Archenemy had been very discreet these last few years.

Evidently, this unofficial lull was well and truly over.

"Due to the dangers of the system, we can't even try boarding it!" a Tech-Priest complained at the other end of a lithocast communication.

"I would have been extremely reluctant to send boarding parties at the best of times," the timing wasn't a coincidence, so it meant the abominations of the Warp certainly had some nasty evil things waiting for them if they proved careless. "But this Space Hulk has certainly come from the Red Calamity, given its arrival vector and the Warp disturbances it generated, correct?"

"Indeed, Lord."

"We have a match in our databases," announced another Magos. "Fifty-five percent compatibility with the Space Hulk *Olethros*, last seen two millennia ago. We demand permission to test the new high-precision torpedoes in order to cripple the integrity of the Space Hulk and increase the percentage of salvage once we will be able to reach the point of emergence of the *Olethros*."

"We have torpedoes capable of striking at such long range?" This was certainly not a piece of information he had been given before today.

"Archmagos Lankovar has recently sent an ammunition ship with Mars-approved torpedoes for testing," the Magos bowed in an apologetic tone. As well he should; he had a feeling the cogboy had decided to delay informing him until 'the right time' arrived, from his perspective.

The Tech-Priest was going to be...vigorously reprimanded through the proper channels. Lady Weaver and Lady Dragon were doing their best to purge this kind of behaviour from the Nyxian ranks, but their Mechanicus had assimilated thousands of different cultures and tech-traditions, which inevitably meant that there were troublemakers slipping beneath their vigilant gazes.

"Since we can't otherwise fire at the *Olethros* or do anything useful before it unavoidably translates out of Marathon...very well, Magos. Your firing test for the new torpedoes is approved. Don't disappoint me."

**Bombardment Cruiser *Winged Vindication***

**Magos Aphelion Beta**

"Did we not go against the will of the Chosen of the Omnissiah by failing to inform the Rogue Trader before today, Magos?"

"Leave the great decisions to me, Questor," Aphelion canted immediately. "Besides, it is not like his displeasure would have made any difference. The *Winged Vindication* is the only ship able to fire the new ammunition we have received."

"If you say so..."

"As I said, leave the great questions of politics to me," the Gryphonne-born Magos repeated with his most authoritarian voice. "Are the forty torpedoes loaded?"

"The torpedoes are loaded and the hyper-telemetry control is active," his Questor canted back. "It's still going to be difficult to hit the *Olethros*."

"Obviously. Three million kilometres away is far beyond Nova Cannon range under optimal conditions, and the Marathon System is not an optimal environment in which to fight."

Despite the best efforts of Lord Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach and the hundreds of thousands of the Omnissiah's servants working day and night to secure Marathon for the Machine-God, many zones were as dangerous as they had been three years ago, and the Space Hulk had barrelled straight into one of those.

"But it is the optimal battlefield to test the new assets Archmagos Sultan produced at Nyx. If the *Blue Nova* torpedoes work here, they will work everywhere."

The full name given to these blessed weapons was 'Nyx-pattern Blue Nova-class long-range high-precision plasma torpedoes', and as far as Aphelion knew, they were part of the package of surprises the Mechanicus Council of Nyx was preparing for the Necrons and the other treacherous enemies of the Omnissiah.

Unfortunately, not every Mechanicus ship could fire them without a refit; Mars and Ryza-patterns were fine, though they demanded modernisations of their fire control. The Gryphonne IV-built *Winged Vindication* had required a full year of engineering and machine-surge modifications to be declared operational in this field. And to think most of the Lunar-refitted hulls in the Nyxian shipyards were receiving these blessed improvements...

"Fire, in the name of the Omnissiah! Praise the Cog!"

The *Winged Vindication* had more than twenty tubes, but only ten had been prepared to fire. It was a fine test to see how much his ship had benefitted from the latest tech-boons.

Each tube had four torpedoes to fire, and all were fully automated. On non-automated warships/on a non-automated warship, firing them would require anywhere between ten minutes to one hour.

On the *Winged Vindication*?

The forty *Blue Nova* torpedoes were fired in three point eight *seconds*.

"All torpedoes active, hyper-telemetry reporting above-level parameters. Attack-data Alpha-Beta-Twelve-Gamma. May the Motive Force guide their holy penetration machine-spirits."

As for each torpedo fired there was one of his Tech-Priests focusing on its vector and acceleration, Aphelion had little else to do save enjoying the spectacle the Omnissiah had decided to grant them in his limitless magnificence today.

One torpedo exploded well short of the target, contact with debris no auspex had detected. It was unfortunately common in this graveyard of machines, as furtive technology had been common for the ancients.

A second followed suit ten seconds later.

"Magos! Warp anomalies around the *Olethros*! Major Warp anomalies! Estimation of the phenomena being precursor signs of Warp translation: seventy-six percent!"

"This soon?" the Magos deployed as part of the units under the Master of Exploration canted incredulously before frowning. It was terribly unusual...and the words of the young Rogue Trader resonated in his memory.

"It seems Lord Wolfgang Bach was right."

"Magos?"

"The *Olethros* is a Space Hulk, but its arrival in this very system indeed can't be a coincidence. The enemies of the Omnissiah sent it to ruin the work of several years."

And by the Machine-God, this objective had been more than achieved. Contact with the numerous minefields and the hostile weapon platforms had created new clouds of debris that the servants of the Omnissiah would need months to clear.

"If so, they have committed a mistake Magos," his Questor commented. "Our torpedoes are going to reach the *Olethros* before it can leave the system."

Aphelion reviewed the numbers and the calculations. It was going to be extremely close, but his second had a point.

The thirty-six torpedoes which had evaded the clouds of debris, the cloaked asteroids, and the multiple damaged armament nets of Marathon were going to strike before the final Warp translation removed *Olethros* from realspace.

"Please let them strike true..."

The torpedoes exploded, and so far from the scene of action, it appeared the Space Hulk seen via hololithic displays was vanishing under the explosions. Then the interferences and the debris generated clouded everything for several seconds.

When their augurs and auspexes were able to once again scrutiny the space zone, the *Olethros* was nowhere to be seen...but it had left massive ship parts behind, and somehow, the Magos doubted this had been the plan of the Archenemy.

"Prepare your best boarding teams, Questor." Aphelion ordered excitedly.

"We are going to need weeks to reach the hulls torn from the grasp of the *Olethros*."

"Yes, and?"

**Grand Cruiser *Pavian Victory***

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

No power in this galaxy could save Magos Aphelion Beta from a reprimand by Lady Weaver, but Wolfgang knew the results of playing his game with the new ammunition would lessen the negative impact on his career.

The reason for this 'benevolence' towards a Tech-Priest taking great liberties with the chain of command and the ammunition supplies was, of course, the largest 'fragment' they had recovered from the *Olethros*.

"The name of the ship is *Power XL,* of the short-lived Adeptus Mechanicus XL-class. If the first databases the Tech-Priests were able to copy are true, it was commissioned in 999M30 and lost in 007M31."

"Which of course makes the hull near-priceless," starships dating from the years immediately preceding the Great Heresy had received a trove of technological improvements as the Great Crusade recovered quantities of STC templates, and the Mechanicus of that era had always fielded more advanced novelties. "I'm not aware of what the Mechanicus means by 'power ship'."

"Judging by the armament, I speculate it was a specialised design built to break enemy planetary blockades and resupply allied forces within a few hours. The external armament we can see supports this hypothesis."

It was true. The *Power XL* was a very heavily armoured design, and the number of torpedo tubes and macro-guns could hardly be considered small. In size, it had the size and tonnage of a Heavy Cruiser – heavily damaged of course, but a Heavy Cruiser nonetheless.

"Well, we've just made a lot of shipmasters back at Nyx very happy," the Tech-Priests were in the process of purifying the warship, but so far the internal damage remained relatively limited. This meant a great deal of expensive technology to be returned to the Mechanicus, and the usual buyers paid high prices for a prize like this one. "Assuming we can tow it back to Kars Zagros."

"We will need to install a new Gellar Field generator and do a lot of repairs, but I think we can succeed, my Lord. There will be a price to pay for it, though."

"I suppose you refer to the fact our adventure into the unknown is going to stall for the next few months?" Wolfgang asked lightly, watching the red light of the Red Calamity Warp Storm in the distance for a second before returning to admiring the damaged hull of the *Power XL*.

"Yes, Lord. The timetable we agreed upon with the Mechanicus is now completely useless."

"I agree." The young Rogue Trader sighed. "It can't be helped. The moment the *Olethros* appeared, the timetable was shot no matter what we tried. A pity that damned Space Hulk couldn't stay a few more hours. With one salvo, we recovered an ancient Mechanicus ship. With a few more explosions, what would have found hiding in the heart of this Hulk?"

"Nothing good, in my opinion." His second grimaced. "Space Hulks are cursed things, Lord. We were already quite lucky this one had no Orks using it as a base. Can you imagine what the xenos could do loosed in a system like Marathon?"

Wolfgang grimaced in return. He wasn't going to thank the man for thinking about this kind of disaster.

"Point taken. Anything more I should know before going to the Astropaths and informing Lady Weaver of this unplanned event?"

"Err...the Tech-Priests are all trying to stake a claim on the *Power XL*, since the Forge World which built it has been destroyed millennia ago?"

"I should have warned you I only wanted good news..." the blonde Rogue Trader grumbled.

**Segmentum** **Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Mars**

**Headquarters of the Collegia Titanica**

**0.012.308M35**

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

The moment had been auspiciously chosen. The repairs of the blessed *Flamewrought* were nearly complete, as was the installation of the blessed devices which would make sure it did not succumb the same way the Gloriana *Tsunami* did during the first ill-fated assault on the Ymga Monolith.

Emissaries and ambassadors of twelve times twelve Forge Worlds had been invited to the ceremony. Hundreds of grand projects had been announced in the days before to awe and convince the billions of Martian Tech-Priests the quotas they poured over every day in service of Olympus Mons and the other Forges were paramount if they wanted to come closer to the Omnissiah. Twelve-blessed Mars-pattern Arsenal-class Star Galleons had entered active service in the last standard month, followed by many groups of Percival Siege-Walkers and thousands of lesser but still mighty war machines.

Twelve Legions of Skitarii, one for each of the most productive Forges of Mars, according to the latest production figures, were allowed to prepare the grounds for the grand ceremony. Thousands of tanks and mighty war machines came behind them, bearing the sacred banners which had for some waited hundreds of years in Mars' vaults, carefully preserved with the holiest stasis technology.

The Fabricator-General made three steps forwards and began his proclamations in an augmented voice which was heard across the red plains of the First Forge World.

"Duty calls. Honour calls. Machine parts, oil, and prayers were made. They were answered. Duty was fulfilled. Honour was repaid. The Sacred Quest for Knowledge has won many victories in years past. A pledge was made. Will it be answered?"

It was all theatrical, as non-Adepts would say. Over a hundred councils of war had been held in the last several years to arrive at this moment. The fruits of millions of hours of artisan-work had changed hands, relics had been distributed, and generous contributions had been made to the Exploratory Fleets. Dissensions within the fabric of the Adeptus Mechanicus had been calmed and assuaged.

But it was ceremony, and for all the politics involved under the red sands, no one venerating the Omnissiah could stay unmoved by the spectacle of one kilometre-tall walls of adamantium and ceramite opening slowly.

"IT WILL BE ANSWERED. THE LEGIO WILL WALK."

The ground shook violently, and ancestral instruments played the ancient salute.

The tremors gained in intensity, and the first Titan of Legio Ignatum walked in front of millions of augmetic eyes.

On any battlefield, it was only good sense for Warhounds and their smaller cousins the Knights to lead the way and scout the terrain, in order to ambush the enemy and acquire as much information as possible for the larger Titans while denying this knowledge to the enemies of the Omnissiah.

But not today.

No, today the largest machines came first, and Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 felt insignificant confronted with the beautiful form of an avatar of the Machine-God.

Some would name it a relic of a lost and broken age. Others would call it by its formal name: Mars-pattern Imperator-class Titan.

And while a handful had been built since M31, this one was particularly blessed by the Omnissiah, for its service to Mars and the Imperium had never been interrupted.

It was one of the first machines which had seen Him walk across the stars.

It was *Exemplis*.

And as Warlords emerged from the fortress to stand next to their leader and source of inspiration, the ritual words were uttered once more.

"INVENIAM VIAM AUT FACIAM!"

*I will either find a way, or I shall make one*.

Millions of weapons and sacred cogs were raised into the air to salute the proclamation.

Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 prayed he would be alive to see the far, far more extravagant ritualised ceremony welcoming the Battle-Maniples of the Fire Wasps back home in several years.

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Medusa System**

**Medusa**

**5.199.308M35**

**Iron Captain Raan**

There had been so many rumours whispered about what was happening on Medusa these last centuries that the Iron Fists Space Marines, including Raan, had taken to ignoring them wholesale.

It was true there were always different interpretations of doctrine and codes of war among the Iron Council and the ranks of the Iron Hands, but the same could be said about the other sons of Ferrus Manus and the existing Chapters not sharing their gene-seed lineage.

The Iron Hands being divided by the so-called 'Moirae Creed', an idea which reeked of heresy and stupidity? Absolutely ridiculous!

That was, until Raan arrived in the Medusa System and noticed how a good third of the Iron Hands' formidable fleet and mobile platforms of war were missing.

Any other day, it would have been dismissed easily. Space Marines often found themselves at war, and the inheritors of the Tenth Legion were no exception. Large detachments were always to be found outside the limits of the system serving as an Adeptus Astartes Homeworld. The problem with this nice theory was that as of last year, the reports addressed to the Iron Fists, the Brazen Claws, and the rest of the Iron Hands' Successors all insisted that the *entire* fleet was based in high orbit around Medusa.

But if that was really the case, at least two Battle-Barges and five Strike Cruisers were missing. Completely coincidentally, two shipyards had incomplete Strike Cruisers under construction within their berths.

The assets of Clan Borrgos were really, really conspicuous through their absence.

Raan did not feel grief easily, but on this occasion his expression under his helmet was one of sorrow. What was this folly? As many wrongs had been avenged during the Fall of Commorragh, the Successors of the Tenth should have assembled to convene on a new path. But no summons had come from Medusa, and so it was a hastily convened coalition which had travelled to Nyx for the 'Bacta Conference'. It was the Brazen Claws and the Iron Fists who had promised what needed to be promised to make the sons of Ferrus stronger than ever, and recognised the defeat of the Naga provided plenty of opportunities no one had thought would come in their lifetimes.

And still the silence had continued to reign from Medusa's direction.

The hours he spent walking and waiting before being introduced to the Iron Council were really uncomfortable. Not authorised to enter the Noosphere network – or authorised to do anything else, as a matter of fact – Raan meditated and calculated the odds of his mission being a success. They decreased with every minute, and the percentages hadn't been good in the first place.

When he entered the vault where the Iron Council waited – informally known as the Eye of Medusa by the sons of Ferrus – his meagre positive simulations were swiftly proven to be too optimistic.

"Iron Captain Raan. You overstepped your authority massively."

The words, uttered by a Venerable Dreadnought of Clan Sorrgol, could not go unanswered.

"That isn't for you to decide, Venerable Ancient. I am here on behalf of Chapter Master-"

"You overstepped your authority!" another Venerable Dreadnought interrupted him, this time one of Clan Raukaan. "Bringing the sons of Ferrus Manus together without our authorisation is utterly unacceptable!"

"Maybe if we had received something other than complete silence from Medusa, we might have recognised it as a refusal. We are not Seers!"

Raan regretted his outburst of emotion, but not the truth behind it. It was nothing more than the truth. Astropathic communications including 'yes' or 'no', they could understand. Silence? What they were supposed to interpret from it?

"All true sons should have recognised the obvious course! It is evident no true son of Ferrus Manus needs this mellowing substance called 'Bacta'! Have you forgotten our words so easily? The flesh is weak!"

"The flesh may be weak, but we have found a way to reinforce it and regenerate it, making it more likely to endure the ravages of war!"

"Ridiculous! The flesh is weak!"

"Yes! This treatment is nothing but failing to acknowledge the unavoidable! Only by proper metal and bionic modification can we eschew the weaknesses of the flesh!"

This was just...sheer madness. And Raan saw no way to change any mind. For the first time he truly studied the composition of the Iron Council. Of the forty-one members, twenty were Venerable Dreadnoughts and twenty-one Space Marines. Not a single seat was given to Clan Borrgos, and as far as he could see, the non-entombed members had all replaced over ninety percent of their bodies with metallic and extensive augmetics.

It was just...illogical. Grave wounds necessitated mechanical replacements of course, but the flesh of a Space Marine was capable of excellent performances as long as it worked. And putting so much metal within an armour made you vulnerable to certain esoteric weapons developed by the Archenemy.

"I acknowledge your position." He didn't believe it was logical or a good course, however. "On a completely unrelated matter, the Brazen Claws and Iron Fists have agreed to answer the demand of Terra to defend the Hydra Cordatus System and-"

"Do you really believe you can come here and try to shame us into abandoning the duties we have to purge the weakness of the flesh?"

Oh well. This mission was a complete failure anyway...best to end it with a logical argument.

"Lady Weaver reminded us quite pointedly when we spoke with her that our duties are not to purge anything within ourselves. Our duties are to protect the Imperium and humanity from the horrors of this galaxy. They also include killing said horrors. Nowhere has the Emperor told-"

"Out of respect for the ties which once bound our two Chapters, you will remove yourself from this sacred chamber at once!"

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Laphis**

**3.242.308M35**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

"Well...it was an interesting disaster."

"With all due respect, brother-captain, this underwater assault was rather underhanded and sneaky."

Aeonid nodded gravely.

"True...now tell me, in which environment is our armour perfect for camouflage?"

"Touché, brother-captain," The Company Champion feigned a bolt touching the armour above his heart. "Touché."

Aeonid allowed himself a smile as the beach of white sand around them gleamed under Macragge's sun.

Beyond this line of white on the other hand, ultramarine-blue waters awaited. They were warm and attractive, as it should be for a Paradise World. Less than twenty kilometres away, there was a sea resort.

"I think we can return to Ravenna on foot," Aeonid said at last. "Tell the 8th to wait for us here Marcus, we will hold the post-exercise briefing there."

"Sergeant Purpureo is going to protest...again."

Aeonid gave an amused expression to the Champion of his Company.

"Marcus, I've just defeated a defending force with a tactic which was only barely mentioned in the Codex. He's going to protest no matter what."

"True." Marcus Flamininus admitted. "The Sergeant is...particularly attached to the traditions of the Codex."

Aeonid would have used a stronger term, like 'grox-headed', but it was not his aim to light more fires.

"It's a shame. He could make a great Captain." Sergeant Furius Purpureo was a virtuoso with a blade, a leader of men, and an excellent shot. Recently transferred from 9th Company, he had already mastered Jump Pack operations and Bike-riding like few of the 8th Company did.

But as far as tactical skill went, the young Marine was like a Servitor locked on a single line of instruction: desperately unimaginative and unable to see anything beyond the instructions of the Primarch.

Anyone who had read the Codex Astartes would find ways to be ten steps ahead of him. Like Aeonid Thiel had done with an amphibious assault on the beach they were leaving.

"You realise, brother-captain, that the very flaws that disqualify him in your eyes to be a Captain are valued qualities in other councils?"

Aeonid rolled his eyes.

"I am old, Marcus. I am not senile."

The lips of the Champion twitched.

"It wasn't my intention!" the other Space Marine assured in a tragicomic tone.

At least some Astartes still had a sense of humour.

"Yes, I am aware our little troublemaker is most likely going to be transferred to the 7th Company within the next decade. Unless Chapter Master Valens wishes for him to stay here and keep an eye on us."

The problem when you placed most of the troublemakers in one Company was the necessity of oversight. The Company known as the 'Honourblades' had a long tradition of 'testing' the lines of the Codex in every engagement, and as such they often met suspicion and antipathy from the eight other Companies which weren't tasked with Scout training.

"Would Lord Macragge go that far?"

"You tell me," the Heresy veteran replied with a thin smile. "I wasn't able to speak much with him."

Past the initial ceremonies celebrating his return, Aeonid and Cato Valens had only met five times. It had been sufficient for the current Chapter Master of Ultramarines to realise that Aeonid didn't have many points where he was complimentary about the way the other Astartes ruled Ultramar.

Oh, there weren't any problems like rebellions or heresy. Macragge was largely peaceful and tranquil, as was Ultramar as a whole.

From the outside, the society and the culture of Macragge were still as dutiful as ever, a shining column of white marble presenting to the rest of the Imperium what a dominion under the benevolent guidance of the Ultramarines looked like.

Macragge was still as idealistic as when he left...but the Ultramarines had not changed either, except their increasing isolationism.

Laphis was a perfect example of this: originally built to be a retirement world for the elite of the Imperial Army when it still existed, access to it had been heavily restricted after the Scouring. Far from reversing this trend, the M33, M34 and M35 Chapter Masters had made it worse. Nowadays, only high-ranked flag officers of Ultramar forces like the Ultramar Auxilia and the Praecental Guard were allowed to retire on Laphis.

Assuredly this resulted in a world which was still dutiful and refused the indulgences and decadence which had destroyed many Paradise Worlds from the inside.

It also made sure the planet was rather sparsely populated for its size. There were fewer than one billion inhabitants, and it wasn't likely to change, with many of the 'newcomers' having long gone past the age of siring children.

Ultramar was near-entirely separate from the Imperium now. It was a realm of Space Marines, and had little in common with the rest of the human-settled worlds out there.

"I'm certain Chapter Master Valens will acknowledge your skills soon. He can't deny you're one of the best tacticians the Chapter has ever had."

Aeonid didn't answer. The manner Valens and his most loyal Captains – Bacurius to name only one – had been reacting to his arrival and the words he spoke weren't exactly promising. Many among the Ultramarine leadership were rather open-minded, but others had reacted to his 'legendary' reputation like he was Horus himself.

It had not escaped him that right now, he was the one and only Space Marine in the Macragge System wearing a red helmet.

Formerly a symbol of shame, thanks to his own actions it had eventually turned into a badge of honour and symbol of ranks. But the tradition had once again faded away. It was not forgotten like many things had been, but it was not really used either. Not when the 5th Company, the Wardens of the Eastern Fringe, was currently the only force deployed outside of Ultramar's frontiers.

"Acknowledgment or not, we must continue honing the skills of the 8th Company. They have much, much to learn before I'm satisfied with them."

"We're deploying to Mortendar or Thulium then?"

The Fortress World of Mortendar was the first line of defence of Macragge, guarded by tens of millions of soldiers at any given time. Any enemy wanting to attack the heart of the Ultramarines' realm had to neutralise the outer world if they didn't want to take a counterattack in the back. Thulium was a Death World where a lot of Scout and non-Scout training was done.

"Oh no, we're staying here. Laphis is an unforgiving terrain like there are few in the galaxy."

"Brother-captain, 'unforgiving' is not the description I would use for Laphis..."

"That's where you are wrong, my dear Marcus," Aeonid smiled. "Very wrong, indeed. Laphis is not a land which tolerates the slightest mistake. There are only lush plains with zero cover, cities unfortified which won't last a single hour during a serious siege, and seas and forests which don't have a single predator in them."

"Yes," the Company Chaplain said drily. "That's why we call it indefensible."

"Nonsense," Thiel replied with a haughty expression which had horrified many blue-blooded scions of Macragge in M31. "I assure you that when I'm finished with them, the members of the 8th Company will give their power armours to go to hell-training on any other world which isn't Laphis..."

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**C-21JDOD System**

**C-21JDOD/'Catachan Party Ground'**

**3.600.308M35**

**Colonel Lothar Jurten**

Lothar Jurten hated the mud and the trenches. Unfortunately, the Catachan Party Ground was pretty much a planet with mud and trenches on a continental scale, and the locations bereft of these two features were worse, because it meant you were training against tanks and mechanised troops.

And while these 'enemies' were only shooting at you with 'paint shells', they were still shells, just without most of the explosive strength. If you allowed yourself to be hit directly, you were going to spend a lot of time regretting it, assuming the stocks of Bacta weren't exhausted by the time someone dragged your body back to HQ.

"Men!" The Commander of the Krieg 83rd Line Infantry shouted. "I have good news and bad news!"

"Good news first, Colonel!" chorused his men.

"The good news is...the Munitorum bureaucrats, acting with the most extreme celerity, have finally accepted we need to change our uniforms and carapace armour's colours. And since Her Celestial Highness is generously paying the expense, the paint is already on its way!"

"HURRAH!"

"Of course the Munitorum being the Munitorum, they insisted we did a last war game in our splendid armours of pink and gold!" The Krieg Colonel grinned. "That's the bad news, in case you didn't understand. And since Major-General Wilhelm Hohenzollern already has a series of eleven defeats under his belt, we're taking on an infantry of Nyxians and Vostroyans today!"

This time the groans were sufficiently audible to be heard three trenches away.

"The rules of the game, Sir?" the Captain of 1st Company asked as coins and tokens were exchanged between the guardsmen. Of all the traditions the Trade Korps had brought with it from faraway Krieg, this was one the Catachan devils had never been able to convince them to abandon.

"We're the defenders today. If the attack force manages to repel us from the first five trenches in three hours, they win."

"It should be manageable, assuming they don't have Termite drilling machines this time."

A couple of years ago, it would have definitely been overconfidence to speak like that, but each of the Krieg guardsmen standing in the trench today had survived months of hell-training from their Catachan 'instructors'. After the dozens of rounds of demotions and 're-training', the notions of bargaining for better reports and arranging an informal market of ammunition had died rather hard in the face of adversity.

"COLONEL! Seismographs active! They're sending Mecha-Ambulls!"

"I should have kept my damn mouth shut," the Captain next to him grumbled.

"Yes, you should have."

Lothar Jurten agreed before grimacing. Between the underground drilling machines and the metallic Ambulls, he preferred the former. The Tech-Priests could babble all they wanted about being 'a holy weapon tested for the Chosen of the Omnissiah', these things were hell to neutralise, and their tunnels were even more difficult to collapse.

And because there was no golden light on this damned training planet, their Major-General was an idiot who had committed the cardinal sin of annoying the cogboys, which meant the Ambulls had never been deployed on their side, not even once. At least Jurten had always been on the receiving side.

"Well, they're coming," the Colonel of the Krieg 83rd mused philosophically. "Let's try to make them sweat for their victory this time!"

Naturally, this was the moment the ground chose to open up and reveal a lot of these metallic animals...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

***Terra Cimmeria***

**3.429.309M35**

**Magos-Artisan Karismus Xavier-Alpha**

The machines were activated once more, light flashed out, and the luminous fly of Indiga fell dead.

Unfortunately, the other metallic fly at the other end of the chain, the one which was supposedly going to receive the sacred insect's essence, remained inert.

"Another failure," the Nyxian Tech-Priest canted in disappointment. "What I am missing?"

It was particularly galling to hit such a wall of ferrocrete after so many successes.

When the Chosen of the Omnissiah had allowed him to work on machines which would allow the biotransference of living insects into metallic bodies, Karismus Xavier-Alpha had been thrilled by the challenge and ambition of the project.

If it worked, Lady Weaver would have a swarm at her disposal when she landed on the Ymga Monolith and taught the xenos the errors of their ways. When the insects didn't need to breathe anymore, the possibilities were near-infinite.

In practise, the project had been far, far more difficult than in the first cogitator estimations. It had only been last year the first Mecha-Ambull had been a success, and it had taken two more months before the process could be considered 'reliable' – which as far as the overseers and his superiors were concerned, was a success rate of bio-conversion over ninety-nine percent.

The Nyxian Magos had really believed the problems were behind him, as after the Mecha-Ambulls, the Mecha-Spiders, Mecha-Centipedes and Mecha-Beetles had required mere days to be successful.

But as the Council praised him and gave him more resources to play a major part in the glory of those following the Chosen of the Omnissiah, the adamantium wall rose in front of him.

No matter what he tried, he couldn't biotransfer psychic species like the prized Catachan ants into bodies worthy of the Motive Force inhabiting them.

Karismus had not tested it more than once upon the Great Golden Ants, of course. While the warriors of the hives delivered to him were blessed insects at the end of their lives, the Tech-Priest doubted killing dozens of these priceless assets left and right would be something the Chosen would thank him for. The Indigan flies had been used as test-subjects instead. But for now, flies or ants, crabs or any other species, the result was the same: if it had any psychic capacity, the essence-transfer from flesh to metal didn't work.

And he was unable to understand why.

"I must go to the altar of the Machine-God and pray for his knowledge," the Tech-Priest canted after several long processes of cogitation. "He will know the answers, and will maybe share a part of His All-Knowledge with my brain. The Machine-God knows all, the Machine-Gods sees all."

And even if He didn't give him the clues today, Karismus was exhausted and running out of machine-modifications to try.

"You seem to have had a long day, Magos," a non-Tech-Priest called to him as he left his primary workshop. Karismus didn't bat an augmetic; in the last five years, many officers and Space Marines had been given authorisation to come to *Terra Cimmeria*, though by the nature of their duties and the security measures, few stayed more than a couple of days inside the halls of the largest orbital Star-Forge of the Nyx System.

Though Karismus wasn't exactly aware of what organisation the man next to him belonged to. Dark robes were more in the style of the Inquisition, but the man didn't wear any visible rosette. But since the man was in front of the servo-owls and there wasn't any alarm, the Magos supposed the appropriate authorisations had been given.

"It was a long day indeed," he replied. "I am facing...setbacks and problems. And I am not as confident as I was several days ago that I can help the Chosen of the Omnissiah like I wish to."

"My friend, all of you are considerably helping Lady Weaver here," the old man waved his protests away. "If the forces assembled for the coming campaign are able to be mustered at the proper date and time, your Artisans certainly deserve a lot of credit for it."

"Maybe," Karismus voiced with reluctance. "But I fear failure in my endeavours. I fear that for all my knowledge and the tech-lore I was given, I will be unable to give Her all She needs. And then-"

"Lady Weaver has a golden heart. She will forgive you." The fingers of the black-robed man touched his metallic hand, and suddenly Karismus had an illumination.

Of course! He had been trying to craft new bodies for the insects in Ceramite, Plasteel, and many other common metals and alloys.

But for the great symbols which were the Ants, he would need far nobler metals if he wanted the insect essence to accept these new bodies as worthy recipients for a new life. Gold would certainly work, as the Chosen of the Omnissiah was empowered by the Living Omnissiah.

He would likely need to order a lot of gold – he dearly hoped he wouldn't need to craft entire bodies from it– but it was a very promising lead, the first time he had in days.

"I am sure...I'm sorry, but I don't believe I remember being introduced to you?"

"My name is Malcador," the old man said gently.

"Oh? Your parents named you after the Hero?" While it wasn't the most common first name in the Imperium, it remained a very popular one, no matter the era.

His interlocutor chuckled for sole answer before bidding him farewell and disappearing from his visual augmetics' range.

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Saint Clare's Stand**

**Agri-Hive Isis**

**3.998.309M35**

**Regina-Consort Wei Cao**

The Agri-Hives, Wei acknowledged, were not bad places to live at all. Provided you loved the different shades of the colour green, because there was only that as far as her eyes could see.

It was a verdant decoration of recently sown vegetables and cereals, amongst other things.

"I notice," she remarked after passing her hands through Taylor’s black hair, "that there are rather few Tech-Priests employed here compared to Agri-Hive Ceres."

"The Adeptus Mechanicus can't be in strength everywhere," the Basileia commented before huffing when the Planetary Governor of Wuhan raised an eyebrow. "The inauguration of Agri-Hive Isis will decrease the unemployment rate of this province of Saint Clare's Stand a lot. If all the sections were administered by the Mechanicus, it would likely gain in efficiency, but no one on the planet would profit from it, since most of the work would be handled either by servitors or Tech-Priests."

"Whereas this way you please everyone?"

"The longer I am Planetary Governor, the less I am convinced it is possible to please everyone during a negotiation," the insect-mistress replied with humour. "But yes, hopefully the different factions should each enjoy their piece of the cake. The Cartels were involved in the construction, the Tech-Priests took care of the highly-advanced parts, the local Administratum was kept content because this Agri-Hive isn't on Nyx and it revitalises Saint Clare's Stand as the flow of pilgrims is entirely turned towards Nyx now, and the citizens of the planet have plenty of open jobs to apply for."

"And the possibility of starvation for the Nyx System should it be cut off from the rest of the Sector largely decreases," Wei finished. "I wish I could create accords which satisfied so many Adeptuses at Wuhan."

"What Wuhan wants is for you to grow golden wings. I have a feeling that nothing else will satisfy some people."

"True." Wei smirked. "I have a feeling I'm going to have my days very busy while you go on your quest across the Eastern Fringe."

"If they cause you too many problems, remember the trinity of solutions: Penal Legions, Penal Legions, and Penal Legions."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." The Regina of Wuhan articulated without ceding to hilarity. "I will have you to know, my dear Basileia, I am perfectly capable of-"

A blazing lightning column erupted less than a dozen metres away, and instantly the Dawnbreaker Guard around them went into protective mode.

A second later, a figure Wei was familiar with by recordings of holo-vids and accounts with numerous Sapphire-black levels of clearance had materialised.

It was the Arch-Thief of the Necrons, though apparently the xenos preferred 'Chief Archaeovist Trazyn the Infinite Collector'.

And he had arrived in the middle of Agri-Hive Isis with...a gigantic bell.

"This bell is a nightmare, my friend!" The being dressed in ostentatious metallic garb and violet cape complained like they were resuming a conversation. "If I had not recently improved my security procedures against psychic disturbances, the damage of its chime could have been immeasurable and catastrophic!"

Wait a minute, the xenos...was afraid of a bell?

"Five chimes and almost three galleries completely frozen! Completely unacceptable! I'm releasing it into your custody, we will discuss the price at our next negotiation conference!"

Two seconds later, the same lightning blast manifested, and the Necron teleported away.

The massive bell was still there, however, physical evidence the last minute hadn't been a mass hallucination.

"Apparently we're not going to pursue the thief today," Champion Kratos sighed after ten more seconds of waiting to ensure Trazyn was truly gone.

"It's really out of character for him to give away something so...massive," one of the Blood Angels Successor Marines pointed out. "What's up with the bell?"

Taylor took five steps forwards while removing the glove of her right hand and touched the golden-coloured metal.

The moment her first finger made contact, it was like a symphony of martial music was unleashed, and the radiance which was always surrounding her lover these days began to communicate with the bell.

"Oh nothing much," Taylor told them sarcastically. "I just suspect Trazyn stole it from the Shrine World of a Living Saint."

The Black Templar of the Dawnbreaker Guard was the first to react.

"That would make it the Sacred and Thrice-Blessed Bell of Saint Gerstahl, my Lady!"

"And it would make perfect sense," the Basileia nodded. "Trazyn had already somehow recovered *Galatine*, Saint Gerstahl's sword, since he gave it back to us during the Fall of Commorragh. We should have known he had 'saved' plenty of other relics and artefacts from the same period..."

The Emperor's Champion coughed politely as Taylor appeared lost in her thoughts...or she was contacting all her insects to try to discover how Trazyn had managed to sneak up on them...again.

"If you are right...the Bell of Saint Gerstahl is only supposed to ring when the Imperium is threatened by the Archenemy. I fear..."

"Yes, time has ran out." The golden-winged Lady General nodded. "Gamaliel, please contact High Command immediately. It seems the wait is over. The abominations are going to attack Cadia."

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Acacia Sub-Sector**

**Pavia System**

**Pavia**

**Constantinople**

**Fountain of Light**

**3.999.309M35**

**Daouda Kassim**

Only ten days of waiting, and the humble pilgrim he was had the honour to be allowed into the vast holy site of the Fountain of Light.

Daouda knew it was going to be a blessed day when the Adeptus Ministorum authorities announced by vox-com he was one of the thousands of chosen, and after this joyous announcement, the day had not disappointed.

Everything was perfect. The long columns and the statues surrounded by water were so perfect it was often easy to forget they were 'only' statues and were not going to begin moving at any moment. The sculptors sworn to honour the heroics of the Living Saint were rumoured to be still working on certain sections, but the events of the Battle of Pavia where mighty guardsmen cast vile foes back into the pits they had spawned from...they were there for all to see. A few statues had even been modelled after the chivalrous Knights, standing vigilant over the artificial cascades and torrents linking pool after pool of the city-sized Fountain.

Daouda was looking at the representation of a noble guardswoman raising a banner atop an important location when it happened.

The waters turned gold without warning.

The waters of the Fountain had changed from pure, blessed water, to something altogether more miraculous.

And into this...Daouda would be unable to describe anything afterwards, but at that moment, his eyes perceived armies of angels rising to battle the darkness.

The middle-aged pilgrim cried before the miracle, and his prayers of thanks were echoed by tens of thousands of throats, soon to be millions as the news spread.

Then the golden miracle ended and the water was...most blessed water again.

But no one who was chosen by the God-Emperor to see this would ever forget it.

A miracle had happened. And his life as a pilgrim would never be the same.

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Grand Warren-Camp of Anarchic Muster**

**High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable**

"Brute-things think-believe they have squashed-defeated us!"

Millions of Skaven throats answer-roared in response, as it should be-be! Truly the brute-things were arrogant-blind!

"Vile-vile commander of brute-things has fallen for our plan-schemes!" The Arch-Warlord explained to the great-mighty armies waiting below for his-his flawless orders. "In trust-believing his daemon-things, he has allowed us-us to prepare our great-great forces for the last-final war-war! Now our victory-triumph is inevitable! PRAISE MALAL!"

"PRAISE MALAL! PRAISE MALAL! ANARCHY FOREVER!"

Scrachit Barbbuster raised-lifted his paw, and the ruckus went back sufficiently for his-his speech to be heard-listened to by all the vermin-troops.

"As assassins of Clan Eshin kill-kill the heretic-overseers, our-our armies will stop-cease hiding and begin-start a great-great offensive!"

And the last attacks had gnawed at the brute-things numbers on Skavenblight! Their big armies weren't that big-big anymore, no-no!

"Clanrats of Clan Verminus! You-you have been given great-mighty Doom-Tanks and Doom-Copters! You have been greatly taught-prepared in invincible tactic of the Blitz-squeak! You are an absolute-great tide of claws, guns, and V-rockets, yes-yes!"

The greatest member of the Council of Eleven licked his fangs before baring them.

"We have more-more Clanrats than they have guns! We have more gun-cannons than they-they have pack-cells! We have more-more ammunition and Pestilens vermin-things to poison them than they have false-temples! Victory-triumph will belong to Verminus! Ring Doom Bells! Prepare Warpstone! Praise Malal!"

"PRAISE MALAL!"

Mighty cohort-armies of Stormclaws and Clanrats squeaked for blood and the great-greater glory of Anarchy, and the Unvanquished Warlord saluted, his red-red cloak making him great-great and magnificent.

And what an army it was-was! This great-vast warren was one of many-many prepared for war by the Clan Verminus. There were-were billions of Clanrats ready, and at least half-half were armed with guns. He had to bargain-plea Clan Skyre, but Verminus would take-seize the glory in the end-end, so everything was fine, yes-yes. Mighty Malal favoured the bold and him-him!

"Do not pause-stop until every engine-thing of brute-things is captured and put in our service! Do not-not relent until ascension-rockets of Ozai soar to lead-carry us to the stars! Kill the Vile-Vile One and brute-things! MALAL WILLS IT!"

"MALAL WILLS IT!"

"MALAL WILLS IT!"

"GLORY TO ANARCHY IN WAR! GLORY TO CLAN VERMINUS! GLORY TO ME! LET GREAT-GREAT SKAVENBLIGHT CRUSADE BEGIN!"

Billions of Skaven rush-scurried to war. And the High Arch-Warlord laughed.

**Author's note**: And with this intervention of Scrachit Barbbuster, the Ovation Arc ends.

The monsters are ready. The armies and fleets of the Arch-Enemy have assembled. Weapons older than the Imperium is have been awakened.

The Word Bearers are ready for war...even if most of them have no idea of the stakes their Daemon Primarch has raised in their name.

The next arc will be *Black Crusade*. I have no preliminary title I feel comfortable to share without spoilers.

Prepare yourself, for Escalation is about to return.

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 .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption