**Muster 6.2**

**Pirates and Assassins**

*While uncountable heroes and heroines received the praise and the honour they deserved after the official end of Operation Caribbean, a key figure which often tends to be forgotten is Magos-Draco Dragon Richter, Minister of Industry for the Lady Basileia of Nyx.*

*No one of course can doubt that the General-Saint was both the beating heart and the leadership of the offensive against the lair of pirates known as the Pavia System.*

*But without Dragon Richter, the Army Group mustering between 292M35 and 295M35 would have experienced far more supply difficulties and in all likelihood, its vehicle and armour effectives would have been far smaller.*

*The Imperial Guard had one million four hundred and thirty-one thousand frontline guardsmen assembled in one hundred forty-four regiments. Aside from the hundreds of thousand carapace armour, the medi-packs, the vox-casters, the Larkine lasguns and thousands of other weapons and objects necessary to keep men and women in fighting condition, the Mechanicus chains of production across the Sector delivered fifty-three thousand eight hundred and twenty-six artillery pieces.*

*This number, already far larger than certain Guard forces ever achieved to requisition over several years of campaign, was made even more impressive by the wide-scale effort of unification imposed by the Magos-Draco. By 294M35, Army Group Caribbean had only six types of artillery pieces in its arsenal: Basilisk, Hydra, Medusa, Griffon and Manticore. On average, there were no more than three different patterns which could be found in the three field armies. Delivery errors and artillery shells’ issues were divided by six and none of the disasters reported in previous wars against the greenskins occurred again.*

*The artillery regiments were not the exception, but the rule. Armoured regiments discarded their second-rate tanks and the obsolete rear-line equipment. Contrary to rumours that the Jaghatai Battle-Tank was introduced in mass from the get-go, this wasn’t the case. The tank drivers and gunners received thousands of brand-new Leman Russ Battle-Tanks. The Cataphracts, the Khan Battle-Tanks, and the Hellhounds were assigned to elite dedicated regiments. Overall, the official declassified documents report twenty-one thousand one hundred and fifty-three tanks transferred to Army Group Caribbean, with more than ninety percent Leman Russ variants.*

*And then there were the vehicles. When added the armoured carriers like the venerable Chimera, the support vehicles, the repair units and the light transports, the twenty-four divisions had two hundred and sixty thousand-plus motorised vehicles, not counting the bikes.*

*This was already an extraordinary accomplishment, and yet it was merely the beginning. The Munitorum request for regimental tithes started to be delivered by 294M35. The Nyx manufactorums were also the main builder of fighters, bombers and all types of flyers for the Aeronautica Imperialis, sixty percent of the total Sector’s output coming from the Nyx forges. Hull construction in the shipyards for the Imperial Navy and the trade cartels continued according to schedule. Even the promethium production was not neglected; by 050.291M35, Executive Industrial Order Number One officially gave Promethium 3-Refined 95 Rating – more commonly known as P3 Super 95 - the status of ‘war fuel’ and increased both daily production and the strategic fuel reserve.*

*The economy of the Nyx Sector, far from collapsing to meet all its requirements, magnificently rose to the challenge, paving the way to a new age of prosperity...*

Extract from *Logistics of Operation Caribbean* by Christian Cicero, 990M36.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.158.291M35**

Thought for the day: A weapon cannot substitute for zeal.

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

As far as official audiences went, everything was unconventional. The choice of location was the most striking example.

Obviously, it took more than that to destabilise the emissary of a Magisterial Navigator House. And frankly, the declining wealth and status of House Achelieux had the problematic consequence he was forced to meet important figures he would have preferred not to talk to under any circumstance.

Friar had been forced to walk interminable throne rooms for the sick amusement of obese Governors more times he could honestly remember, and his memory was excellent. Five times in the last decade he had been invited to ‘great hunts’ where aristocrats massacred with priceless baroque weaponry the fauna of the world they reigned upon.

The Governor of New Tripoli had been so in love with gladiatorial blood-sports he considered any agreement not discussed in front of a mass slaughter on the sands of arena devoid of value. On the Pleasure World of Lesser Monaco, the cartel heads he had come to negotiate with had refused to open their mouth until he won one billion in one of the most complicated card games he ever had the bad luck to play. The Archbishops of Shrine Desdemona did not accept foreigners six day out of seven and refused to admit a mutant in their presence until he bathed ten times in their ‘holy’ – and ridiculously expensive – water.

And the most disagreeable audience of all, the audience Lord Admiral Custer had granted him. It had taken him ten seconds the Imperial Navy had made a great mistake by promoting this man to his current rank. The first clue had been the insults he had vociferated towards his House and navigators in general. That was a monumental mistake, clearly. Did the idiot really think his words wouldn’t be repeated to the other Houses? The second clue the ‘His Supreme Excellency’ was out of his domain of competence – assuming he had one – was the little fact that at the moment he was speaking, the ‘totally defeated’ Orks had decided to mount a counter-attack. Friar had escaped the flagship mere minutes before the green xenos rammed it and ended in a large explosion the career of the Lord Admiral.

As a result, the Chancellor believed it was difficult to surprise him. Still, the spectacle of over two dozen Astartes trying to neutralise giant centipedes and spiders on a training ground successfully achieved a rise of the eyebrows from him. It wasn’t every day you saw a transhuman giant striking with his bare fists the black chitin of an insect twice his side while his comrades were struggling to hold bone blades no baseline human could hope to wield.

Since apparently no one was dying and the Astartes were shouting their battle-cries with eagerness and no sign they were in danger of death, Friar Achelieux decided it was best, in the interest of his sanity, to pretend that everything was normal, and marched in direction of a little group of guards in dark blue uniform surrounding a woman in golden power armour.

Or at least he tried. Past the first couple of seconds, every step came slower. Not because he had a heart attack or he was in bad health, but because his eyes flinched against the light coming from the very person he had come to meet.

Why? His third eye was covered perfectly, there should be no side-effect here in the middle of a Hive World...and yet his eyes were burning like when he watched too close and too long the light of the Astronomican.

As he stopped ten metres away from the source of the light and bowed his head, unable to tolerate more, Friar amended his thoughts in the privacy of his own head. It was not like the Astronomican. It had a completely different ‘taste’, so to speak. The Beacon of the God-Emperor was purified energy of the Immaterium in its most holy brilliance, but this...it was different. Low and High Gothic were inappropriate languages to describe it...but it was like he was facing a spider web bathed in light. It did not belong to this dimension, and yet it was not the Warp either. It was...different.

A soldier approached with a box containing an unfamiliar model of glasses, and the Chancellor accepted it with a pained expression of gratitude.

Thankfully, once they were on his eyes, the light effect instantly dissipated. On the downside, Friar Achelieux was as blind as any non-Navigator representative in this Hive.

“My apologies, Lady Basileia, I’m afraid your brilliance and my eyes don’t agree with each other...”

The answer he received was not the one he had awaited for.

“Think nothing of it. Until I met you, every Navigator who was introduced in my presence fell on his knees and turned unconscious for at least a few seconds. You are doing better than them.” The Planetary Governor’s voice turned whimsical. “I thought House Orion and their allies would have warned you beforehand, to be honest.”

A genuine apology or compliment was always welcome, of course. But no, House Orion, House Boyle, or House Curtis would not have warned him unless they could somehow profit from the release of said information. And since there was a high likelihood he would have been as ridiculous as them once he met the Planetary Governor, the local Navis Nobilite had obviously decided to let him win or fail on his own. Certainly, Friar wasn’t going to organise a bet pool on the outcome the jealous Navigators had expected from this audience.

“I’m sure they had more important things on their mind,” the Achelieux Navigator replied neutrally. The ‘more important thing’ was of course ensuring his House signed agreements that their presence in this Sector and the neighbouring regions of space lasted less than a standard month, and if he could remove a few days as a bonus from this duration, it would be splendid.

“Oh yes,” the young woman didn’t roll her eyes, but alas for her entourage was a bit more loose-lipped and at least two men chuckled. “Did you know the most important diplomat of House Orion tried to get an audience the moment the Navy contacted me to report your arrival was imminent?”

“Surely this was nothing but an unfortunate coincidence,” Friar was not going to confess it in public, but he was rather curious how deep House Orion had dug its grave in the last days.

The hint was not sufficient to get an accurate picture, but between the information he had been able to collect in the last days and his knowledge of Navigator internal market competition, he could make a few guesses. And one he felt reasonably accurate was House Orion and its local affiliates had tried to under-evaluate the number of Navigators it had available. In normal circumstances, this was a simple but terribly effective strategy: Orion, Curtis and Boyle together had ninety-nine point six percent of all Navigators present in the Nyx Sector, giving them a true monopoly.

Yes, this was an excellent...one might almost call it...saintly.

“Leave us.”

Save two Space Marines who weren’t participating in the violent struggle against the insects – that one had obviously lost since he was imprisoned in a cocoon of spider silk – the troopers obeyed and retreated near the gates out of hearing range.

It allowed him to do a full observation of his host, Lady Taylor Hebert, Basileia of Nyx. Even without his sight lessened, Friar could tell this was not a woman to take lightly. People who managed to grab a Planetary Governorship while less than a hundred years old and remain by some legal loopholes in the Imperial Guard were dangerous.

No, dangerous was perhaps too weak a word. The insects joyously beating the Space Marines on the training field were dangerous. Their mistress was...something more.

Physically, she was a pretty black-haired girl. Absolutely not his type, but he had met thousands of far uglier women who were consorts to a Planetary Governor or a high-ranked Adept.

“I presume we can speak freely without our words arriving to unfriendly ears?”

The Space Marines had a reputation of honour, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“The Dawnbreaker Guard only answers to me. If something out of this conversation arrives to the ear of nobles or people not in confidence, I think this will be the sign we will need to reassess all our security measures...again.”

Friar Achelieux nodded and did not press. Navigators were powerful, but the authority of a Sector Lady largely surpassed his...and that was not counting on the unwritten influence a Saint could use. And this young woman certainly was one.

“That aside, the conditions have slightly changed since I commanded my Astropaths to contact your House. As you have no doubt noticed, the war against the greenskins is over, and the need for interstellar trade ships is greater than ever. I am as a result increasing the production of military and civilian fuel. Commercially, this means new fuel tankers. Therefore I am willing to contract your House for its services in crewing five promethium tankers for a strict Sector-wide usage, in addition to the initial demand of four Navigators.”

The Chancellor did his best not to gape. This was...incredibly generous. And House Orion must have exasperated the Basileia far more than the most pessimistic rumours had speculated, to be deprived of what was for all intent and purposes an above-average prize.

Promethium tanker was a ship category which was always capable to generate benefits. Every world which was not Feral or Feudal used vast quantities of fuel. And each of these tankers would require a Secundus senior Navigator and a Tertius substitute. This was not a contract for five Navigators; it was a negotiation for fifteen!

The rest of the proposal was not of a nature to discourage him from signing. The two billion contract for the battleship *Enterprise* – and since it was her flagship, this guaranteed a formidable endorsement of Achelieux Warp-mastery – would be the first stone, and the second was the four billion Throne Gelts contract for the tankers. There was also an open invitation to buy a palace in the upper quarters of the capital Hive and a one point five percent of the benefits acquired by said ships once the time arrived for all investors to get his share.

This changed...everything.

“My Lady, House Achelieux is deeply in your debt for such generous terms, and I will be more than happy to sign at the bottom of the contract. However, I would be betraying my obligations of Chancellor if I don’t inform you House Achelieux has many enemies, vultures which have stopped at nothing to see its power and influence broken.”

Of course, most of the former protectors of House Achelieux had lacked Space Marines of their own. The masters of Lesser Monaco had soiled their undergarments at the first sight of a Space Wolf.

“I am aware of the...violent disagreements you have been subjected by Houses Belisarius and Ferraci. Rest assured that if they try something similar in my Sector, they will regret it. Assuming they survive the first encounter with the Iron Drakes and the Brothers of the Red patrolling across the Sector, of course.”

“In this case, House Achelieux is deeply in your debt...”

A Space Marine trying to ride a centipede without a saddle passed three metres on their right and broke the solemnity of the instant.

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

Navigating inside a Hive was always a difficult exercise. Contrary to one might think, the Upper Hive and the Spire were more difficult than the Lower Hive and the slums below. The aristocracy did its best to remodel its living quarters at least twice a year, the security measures were modified every standard week as the whims and the paranoia of the chiefs of the security teams knew no limits.

The latter was also unfortunately one of the rare common points Lady Weaver had with her predecessors, though given the number of assassinations the defensive systems had prevented, it was perfectly understandable.

The Lord Inquisitor in him approved the security improvements. The Ordo Malleus had learned long ago there was no such thing as paranoia when the opponent could wield the powers of the Warp and drink the chalice of heresy until there wasn’t much difference between an apostate and the monsters of the Immaterium.

The old man he wasn’t supposed to be was thinking the exhaustion these long walks inflicted upon his aged body would have been nice to avoid.

But as in the next seconds he saw the first member of the Dawnbreaker Guard standing vigil next to several PDF troopers, Odysseus Tor hid a smile of relief from his expression. He had finally arrived to his destination.

Of course, entering the room the four Astartes and the two hundred-plus soldiers were watching over proved to be a complicated exercise. Odysseus had no appointment, a fact that if he had been anyone but a Lord Inquisitor, would have seen his quick solicitation’s refusal and a prompt escort towards the exit. As it was, it still took him two full minutes of arguing with Seraph Puriel before the gates were opened and the sound of a conversation arrived to his ears.

“The new foundations’ construction is proceeding according to schedule. The walls and the great dome will be able to resist a class-14 earthquake.”

“Good. I understood you began to stockpile the white and rose marble shipped from the Theta Mining Worlds?”

The doors closed with minimal noise on this side, allowing him to complicate the hololithic representation of a gigantic cathedral from above. It was one of only two sources of light in the room. The second, faint but golden, was provided by the Lady Basileia herself.

“We began three days ago.”

“It looks like everything is proceeding on schedule, then. Do you have more requests?”

“Yes...the Ararat-Nyx Cartel is constantly pestering me about their cargoes of jade and emeralds. I don’t understand why they think I am one of their potential clients. It’s not like the Great Angel wore green or green-black armours...anyway I would be thankful if they could go annoy someone else.”

“I have a meeting with one of their commercial executives in two days. I’m sure this subject can be brought up.”

The lights were turned back on, allowing him to watch in detail the two figures around the hololith, though he had no doubt given the contents of their conversation who was speaking. The first, in a dark blue piece of cloth which was looking like a strange hybrid of robe and uniform, was Lady Taylor Hebert. The second one was Cyrene Versailles, famous architect and the woman the Lady Nyx had designated to build her ‘Hagia Sanguinala’ project.

To Odysseus’ regret, neither he nor his Inquisitor colleagues currently operating in the Nyx Sector had large files on Versailles. And it was logical. The architect was rarely operating in the same Sector of the Imperium for more than a couple of decade. From this perspective, the Hagia Sanguinala was an anomaly, as it was going to take easily twice that long to be completed.

Both the Inquisitor and the man in him dearly wished to know how the young Governor had managed to convince Cyrene Versailles to stay for so long on the same planet – the architectural challenge and the princely salary aside. Alas, the Inquisition, contrary to millions of rumours, had not an unlimited amount of resources, and the Ordo Nyx was worse than most as it was still rebuilding its network after the elimination of the majority of the incapable and unsound members.

A woman who had the support of at least a Cardinal and had never manifested anything less than full support of the Ecclesiarchy was not someone the Inquisition was going to waste its best agents spying upon. Moreover, Cyrene Versailles was either at Hive Athena or on the site of the Basilica construction. It wasn’t like her travels were a mystery.

The Basileia and she had few traits in common. The architect was smaller, her hairs had a fair brown shade, and while she was clearly doing enough activities to keep a slim body, Cyrene Versailles was obviously not a muscled person.

The white and black robe she had donned today was emphasizing this difference. It was a fashionable piece of cloth, but there were no shadow of military tradition; it was a purely civilian dress, and it was completed with shining silver high heels.

And there was steel behind this appearance, no matter how largely she bowed in reverence as he descended the magnetic lifter.

“Lord Inquisitor, we weren’t expecting you today.”

“I wasn’t expecting to come, but recent Munitorum issues have arrived on my desk yesterday, and I thought it would be best to talk about them in private.”

The insect-mistress tapped a combination on the hololith and the representation of the future Basilica was removed.

“I see.” The attention of the Planetary Governor shifted to the architect waiting diligently on her left. “I think this will be all for today, Cyrene. Don’t hesitate to contact my staff if one of the Chartist Captains tries to invent new taxes on his own authority again.”

The white-robed woman saluted and rapidly left the room. In her hands were at least a dozen data-slates and many drawings which looked like they had been created by first-rate artists.

“Refreshments, Lord Inquisitor?”

Odysseus accepted, and ten seconds later he was seated with a glass of fifty years-old amasec in his right hand.

“I apologise for disrupting your schedule today, but my colleagues have sent me important information regarding your Munitorum concerns.”

“I would not qualify them of concerns.” If the eyes of Lady Weaver had the power to shoot lasers, Odysseus Tor felt he would likely miss most of his head and the wall behind him would have an impressive hole in it. “I just worry the Munitorum’s sheer incompetence is costing the military and civilian industries of the Imperium precious resources. Asking for tithes when a Sector is barely beginning economic recovery and many reinforcements didn’t arrive in the first place to help against the greenskins is not and never will be a popular move.”

The decision to handle this matter in private had been incredibly judicious, clearly. Odysseus had a very good guess how certain Ecclesiarchy priests would have been able to turn the words of the woman they worshipped as a Saint. ‘Serve the God-Emperor, not His corrupt Administratum’, perhaps?

On the other hand, he couldn’t dismiss the words which had been voiced out of hand, and not only because they had been said by a Sector Lady. The Munitorum was regularly making great mistakes these last decades wherever the duties of the Holy Ordos sent him, and rebellions and planet-wide insurrections often followed by mere days the public outing of these ‘mistakes’.

“Yes, I can’t deny the Samarkand Quadrant as a whole has reasons to be very unhappy with the Munitorum.” Like eight Sectors being suddenly asked to pay military tithes, when five had fought the barbaric xenos in the last five years and two were still conducting active military operations against them. “According to my colleagues, the source of this tithe-request at such an inopportune time originated from a conflict of interest between Lord Samarkand and several Ultima Munitorum delegates of the Caspian Reaches. Specifically, the percentage of custom taxes granted to the Departmento Munitorum in the naval bases of the Yesod Corridor. This sudden tithe request I fear is the means chosen by the Munitorum to force Lord Samarkand and his Zaibatsu Parliament to bow.”

The sour expression Lady Nyx showed to him was eloquent enough to signify how much she liked being the result of this political infighting.

“Since neither Lord Samarkand nor the Zaibatsu dynasty gathering the usual tithes has deigned contacting me at the moment we’re speaking, may I assume they have not yet reached an accord?”

“They are still screaming at each other,” Odysseus confirmed.

“And you’re absolutely certain this is not a vengeance attempt of Clan Vandire or one of his cronies who were sent to the Penal Legions?”

“As certain as the Inquisition can possibly be,” he answered. Yes, there had been some doubts in the beginning whether Nostradamus’ relatives had been involved, but the Administratum was the greatest of the Adeptus and that left millions of incompetent and quarrelling ordinates with no appreciation for the continued survival of the Imperium. “And it also explains why your past negotiations with said Adeptus haven’t been respected; these are entirely different scribes and you are not their target.”

The snort Lady Taylor Hebert made was not very Lady-like.

“I’m sure the millions of men and women who will be part of this military tithe will love to hear that.”

Odysseus Tor didn’t bother answering. The answer was far too evident to waste his saliva on it.

“There is some good news along with the bad. The exchanges with my colleagues have convinced the Inquisition the tithe was not formulated to answer a ‘clear and present danger to the collective security of the Imperium’. As such, we were able to modify two points. Firstly, the tithe will be divided into three echelons a decade apart. You will have to recruit and arm one hundred million men for the Imperial Guard, but instead of boarding the transports from 293M35 onwards, you will be able to deliver them on the tithe days of your choice between 294M35 and 304M35.”

The posture of the General in half-pay markedly changed in a few seconds. Mere seconds before, she had been rather grim. But now for the first time a smile illuminated her visage.

“That’s...yes, you are right Lord Inquisitor, that’s rather good news. I will have to check with my Ministers tomorrow, but I think spreading the tithe delivery on a decade will largely offset the deleterious effects on the economy. Thank you.”

Well at least some good had already come from these long astropathic calls and the endless hours of investigation.

“Secondly, courtesy of your military rank and the number of guardsmen Nyx itself will muster, you may be able to...influence the ultimate destination of these troops.”

The Lord Inquisitor had not expected a reply in a few seconds, but he received one.

“In this case...I would heavily support a large expeditionary force to be sent to the Svalbard Sector.”

Odysseus had heard the name somewhere, but where?

“It is the Sector alimented in weapons, ships and ammunition by the Forge World of Tigrus,” the Lady Basileia explained as he raised an eyebrow.

Ah yes, it perfectly explained why.

“I see no problem myself with this decision, but I will advise you to...not favour outrageously the Adeptus Mechanicus in the long term.”

“I will keep it in mind.” Sometimes the young woman was not difficult to read, and this was one of those times. The Lord Inquisitor accepted the rebuff with good grace. “The greenskins are becoming a serious threat in the region, the Astartes can’t be everywhere, and the Guard and the Navy refuse to intervene because the Forge World is the most important world of the Sector and they feel its importance could be topped down a notch. I refuse to lose such a vital technological bastion if we do have the strength to stabilise the frontlines.”

“Tigrus is for the present far from the frontlines.”

“And if we take the appropriate measures, the Svalbard Sector will also be far from them when the troops of the Nyx Sector will annihilate the green brutes.”

Odysseus Tor shrugged, and decided that since his interlocutor had the defence of His Holy Majesty’s realm at heart it was not his business to naysay the Basileia when she desired to provide reinforcements against the Orks.

“Of course, there is some bad news. I’m afraid that the senior archivists and decision-makers of the Departmento Munitorum have been extremely uncooperative where transfers of Guard senior officers are concerned.”

“You’re thinking they will delay and delay until the last minute before sending me officers?”

Odysseus chuckled.

“I’m afraid they do that even when they want to be cooperative.” He shook his head. “No, I’m afraid they will send you a lot of their problem children with no possibility to refuse...”

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

“This is not something tolerated by regulations, your Holiness!” Missy gasped theatrically and feigned to be horribly shocked two steps after she entered the living room.

Sure enough, the two young women who until her arrival had been in the middle of a passionate kissing session stopped instantly their embrace and glared at her with perfect synchronicity.

“Vista...” the growl of Taylor Hebert was amplified by hundreds of insects coming from every corner and air vent. “This stopped being funny after you and Dennis did it the first ten times!”

“I completely disagree, your Majestic Authority.” The younger parahuman answered cheekily.

It was really too funny seeing the two lovebirds trying to stand from the couch where they had been furiously kissing while keeping a presentable appearance. Unfortunately for Wei and Taylor, this was a lost cause. The robe of the Wuhanese had not exactly been modest and conservative in the first place, but given that she wore not much else right now under the sexy dress, it was not good for public appearances. As for Weaver, the grey-black uniform was certainly professional, but not with half of it laying on the ground and the rest about to join it in a few minutes.

“I’m really, really regretting granting you access to my quarters,” the ex-warlord of Brockton Bay said as she donned back and adjusted her clothes, while the Seneschal-Consort left the room in a hurry. “If you continue your bad habits, I am going to chance the codes...and of course prepare a terrible vengeance. I’m sure that sooner or later, you will have a boyfriend, and then...”

Taylor didn’t move a finger, but the large beetle next to her mimicked a killing strike motion that was rather evil. Maybe in hindsight it was best to slow down a bit the jokes...

“Okay. I promise I will knock next time, that way you will have time to save the appearances.” Missy watched the decoration of the living room as the Basileia finished lacing her shoes. It was rather good, to be honest. Between the clockwork-Gothic items, the large plants, the books, the instruments, the maps and the glass surfaces, this large salon had been infused with a very steampunk atmosphere. “This is rather nice. You want to extend it to the entire Hive?”

“Err...no. It’s one of Wei’s suggestions for my living quarters aboard the *Enterprise*.”

“You can say ‘our living quarters’. I think your relationship must be known to the entire system by this point. I bet you have prepared a very large bed for the long travel to Pavia.”

Taylor blushed...adorable.

“Not that I don’t like your advice and political ideas, Missy, but it is rather late and Wei and I had some projects for the evening.”

Of that, the Shaker parahuman had absolutely no doubt. The project of continuing their love affair must have been at the forefront of their priorities five minutes ago.

“Is there a pressing problem that can’t wait until morning?”

The Minister of Justice nodded, returning to a far more serious attitude.

“Approximately...” she looked at the sapphire-coloured watch Dragon had offered her last year, “one hour and a half ago, a fight broke up between pilgrims in section H-2 of Vulkan’s Arsenal. The temporary casualty is of six dead and twenty wounded.”

It would have been far worse had the enforcers and the PDF patrols on duty had not intervened. Due to its industrial importance, the shipyards were one of the most secure locations in the Nyx System and the Tech-Priests routinely improved the defences and the technology available to the average soldier.

“That’s...awful, but I don’t see how it represents such a big problem. With over two hundred-plus billion humans on the same planet and more on other moons and surrounding planets, there are a lot of crimes...”

“The pilgrims fought because they were angry. And they were angry because the captain of their starship decided to disappear with their savings after selling his command to an unscrupulous Atlas cartel representative.”

“I trust said Atlas citizen is currently enjoying the hospitality of the Nyx justice system?” Taylor asked.

“Naturally,” ship purchases like that had to be done via proper procedures, and the fact the man had tried to do it in front of her nose was an affront that couldn’t be tolerated. “But that still leaves the problem of the pilgrims.”

“If they were willing to go to Claire 47, I’m sure we can arrange something. Warp travel is not one hundred percent reliable, but I think I can find a Navigator, a few officers from our merchant fleet and a small crew to bring them to the Shrine World.”

“They didn’t pay to visit the Nyx Sector. All the witnesses are repeating the crook-captain promised they were travelling to the Ophelia System.”

The insect-mistress stopped caressing the black beetle by her side.

“If we’re speaking of Ophelia VII, seat of the Ecclesiarchy...”

“We are.”

“Then they are more than five thousand light-years away from their destination. Either their Navigator can’t tell his right from his left, or it was always the captain’s plan to come to this Sector. Your opinion?”

Vista bit her lip before beginning her revelations. The Shaker parahuman was certain Taylor was going to hate it wholeheartedly.

“I think we have found the explanation how the Menelaus dynasty and many of their associates were able to increase their planetary populations despite not receiving any large-scale colonisation support from Segmentum Solar or other important population centres.”

The silence didn’t last more than a couple of seconds.

“The bastards,” Taylor Hebert hissed loudly. “The bastards! It wasn’t sufficient for them to condemn their workers to a death of unending toil in disgusting conditions? They made a trade of robbing people and dragging them to Nyx in chains?”

Missy swallowed heavily. The fifteen year old girl knew the fury was not truly directed at her, but when she was wrathful the insect-mistress was a bit...terrifying.

“I don’t think there were that many of them. Since this was very much in the domain of black ops, there’s no documentation to prove it one way or another of course. But those that weren’t executed for other crimes when the Nyx merchants experienced a change of management must be far, far away from the Nyx Sector by now.”

“Save one exception.” Her superior remarked with a calm that presaged nothing good.

“Save one exception.” Vista repeated. “This crook-captain, alas, is going to be difficult to find.”

“Take a duo of Heracles Wardens and a cohort of Tech-Priests experts in murder investigations to help your men. I want answers from this man Missy, and if he truly intended to sell these pilgrims as slaves and fill his bank accounts with their money, he will face the Imperium’s justice.”

“I will do that.” This was going to be a long and exhausting night, no doubt. “This leaves in your hand the fate of the pilgrims, unfortunately. The Navigator aboard the ‘pilgrim vessel’ swore he wasn’t aware of anything and has already left for Kar Duniash and another contract. The Arbites have arrested the upper officers. The ship is going nowhere without your approval. But there is a whole flock of pilgrim still aboard, with no money and no future.”

“Fantastic,” the Basileia whispered in a disapproving tone before blinking. “Wait a minute...how many pilgrims are there in this ‘flock’?”

“This is an old Samson-class Pilgrim Vessel and the captain was more concerned about quantity than the survival rate. The number of pilgrims must be close to twenty thousand.”

“Unbelievable,” the Basileia muttered before straightening her back and taking a more alert stance. “I can’t even send them to Claire 47, because without an important money subsidy and the most basic help, they would find themselves reduced to beg on the streets before the year is out.”

The dark-haired parahuman gritted her teeth in frustration before speaking once more.

“But they are humans and I won’t turn my eyes away just because they were the victims of my predecessor’s cruelty. I will contact the Cardinal and we will propose them land grants and some financial support for the next couple of years. Assuming we manage to catch the captain and recover the money stolen, we will of course reimburse them.”

This was one of these moments Missy felt Taylor had really be a heroine deep inside. Many in the PRT department would have begun by protesting it was not their fault and they didn’t owe a dollar to these unscheduled migrants.

“Saint Clare’s Stand and Ruby’s Harvest?” Vista proposed.

“I was thinking more about Fay,” Taylor admitted. “The Nyx System, as much as we try to expand housing and mega-stations, is rather crowded these days. Fay has not that problem. I have been rewarded with hundreds of thousands empty hectares there, so there’s no shortage of place.”

“Plus the Mechanicus cohorts are less present in the Moros Sub-Sector, and the Governor is hardly going to refuse you a minor favour or two.”

“I plead guilty, your Honour.”

The two young women laughed together.

“I will convene an emergency Ministerial Council tomorrow after breakfast. This will at least decide the foundations of what to do when we are facing a humanitarian crisis. And obviously, this will be a one-time event. Even Menelaus employees must realise by now the Nyx Sector has changed and their illegal businesses are far riskier and less profitable than in the past.”

“For the Menelaus dynasty, I completely agree.”

Taylor smirked.

“I think I hear a ‘but’ coming after...”

“But there is your own status of ‘Saint-Basileia’,” she imitated an aureole above the head with force gestures, “to consider. The popularity of your victories does not go much beyond five or six Sectors, so for the moment the itinerant pilgrims we receive are more of an itinerant and local type who return to their homes once the pilgrimage is over. And their numbers remain largely below those of a typical Shrine World. But if you begin making waves outside the Quadrant...”

“Missy, we are going to hunt some pirates and discuss with a thief and a xenos overlord. I doubt very much doing this stuff is going to give me a promotion, much less a Segmentum-wide proclamation from the Ecclesiarchy.”

Given how insane the Battle of the Death Star had turned in short order, the ex-Ward did not fall for that line a single second.

“We will see if you sing the same tune when you return from Operation Caribbean...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Fay System**

**Fay III**

**7.172.292M35**

**Governor Ilvyna Dalten**

“It’s really impressive. Your workers did this in the space of four months without major Mechanicus assistance?”

“They did,” confirmed Ilvyna Dalten, Governor of the Fay System in the name of His Most Holy Majesty the God-Emperor. “Although it depends what you mean by ‘without major Mechanicus assistance’. No one else but the cogboys can install the main photon lines, the phased crystals, the vox towers and the Amphitrite water power plant.”

This monopoly over technology and what the Tech-Priests labelled under the large and vague term ‘Mysteries of the Omnissiah’ was somewhat frustrating, but force was to admit they respected their schedules and delivered high-level results.

“Still, it’s very impressive,” Zoe XIX Attica said. “You will be able to house, what? One hundred thousand inhabitants in this city?”

“The initial plan assumed a full capacity of one hundred and twenty thousand people, but we enlarged the western quarters significantly in the latest modifications. We should be able to reach one hundred and forty thousand in a couple of months.”

The ex-officer of the Imperial Guard smiled thinly.

“Of course, a lot of houses and blocks have already taken residence in their new homes. The administrator I nominated to serve as interim major told me we have already some thirteen thousand men, women and children in the city. By our best estimates, seven thousand are former pilgrims.”

It was evident as they watched the brand-new settlement and its busy streets that it was anything but an empty town. The motorised aircars were rare, but the much cheaper chariots and tractors were there by the hundreds.

“And all the needs of this city are not powered by promethium power plants?”

“Indeed. We have the solar collectors and the windmills west of the city. The geothermal plant is in the small Mechanicus enclave to the north. We respected the wishes of Lady Weaver very seriously on this matter.”

Not that Ilvyna had been reluctant to obey that order. When she had travelled to Nyx, the Fay Governor had seen from her own eyes what unchecked industrial development and centuries of pollution could do to a planet. Certain factories and constructions had to be done on the ground, but for many sprawling manufactorums involving chemicals, promethium and forges, the best solution was to build in space.

“Who had the idea to name the city Nyx’s Road? The pilgrims or yours?” The Princess-Magister asked in an amused tone.

“I haven’t the slightest idea of what you’re talking about, your Excellency!” The first ruler of the Dalten dynasty replied with an offended expression for a few seconds. “I may have a received a message a few months ago from Lady Nyx that *Saint’s Gift* was not an appropriate city name...”

The Governor and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Nyx exchanged a conspirator’s smile before returning to more serious issues.

“Agriculture will take up the majority of the jobs for years to come, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the lands here are quite appropriate for cereal harvests and fruit trees. The previous Governor wanted to convince the Wuhanese cartels to give him manpower and Thrones Gelts to settle the region, but he was unsuccessful.” Ilvyna shrugged. “A group of a dozen pilgrims recently convinced one of the Magos Biologis to give a chance to something they call ‘grapes’. We will have to see how it fares.”

“The industry?”

“The main efforts will be focused on the use, reparation and maintenance of the power plants that have been installed at Nyx’s Road. I have accepted on principle a great warehouse for the reparation of tractors and agri-machines. The Tech-Priests should arrive in three or four standard months.”

Yes, Nyx’s Road had a bright future promised to it. The weather was far more pleasant than in the capital, as it was situated seventy kilometres southwards and merely fifty kilometres away from the sea – though of course there was a mountain or two on the way.

“I do not see the PDF barracks,” the emissary of the Basileia said.

“It is the blue-red building in construction west of the Amphitrite plant and the river. The presence of my planetary defence forces in this area is light for the moment. I don’t want to terrify the newcomers. Over eighty percent of the population isn’t from Fay and few have served in any military-related job. Before the end of the year I will officially open the recruitment centre and the training grounds, but I do not expect many recruits this decade.”

“It’s quite a change from your policies in the north and in the orbital stations.”

“For a time,” the Governor of Fay answered. “For a time. I don’t know if it will be achieved in my lifetime, but I firmly intend to give a Fay a military tradition it can be proud of. Pensions, land grants, tax reductions and boons for the men and women willing to enlist are already in effect. The PDF training has been drastically increased and is now near the standards expected for an average regiment of the Imperial Guard.”

The former Major of the Fay 20th raised her eyes levelly to meet the dark irises of the Nyxian woman.

“It works. Lord Commissar Zuhev has not sent any complaints so far about the Fay regiments who volunteered for Petersburg.”

“And it’s half a victory by itself...” Obviously, the Attica noblewoman had met the man – who was at the moment leading the contest of ‘scariest Commissar of the Nyx Sector’. Some Fay troopers and visitors had even taken to nickname him the ‘Dark Fist of the Saint’ or ‘Weaver’s Shadow’.

It went without saying that the mustering at Petersburg had not acquired a reputation of hedonism, laziness and soft-heartedness. Zuhev was pushing hard the guardswomen and the guardsmen. Whereas they were supposed to be part of the expeditionary force with Lady Weaver or the general tithe was unimportant; no one was getting favouritism in his or her military training.

“And when will the future Heir or Heiress arrive?”

Ilvyna Dalten caressed her pregnant belly for several seconds.

“The midwives and my Medicae personnel say it will be in three months and two weeks. And speaking of which,” Ilvyna paused before voicing a request she had no certainty would meet a positive answer. “I was thinking about naming Lady Taylor Hebert the godmother of my daughter...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Vidar Sector**

**Craftworld Malan’tai**

**7.581.292M35**

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

At least twice per day, Maea was wondering what sort of milk the Biel-Tan nursemaids had given Yvraine at birth and who was their supplier.

It simply wasn’t possible for an Asuryani to be that energetic every micro-cycle under the sun, and yet Yvraine Kaydinn was an ultra-sphere of psychic energy somehow taking a female’s appearance.

“And I was telling them it’s as easy as to open your eyes! Open your eyes! Because they are Farseers...”

Maea Teallysis dragged away her loud companion before her luck abandoned her and a Farseer left the Great Council’s room. Accurate or not, the young Seer rather doubted the elders of Malan’tai would laugh with the implicit critics of Yvraine. Indeed, the most likely reaction she could imagine involved the expression ‘a rain of punishments and chores’.

“You shouldn’t mock your elders when the circumstances are so grave.” She told the exiled Biel-Tan Dire Avenger as they passed through the large Beltaer Portal and arrived at the entrance of the Melael gardens and its great cascade.

“Does that mean I can mock them when they aren’t?” Maea groaned and decided in the end that the best answer she could give was consisting in glaring at the shameless manners of the younger Asuryani.

“The Farseers of Biel-Tan must have hated you if you tried this with them regularly.”

“Of course I did. And of course they hated it. They are a heap of old fossils so convinced of their own invincibility and absolute prescience they needed someone to convince them of the contrary!” Yvraine patted her chin with two fingers in a pose that was a caricature of seriousness. “And they lack humour too!”

One part of Maea was horrified by this complete lack of respect towards elders and the strict hierarchy of your home Craftworld. The other part whispered in her head that Biel-Tan, unlike Malan’tai, had no rights to demand the respect of the new generations of Asuryani. Not when thousands and thousands of younglings were imposed by their teachers the Path of the Warrior before they were truly able to understand the consequences of their choice.

And it might be argue that many never understood what they missed. The very treasure that had been stolen from them stayed out of their minds, locked away by the war vision imposed by hundreds of cycles spent in an eternal cycle of war.

Biel-Tan was not condemned to a long blood trail on the Path of Khaine. There were still old Asuryani like Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren who understood the quick succession of conflicts was weakening the militant Craftworld, not strengthening its power and influence. Every time a Tempest of Blades war host encountered other Craftworld delegations, the possibility existed an Aspect Warrior would soon begin to doubt the decisions taken by the High Farseers and their bloodthirsty Autarchs.

But the useless wars continued. Yvraine should have stayed on the Path of the Dancer or the Path of the Acrobat for thousands more cycles. She should have also received a long education in the Paths and the Asuryani culture from the communal songs of teachings, being one of the thousands of orphans which had lost their parents in an unwinnable war or another. Instead she had been told to become a warrior.

Dancers, musicians, poets, painters, traders, dreamers...they all went to war...and came back as spirit stones and corpses.

“I fear your humour was a non-Asuryani language for all the good it did to them.”

“You may be right,” Yvraine replied. “But it was not my fault!”

Maea poured a trickle of her strength in the verdant grass of the parks and in five heartbeats the green was covered in a parterre of green, blue and gold flowers. The Seer and the Dire Avenger lied down in the middle of it, the soft and beautiful petals providing Yvraine and she a tender mattress as they watched the water creations imagined by the senior craftsmen of the Architect Path.

For hundreds of heartbeats, Maea enjoyed the peace. It was truly beautiful and she regretted deeply the galaxy as a whole could not be covered with thousands of planets like these. An endless numbers of verdant worlds where war and madness would be a disease confined to the past.

It was just a dream. Maiden Worlds like this paradise still existed, but their peace lasted the exact time they took to be discovered by non-Asuryani explorators. There were few safe locations outside a Craftworld for their people. The Fall, their dark cousins and Biel-Tan among many things had enforced this reality at the point of the blade.

“The Shadowpoint draws near.”

“I hope you’re not going to invent some new puns about the Path of the Seer elders and clouded robes...”

Yvraine laughed for a long time and her voice was like a crystalline sound accompanying the symphony of the waters around them.

“No, I will not. But I will admit...I am curious.”

“I am not.” Maea retorted bluntly. “It’s bad enough something we were involved into caused hundreds of Asuryani deaths, with the majority of their spirit stones unrecoverable to be brought back to their Infinity Circuit. If we are truly responsible for something which will deeply hurt our race...”

She hadn’t the strength of will to finish the sentence.

“Yes, this is not going to be good for us.” Yvraine began with a semi-apologetic tone. “But I’m still curious. The human we fought near the big swamps was powerful and dangerous, yes. And it’s entirely possible several of the most powerful abilities of the Sword of Vaul are now accessible to this warrior. But control of a few insects and a Sword of Vaul, assuming this is truly the birth of the future-clouding, should never be able to create a Shadowpoint alone...”

The young Seer picked a golden flower and placed it delicately on her hair, giving away a drop of energy to let the perfume soak her hair.

“I just hope the High Farseers of Biel-Tan won’t do anything idiotic when the threads are revealed...”

Yvraine laughed like she was going to die of laughter and barely managed to utter the next words.

“Are you serious?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Theta Marches Sub-Sector**

**Old Chelsea System**

**7.680.292M35**

**Apprentice-Graduate Cass Damascus**

In hindsight, maybe the lesson on which ships of the Navis Nobilite were safe to use for Officio Assassinorum’s work needed a few revisions.

The Navigators of House Ferraci were...insane. Yes, let’s go with insane. There were all crazy psychopaths, the lot of them. Removing them from the Imperium would be surely a favour to Mankind in general and the God-Emperor.

Cass Damascus blinked and tried to think about something else. These thoughts were not acceptable for a member of the Officio Assassinorum. Their role was not to decide who was guilty and who was not. The punishment’s order was not coming from their hands. They were the cold, merciless blade of the God-Emperor on the Golden Throne of Terra.

Breathe.

Breathe.

“This imbecile ruined my antelope steak!”

By a monumental effort of will, Cass did not tighten her fists in anger, gritted her teeth or showed her anger to the other persons present on the bridge of the *Uranus’ Dominion*, Odessa-class Cruiser owned by House Ferraci of the Navis Nobilite.

But it was not a lack of envy in her body which explained why she didn’t.

“Cousin, the two other cooks failed your antelope steaks. You are just too difficult where good meat is at stake.”

“I am too difficult. I am too difficult! I AM TOO DIFFICULT! YOU DARE? If you weren’t my cousin, I would challenge you to a duel here and now!”

The great bridge was deathly silent. The men and the women who should have been working diligently at their stations were standing in their best attempt to stand to attention and many, including her, only breathed when they were certain there were no eyes fixed on them.

At the centre of the bridge, there were four bodies, two living and two dead. The latter had been the ‘guilty’ cook and the servant who had brought the meat to the table of the Navigator. The former were the Navigators of House Ferraci.

Cass Damascus hated them. Mutants were an abomination. But as long as they were useful for the Greater Good of the Imperium of Mankind and satisfied the exacting loyalty criteria fixed by the High Lords of Terra, His Will was that these deviations of the sacred genetic human patrimony be spared and authorised to serve the Imperium in whatever capacity they were best suited for.

But the Navigators...they were absurdly wealthy. They were above most laws. They weren’t satisfied serving the Imperium! The only being they recognised truly above them was the God-Emperor. If they hadn’t the mysterious ability to guide ships through the Warp, they would have been executed long ago, beginning with the two three-eyes freaks mere metres away from her.

They were still dining the two mutants. The laspistol which had ended two lives was still clearly in evidence right to a plate filled with enough rare meat and sauce that the cost would have likely been sufficient to feed a family of ten for five or six days.

The scene was, frankly, deeply repugnant. The two mutants, dressed in long cloaks of deep red, were dining and laughing, criticising the meal of the man they had just put down like a disobedient pet. The gall of these creatures, to kill one of their betters...

The first mutant was called Benito Ferraci. Bald and podgy, if the bandana hiding his eye had not been present, it would have been impossible to distinguish him from the tens of thousands nobles crowding the outer halls of the Senatorum Imperialis. By Cass’ best guess, fifteen men had been killed by his command since they had departed Holy Terra.

The second was Badoglio Ferraci. Dark-haired and slim, he seemed to present a perpetual sour expression to everyone having the misfortune to look at him. And the personality was perfectly coordinated with his looks. Honestly, the mutant was an irredeemable slime. And seven men had had the bad luck to displease him since their journey started – all slowly executed after long sessions of torture.

It went without saying that the two Navigators loathed each other nearly as much as they loathed the non-mutants of their crew. The Apprentice-Graduate had been under the misconception Navigators always valued the competent personnel aboard their private fleets. If the entire crew was massacred by pirates or other interstellar threats, the Navigators would not be able to do much before joining them in front of the Golden Throne to provide explanations of their monumental failure.

But inside the hull of the *Uranus’ Dominion* this was obviously not the case. Perhaps it was because the Navigators were newcomers aboard this starship. Or maybe it was because they had always intended to sacrifice the thousands of men and women aboard once their mission was accomplished.

The Apprentice-Graduate inwardly snarled. She should never have come aboard this starship. Yes, it was the fastest away to reach the Nyx Sector, but there were two problems with this particular statement. Cass had to reach Nyx to complete her mission; the Navigators had no intention to go anywhere near this system. And there laid the very big problem: an Officio Assassinorum needed to act under a veneer of legality, at least for the opening stage. It wasn’t good at all when your transport decided to begin actions that any serious Arbites court would judge as a clear case of outright piracy.

An alarm sounded on the bridge, and at last, a dismissive sign allowed them to return to the duties they should have taken care of several minutes ago.

“We have a ship energetic signature coming out of the Warp,” the officer responsible for long-range auspex announced. Given the ambiance until a few seconds ago, it was difficult to blame him for his obvious fear. “The profile is consistent with a Stygies VIII-built promethium tanker.”

The three-dimensional profile which materialised on the hololith two seconds later was an ugly one. But super-tankers like those belonged to great cartels and merchant-chartist mega-corporations, built with Mechanicus expertise and base on millennium-old templates. The billions of benefits every fuel cargo was rewarding the investors per cruise was more than making it up for the sheer unattractiveness of the design.

“Exactly where our spies told us where and when it would be,” Benito Ferraci spoke after swallowing a large quantity of food Cass had no wish to identify.

For some reason that was equally based on assassin’s instinct and logic, the Apprentice-Graduate began to be very worried, or at least as much as her training in the Callidus temple had left her the ability to experience said feeling.

Tankers like these one were slow and extremely unlikely to arrive on schedule. Worse, they were valuable. Where was the escort protecting it? True, they were in a Sector officially at peace but still...

“Fire all our torpedo tubes in a single volley.” Badoglio Ferraci cackled. “It is time to deprive House Achelieux of two more Navigators.”

There was nothing to do but obey. The dozens of men and women aboard the bridge had neither the will nor the weapons to rebel against the mutants, and behind the Navigators over a hundred guards in carapace armour bearing the Ferraci coat of arms waited.

The orders were relayed and after five minutes the order to fire was given. It was a delay which reeked of incompetence. The tubes had been supposed to be loaded one hour ago.

And it wasn’t over. Sixteen torpedoes divided into two waves had been ejected at maximum velocity from the tubes of the Uranus’ Dominion. One minute later, there were only fourteen left as the fire-command cogitators of two suffered catastrophic malfunctions and they had to be self-destructed when the projectiles went off-course.

It wasn’t going to save the tanker, but it was galling...

Five minutes passed. And then in one instant everything went awry.

“Status change! STATUS CHANGE! Three, no four frigates!”

Faster than it took to say it, the nimble and swift escorts left the shadow of the promethium tanker where they had been hidden. Less than five seconds later, they were launching their anti-torpedo measures. And there was a lot of it.

“Starship! Starship behind us! GOD-EMPEROR! IT’S AN ASTARTES STRIKE CRUISER!”

A wind of panic spread on the flagship and at that moment the Apprentice-Graduate knew the Ferraci Navigators had led them to their death in the name of vengeance.

The trap wasn’t perfect. Before them, the four frigates of the Imperial Navy had to protect the tanker from long-range fire, and the Astartes Cruiser behind them had not been able to maintain the best intercept course while remaining as silent as the void.

But it didn’t matter. The Strike Cruiser, whose signature was identified as one of the ships belonging to the Brothers of the Red Chapter, would not need more than one or two salvoes to cripple the starship.

“IT’S A TRAP!”

“Thank you, Lord Admiral Ferraci, what would we do without your peerless strategic skills?”

It took her a second to realise it was she who had spoken...and that no one on the bridge of the *Uranus’ Dominion* had failed to listen to her sarcastic remark.

Damn.

She injected a dose of Polymorphine in her body and extracted fluidly the Plasma Pistol from her flesh before opening fire on the gaping Ferraci mutants.

It was incredibly satisfying to see them with large gaping holes in their treacherous flesh...

The weapons of the Astartes Strike Cruiser struck two point six seconds later.

Cass Damascus had failed her first assassination mission, but in the end she didn’t care about it.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Petersburg System**

**Petersburg II**

**7.810.292M35**

**Colonel Tom Cameron**

If there was a good reason to gather the entire regiment this fine morning as the cold northern wind of Petersburg hurled its fury in their ears and on their skins, nobody had shared it with him.

“Maybe the Departmento Munitorum imbeciles have managed to find their backsides and this is the first Major-General arriving...”

“Be quiet!” Tom Cameron ordered, not even bothering looking at the Lieutenant line from where the whispers had come.

The Lord Commissar – or as he was nicknamed when they were hundreds of kilometres away in manoeuvres ‘Old Metal-Tyrant’ – had a lot of flaws, but to be fair to the man, he wasn’t the type of Commissar who enjoyed making you parade for hours before a crowd of nobles. Nor was he the type to insist the boots were polished, the dress uniform was pristine and the vehicles shined before going to a ten days-long expedition in the Petersburg mountains.

The fact the order had come nonetheless from high-up told the Patton Colonel that Zuhev had estimated whatever was going to happen today was enough special to make the Patton 3rd Super-Heavy Armoured and many, many regiments stand to attention with all their vehicles freshly repainted and looking brand-new.

And if Tom used the ‘many’, it was not for exaggeration effect. The mustering grounds south of the Petersburg starport were dark from the concentration of troops.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise. His staff and he had seen the myriad of barracks built every day, the new power plants constructed, the curious machines the Mechanicus cogboys had brought day after day to make sure the air of Petersburg remained perfectly breathable and the water stations delivering pure water of a quality superior to what they drank usually. They had seen every day the gargantuan orbital-to-ground transports coming to add thousands more soldiers to the regiments already present.

But there had been no official presentation or parade. There was just training, training and re-training, per Zuhev’s implacable and relentless schedule.

And to give the Commissar his due, it was working. His tank crew had about one-third of personnel who had not a clue how to drive and fire a tank; now several of the youngest recruits managed a win or two every ten ‘friendly’ war games.

And some detached elements had been involved in the end of the war in the Ifrit Sector, allowing the veterans to return with more combat experience.

No, everything was fine with the Petersburg training grounds...except for the moment, their official order of battle was two hundred and ninety Leman Russ of four different variants, and this was hardly what he would call ‘Super-Heavy Armoured’.

The roars of shuttle thundered above their heads. And thousand of flyers made arrived in the lower atmosphere of the planet.

“More troops. Didn’t we have enough?” mumbled a trooper on Tom’s left. Fortunately for him, the man was in the black uniform and the purple stripes of a Megara private. It was certainly the Megara 6th Artillery, part of the Brigade Nyx’s Shield of the 2nd Division under Brigadier-General Justinian Lex.

It was a good point, admittedly. According to the rumour mill, there were close to a million men for whatever goal Lady Nyx had thought good to train them. And to this significant number were two-plus million of volunteers and PDF-tithed battalions, gathered to fulfil the demands of the Munitorum. How many more were going to come in the next two years?

“Hey, these aren’t the usual transports...”

Tom Cameron sighed. This time, there was no human authority able to stop his men and those of the nearby regiments from babbling. And as the types of flyers were identified a couple of minutes later, the companies’ commissars had to patrol in the rank to make sure the discipline was maintained and the whispers stayed whispers.

But it was difficult. The presence of what looked to be twenty-plus Thunderhawks was extremely unusual. And that could mean only one thing. The Space Marines were here.

The Patton 3rd, per its place in the Brigade Death Star, was one of the closest regiments from the spaceport. As such, they were one of the first to see the armoured column and the red giants flanking them.

This was not the first time the Colonel had seen one of the Angels of Death. But seeing them like this...it was humbling and frightening. The weapons they had in their hands, the famous bolters, were so big no non-augmented human would ever be able to carry it on a kilometre on its own. As for firing it, the recoil alone would probably break bones and provoke severe injuries.

They looked invincible arrayed like this, under the banner of the red tear and the golden aquila. That over half were smaller and did not look to be equipped in battle-armours was not enough to break the awe and the shock the Astartes were giving to the crowd, many of them he knew had never seen the shadow of a Space Marine before.

Watching the Space Marines in front of them, and the noble sons of Sanguinius, the Brothers of the Red...Tom was ready to bet thousands of youngsters would remember this day for decades to come.

Then trumpets sounded and Tom Cameron almost froze as he saw a cloud of butterflies take flight over the starport and when it passed over the heads of the guardsmen, it was in the well-recognisable shape of the double-headed eagle of the Imperium of Mankind.

Tom bent a knee, and across the muster grounds tens of thousands men, Nyxians first but rapidly followed by everyone, followed suit.

Lady Weaver was here.

More Space Marines came first, though unlike the Brothers of the Red they had little common theme beyond ‘shades of red’.

“Rise.”

He hastened to obey, like every man and woman stationed at Petersburg.

Thanks to that he had maybe ten seconds of warning before the Baneblade arrived at their height and stopped fifty metres away...but this meant the second super-heavy tank, one armed with a massive lascannon, decelerated and stopped directly in front of him. It looked vaguely like a Cataphract...in far more dangerous, and given the speed it had left the spaceport, the tanker in him was willing to bet a year of pay there wasn’t much in common with the ‘constantly-under-repairs’ old version.

“Your new tanks, Colonel. Ten Cataphracts, one hundred and fifty Khans.”

“My Lady. General.” The golden-armoured woman who had arrived like an angel saluted. He returned the salute. His tanks? She was going to allow him to drive such a fabulous creation?

A Fay guardsman approached, with a power sword lying on a purple pillow, and with a gesture he was authorised to seize it. And then one the Space Marines marched out with a great banner and a High Gothic-stylised ‘PATTON III’ in gold letters on a grey-green field.

“I give you this banner freely to raise high over the battlefields where your regiment will be victorious, Colonel. Do not disappoint me.”

“Never, General.” Tom Cameron swore. He saluted again. And the Saint continued her walk, while the Cataphract super-heavies and the Khan Battle-Tanks made an impeccable reverse gear to join the ranks of his regiment.

**Beyond the frontiers of the Imperium**

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**8.196.293M35**

**Magos Alena Wismer**

In cartography terms, the Acacia Expanse was some fifty-plus light-years southwards of the imaginary line’s southern end which separated Segmentum Tempestus from Ultima Segmentum. The Navigators of the First Nyx Exploration Fleet had confirmed they were able to see the Astronomican from this region, though naturally it was a rather weak beacon so far from Terra.

Yes, the fleet had found the Pavia System. The spatial coordinates had been verified twelve times. The blue giant had been entered in the Imperium databases and its energetic signature was impossible to mistake for anything else.

And that was the extent of the good news so far.

Because the Pavia System, officially declared Perdita by the Imperium in 274M34, was perhaps not the worst location she ever had to visit in the name of the Quest for Knowledge, but it was without contest in the top twelve.

“It looks to me,” her second-in-command Questor Delta-Darius declared, “that the Astartes were right. It is an excellent place if you wanted to serve as target practise.”

Alena Wismer could hardly disagree. Whatever rumours had spread about Pavia and arrived to the ears of Imperial Commanders, the reality was far, far worse.

“Let’s begin with the planet Lady Weaver is going to come liberating in the first place.”

“Logically, it is the wrong colour,” the Questor replied bitterly. “Since all data taken in M34 confirmed Pavia Primus was a blue and green orb and we are now observing with our best auspexes a violet-black world...”

“This is no terraforming work,” Tech-Priest Beta-14, the expert on this particular tech-subject. “At the distance we are, I can only make theoretical. But the blessed knowledge of the Omnissiah pushes me to believe several viral xenos weapons of a potency similar to our Exterminatus-grade weapons were exploded in Pavia’s upper atmosphere.”

The Magos dearly hoped her subordinate was wrong, because for all the magnificence and splendour of the union between Holy Terra and Blessed Mars, colonisable worlds without any alteration of the biosphere were relatively rare. Learning one had been destroyed by perfidious xenos before it could be reclaimed would be a sorrowful revelation. And obviously, all the ground forces the Lady Basileia was mustering this decade would be worse than useless if the very air of this planet was corrosive.

“Continue your analyses. Inform me when you have more accurate data about Pavia Primus. Questor?”

“The planet aside, the system is a system-wide graveyard of mighty and devoted human starships fallen in the glorious defence of Mankind.”

“There are also hundreds of xenos wrecks,” pointed out a lesser Tech-Priest.

“Exact,” her second in command agreed. “And that makes our survey efforts incredibly difficult. Between Pavia’s star and the outer asteroid belt, we have been able to mark over fourteen star-zones where more than fifty hulls are abandoned. The Omnissiah only knows how dangerous or unstable some of them are.”

From an Explorator perspective, this system was a superb hunting ground which would probably last them a good century to explore, map and search in totality.

In a system recently colonised or at the proximity of a loyal Imperial Sector, this would not have been a problem. Abundance of potential archeotech was something to be celebrated and properly venerated.

However, the Pavia System had a little pirate problem.

“What do we have on the traitors and betrayers of the Machine-God?”

“By all equations and algorithms, they don’t want the Imperial Navy or any force allied to the true servants of Mars to retake the system.”

On the hololith, the outer asteroid belt flashed in black, grey and dark green.

“The first line of defence is the outer asteroid belt, which given the size of the debris was certainly a telluric planet before some world-shattering weapon shattered it completely,” Delta Darius explained. “It would have already been difficult to find a navigation corridor for our fleet, but the pirates laid down millions of mines over the last millennium. We have already passively recorded over six hundred different models of space mines, and we have only properly analysed ten percent of the belt.”

“Operation Caribbean is going to bring plenty of minesweepers with them,” protested Beta-14.

“Some of the minefields are Eldar xenos-tech and emit faint Warp emissions. There are more likely prepared via a psionic-xenos ritual and must be considered extremely dangerous. Many asteroids are also excavated and have warheads on them. Trying to launch an offensive in this time and place risk being cut off and annihilated.”

“But the pirates have their exit to leave and enter the Pavia System,” Alena Wismer said. It wasn’t requiring a lot of logic. Xenos or human, it would take an insane captain to try a Warp jump somewhere between the outer belt and the star. Given the massive debris, the ever-changing position of the hulks and other minefields and of course the lack of precision where long-range Warp travel was concerned, it was virtually certain any ship which arrived without a semblance of prudence was going to smash in the outer belt or some derelict wreck.

“Yes, the western quadrant has one such crossing the pirates must regularly clear of debris to navigate through. But it is guarded by a Malta-class Starfort.”

Mechadendrites were agitated in anger and sorrow. A Malta-class Starfort was one-third the tonnage of a Ramilies, but it was still precious and venerable war engines and data-prints which had been engineered in the last centuries of M32 when the High Lords of Terra demanded the help of the Mechanicus to rebuild the defences of hundreds of strategically important worlds.

“We have visual confirmation at least twenty Destroyers and Frigates are using the dock-bays of the Starfort,” the Questor continued. “There is twenty percent chance this citadel is fully operational, but it may be able to host and launch one thousand starfighters.”

“Attacking in this direction would give away the element of surprise from the start.”

“And the pirates must have plans to deal with interlopers. Traitors to the Machine-God they are, but they know what await them if we capture them.”

And this was just the outer belt. Once this obstacle was no more, the invasion fleet would have to neutralise two large space stations which had been refitted by the corsairs and other void scum.

They had suffered so many modifications it was rather difficult to tell what they had been when Tech-Priests had dutifully maintained their systems, but Alena had a little idea this might be two of the M32 Condor-class stations built during the same era as the Malta-class. Minefields were sure to be found surrounding them.

The inner belt was really difficult to study, but it looked to be thrice or four times more defended than the outer belt. It had also a corridor, but this one was pointing towards the galactic east...and it was obviously defended by one Malta-class Starfort.

And around Pavia, there was a colossal mass that was too big to not be a former Space Hulk. The Magos didn’t need a long reasoning to know this was the main’s pirate lair...and it was over a hundred times the size of a Ramilies Starfort. Omnissiah preserve his servants if this hulk had a fourth of the firepower the great space citadels were able to unleash on their enemies.

“Cog and sacred oils! Where did the outlaws find all these forts and minefields?”

“And where did they find the hereteks and traitors to maintain the blessed machines?”

Both good questions...and the commanding officer of the First Nyx Exploration Fleet had not a worthwhile answer. But she had to find them. It was completely unacceptable to let the warships of Nyx and Mars fight the Pavia pirates with unreliable information.

“We are going to have to use the stealth shuttles after all.”

“Magos, this carries a significant risk...”

“I am aware.” Wismer said. “But the danger represented by the fixed defences is already far higher than our most pessimistic data-figures. We need to know if we have underestimated the size of the mobile fleet defending this pirate’s lair too.”

They certainly had been, without question. Now that they had been to fusion the auspex data-stream, the Mechanicus commanders knew beyond doubt there were seventy-plus frigates and destroyers, supported by what looked to be two battle-line cruisers between the outer and inner belt. Many codes were consistent with the communications of Eldar, Ork, Human, Sheed and Kroot.

They were likely many more waiting in orbit of Pavia Primus, invisible to their long-range auspexes and advanced machine-spirits or waiting in the immense labyrinth of this stabilised space hulk.

“Make the preparations.”

**Fleet Admiral Fitzgerald ‘the Poker King’ Tanaka**

According to the various pirate legends which always cropped up from time to time, the Hall of Captains had been carved in the entrails of the Space Hulk *Empire of Sin* a couple of years after the Eldar corsairs had ejected it permanently from the Warp and towed it to Pavia.

Unfortunately, like a great number of legends, the means to verify it were rather limited. It had been at least four hundred years ago, and the beings who felt a calling to the great profession of piracy rarely lived that long. Maybe some Eldars who had been there during this grandiose event were still alive, but none were currently in the Pavia System.

Anyway, the tradition was clear: only the beings masters of their own starship were able to enter the Hall of Captains without receiving a laser shot, a bullet, a dart-flechette, a shredding shuriken, a neutron beam or any other exotic projectile right between the eyes.

Yes, being the captain of a starship was the assurance to not be killed inside the Hall. But this safe-conduct law was only respected inside the Hall. The rest of the *Empire of Sin* was free game for the hundreds of thousands assassins, brutal sailors, thieves, slave traders and tyrants of the void.

And given that the hulk which served as headquarters for hundreds of war bands and outlawed corsair communities was big enough to give a battleship’s captain undying jealousy and repair capital ships inside his internal dockyards, there were hours to assassinate someone until the target reached the Hall or was able to return to his starship.

Fitzgerald had abused of the stratagem several times, and he suspected it would not long before he would be forced to add one more victim to this particular tally. Captain Boney was getting a bit too arrogant and slow to pay him the ten percent of the loot he had acquired in this latest raid...

Cymbals resonated and an atrocious cacophony stopped his thoughts from delving on the start of a new subordinate’s elimination. The laughter and the conversations stopped. The monster called, and the great pirate admirals of Pavia answered.

Slowly – it would not do to give ideas to the lesser captains one could *summon* the great Fleet Admiral Tanaka, oh no – he removed his large cigar from his lips and crushed it into the platinum ash-pan before readjusting his black cloak, and finally rose from his great armchair.

Like him, eleven other beings floated, walked, jumped or ran towards the High Table, before taking their seat.

The first twelve seats – for a certain definition of the term - were occupied in short order. The thirteenth was not. The ‘chairman’ of the Pavia Pirates was filled with pettiness, madness and a sense of insults few beings in the galaxy could equal. No doubt he was going to make them wait again. The question was how many hours it was going to take. In general, the longer it took to arrive, the worst his mood promised to be.

So they waited. Beginning to speak of a subject included in the order of the day – which had been written with the blood of a pirate on flayed skin – was strictly forbidden if you wanted to live one more day. The last who had tried was General-Admiral Hawkins, and it was whispered his decapitated head was still screaming somewhere in the under-bridges of the *Empire of Sin*.

Maybe if the twelve fleet commanders united their forces, they would be able to overthrow the monster. Together they had control of roughly seventy percent of the warships and the stations, the ‘chairman’ exerting his odious influence on the remaining thirty. But this would have demanded a minimum of trust between themselves.

And the first rule aboard the Empire of Sin was to never trust a fellow captain. That way always led to a horrible death...if you were lucky. An alliance of two was sometimes possible, but it was best to end it as fast as possible, and with the betrayal and the timely demise of the ‘ally’.

Fitzgerald had earned his nickname of ‘Poker King’ by winning his flagship the Poker’s Reward, at a game of Star Poker, but he wasn’t going to bet his life at this game. It just wasn’t worth it.

Despite this, the twelve pirates around this table remained infamous pirates, renowned in infamy over hundreds of galactic Sectors. The pirate-born human was happy to think that if the corpse-worshippers of the Imperium had a clue about these meetings, they would try their best to disrupt them...

Humanity was always represented thorough the ages, and he was pleased to see the ‘tradition’ would continue long after he was dust in the stars. Not counting himself for the Poker Fleet, there was Grand Admiral Jaeger ‘Void Master’ Day of the Pavia First Fleet, who had deserted the Imperial Fleet decades ago when the poor lieutenant realised his superiors were going to keep him to his hard-breaking duties without a thank-you. Fitzgerald was proud to say that at the first opportunity, he would slit the eyes of the arrogant bastard.

The third human at the table was Lord-Count Quintus ‘Gold’ Kalmar of the Kalmar Golden Fleet. Clad in gold from head to toe, seated on a golden throne, everybody knew Kalmar had a fetish for the yellow metal. It was so bad his greatest warship, the Exorcist-class Grand Cruiser *Gold Triumph*, was coated a few months ago in refined...gold. If Kalmar met disastrous losses, the Poker Fleet would take great pleasure in capturing him and pouring molten gold in his throat until all the inside was as golden as the clothes, the hairs and the medallions.

And the fourth...the fourth was Hoth. Or, as they were supposed to call him – and no one save his subordinates or the chairman did - Supreme Arch-Ecclesiarch of the People Hoth. Most pirates could be described as half-crazy to engage in the activities they did. The great majority of the pirate captains were by survival instinct pumped up with paranoia, killers and tyrants all in one. Hoth was...mad. There were plenty of evidence the man had been a senior Cardinal before his own subjects tried to arrest him. Hoth had burned rebellious population and planet in atomic fire, and declared himself Supreme Arch-Ecclesiarch. The Zion-class battleship he had stolen that day was still the heart of his pirate fleet. The sooner this robed hypocrite was tied to the prow of his flagship and died by Warp exposure, the better.

The non-humans had also impressive lists of accomplishments between them. The Ork Kiddz Blackdakka looted the planets he managed to find with his scrap-ships and added to his ravages the curse of ork spores. His fleet had almost had him a month ago in a Nebula.

Leader Fang-Tail N’Fffjt Brakorth of the Incendiary Fleet was a Sheed who had seen his home planet turned to ashes by an Imperial Fleet and the piracy career he had embraced offered him the occasion to avenge his race. Fitzgerald would be more than happy to finish the job the Imperials had botched.

Shaper Qorok Trek of the Kroot Mercenary Corps was in it for the money and the food, like all of his kind. The Poker King wanted to see him cooked and brought to him on a great meal platter.

The First-of-Diamond and the Ocean-Mistress were so infamous no need was necessary to remind their ‘exploits’ and the capacities they added to the defence of Pavia. It would be best to extort their secrets before strangling them slowly while poisonous thorns tore apart what they used as skins.

The last race, and arguably the most powerful, was the Eldar. Though Tanaka had never truly been sure they were truly one single species. Autarch Ulion Lakadieth of Lugganath, Corsair Prince Mariuvahn Moonblitz of the Sunblitz Brotherhood and Lord of Corsairs and Fleets Iath Bloodweaver of the Crimson Squadron had as many differences between each other as they had from a human like him. Sure, they had the same pointed-ears – that he firmly intended to cut and feed them one day – but the first time he had met them in this Hall, he had been forced to remind himself that Ogryns were abhumans to the great displeasure of humanity’s pride...

A new cacophony attacked their ears, and the chairman arrived.

Smiles – or their alien equivalents – appeared on every face. Not because they were truly happy to see the chairman, but because not smiling was nine times out of ten understood to be a betrayal attempt.

“The Great, the Mighty, the Seducer, the Undefeated, the Pure-Blooded! The Lord of the Sky Serpents! Great Chairman of Pavia! Duke of Commorragh! Traevelliath Sliscus!”

Every pirate captain applauded as the tall pale-skinned Eldar entered the Hall of the *Empire of Sin*.

There had been so many horrors ordered by the chairman in the last years that Fitzgerald didn’t even blink when he realised the clothes of the Sky Serpents’ leader, a blue-scaled reptile, were still screaming in agony by some sorcery artifice.

It would be a bad pun to say Sliscus slithered to be seated...but that’s exactly what he did.

“My friends! My captains! I was honouring an Asuryani Princess with my seed when a most interesting proposition arrived to my ears.”

The Commorragh Duke was giving them a wide and genuine smile, his tongue disturbingly imitating the reptiles he always pretended to be above from. Fitzgerald Tanaka knew at this moment the Eldar was laughing at a joke they hadn’t the first idea about...and he intended to push them, volunteers or not, on a path filled with corpses and destruction.

Everyone continued to smile, of course. To do anything else would have been signing one’s death warrant on the flayed skin of their crew.

After a couple of seconds, it was Quintus Kalmar who decided to risk the question.

“Please forgive my curiosity, Mighty Lord Sliscus, but we, the Pirate Admirals of Pavia, would like a few precisions about this interesting proposition you heard.”

“Of course I forgive you, my friend...” the Eldar had the same friendly expression he had shown when he had plunged Rukaur the Arch-Corsair in a pool of starved carnivorous fishes. “The rewards my fleet and yours will be offered for this small service are extraordinary, let me assure you. But the greatest prudence and confidentiality is asked of all participants. There are spies everywhere, sadly. So if you want to participate in this fantastic adventure, you will be gathered here in three years with your great fleets and you will place yourselves under my infallible and genial command.”

“Ignoble temptation of my part, oh Sky Serpent,” Iath Bloodweaver was cruel and as a denizen of the Webway realm of Shaa-Dom, the sole Pirate-Admiral who was willing to challenge in words the chairman. “But wouldn’t it be another attempt to raid Bakka and end your revenge game against a certain human Lord Admiral?”

“No! Of course not!” The lunatic Eldar retorted cheerfully. “Who cares about Bakka? The target is far more prestigious...and unlikely to see us coming until it is too late.”

The smile they were given was more terrifying than a tirade of insults would have been. And the eyes...the irisless black eyes were abysses of insanity and murder. There was nothing remotely orderly or grounded in the body of this abomination.

“Are you with me?”

**Magos Alena Wismer**

“The Imperial Navy should have brought several Battlefleets to raze this nest of vermin and heresy centuries ago.”

The words of Adagio-Iota were logical. Unfortunately, it solved nothing where the problems of the present were discussed.

“This is a good point,” the recently-promoted Magos told her senior Tech-Priests. “But they didn’t, and now the past is the past. We have to deal with the situation our predecessors have left us.”

The stealth shuttles and the five Nyx-class Dragon Armours they had deployed into the inner Pavia System had more than justified their investment, bringing back detailed schematics of the starships and the major defences the pirates used to protect their bases.

It was a significant exploit. While approximately thirty to thirty-five percent of the technology and infrastructure had been at one point or another in the last millennia built by loyal servants of the Omnissiah, twenty percent-plus of the remaining stations, minefields and advanced Pulsar and laser grids. The fact none of these defences, even the rumoured ‘far-seeing’ xenos sorcery, had seen them coming was an excellent omen for the future.

“A direct assault by the passages between the minefields will carry the risk of catastrophic losses.” Questor Delta-Darius said. “The pirates must have excellent maps of these space areas, and all their defence is based on it. The Eldar ships will use their speed to establish new minefields, and then while our battle-line will try to advance, the escorts and the fastest warships of the enemy will attack in hit-and-run devastating raids.”

“I agree.” Wismer replied, continuing to read the gigantic amount of data which had been recorded in the last days by the stealth units. “The pirates have complete knowledge of this system, since it is their lair-headquarters. They must have plans to maximise their tactical advantages and counter-attack any conceivable invasion fleet.”

“And they have a very large fleet ready to repel all intruders.”

Magos Alena Wismer scowled, because what Delta-Darius had just told every Mechanicus Tech-Priests present was, if anything, greatly understating all available evidence.

The First Nyx Exploration Fleet had not expected to see any space fort half the size of a Ramilies-class fortress and no warship bigger than a first-tier heavy cruiser when they had begun analysing at long-range the Pavia System.

To learn they were completely wrong had not been a joyous realisation.

Pavia was, to use another Space Marine’s expression, truly the ‘capital of the pirates’ in the Acacia Expanse and the equivalent of dozens of Space Sectors. So far over twenty-nine species, not counting humans, had seen their presence confirmed in the ‘nest’.

And for the warships, they were a true Battlefleet by themselves, although they seemed divided into thirteen big sub-fleets and did not present a unified command.

But it was still a very unpleasant acknowledgement. Four battleships, three grand cruisers, three battlecruisers, eleven cruisers, eighteen cruisers, seventy-two frigates and one hundred and sixty-one destroyers were something only the Imperium or a major enemy xenos group should be able to build and maintain. But these warships were all in the hands of pirates...

And they would be supported by one stabilised Space Hulk, four Starforts and stations, and over five thousand starfighters.

Maybe the Twenty-Fourth Fleet would have the quality against this cluster of heretics, xenos and traitors. But given the large Eldar presence, the greatest prudence was recommended.

“We will continue monitoring the Pavia System,” Alena Wismer decided. “But strategically, we have successfully achieved our initial goals. Prepare the fast courier *Bolt of Stygies* for an emergency return to Nyx with our latest reports and all the tactical and cartography data.”

“We obey and we serve the Omnissiah!”

The First Nyx Exploration Fleet had played its role. Now Lady Weaver and her commanders would have the difficult task to find how to break the pirates and their defences.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**7.492.293M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

When Dragon arrived to take a seat at her breakfast table, Taylor knew there was going to be trouble.

“You will need to reschedule your morning appointments.”

“Problems?”

“The *Bolt of Stygies* arrived yesterday and the Mechanicus Council and several of your Astartes and Generals spent most of the night analysing the information contained in its data-banks.”

She finished drinking her glass of juice before nodding.

“I presume there have been complications, otherwise you would have waited a few more days before convening a war council.”

“You’re presuming right.” The Tinker told her. “The opposition is far stronger than our most pessimistic estimates called for.”

The Basileia of Nyx sighed.

“Damn Trazyn.”

“Damn Trazyn,” three Marines of the Dawnbreaker repeated behind her and most of the guards and Tech-Priests solemnly followed suit.

In hindsight, things had been going well lately. The orbital industry and the mega-farms projects were completed ahead of schedule, many destroyers and frigates had been formally commissioned by the Imperial Navy. The military and civilian goods’ production was constantly increasing, the first reforms were now part of the Nyx society and the mood in the street was largely positive. Bio-domes with thousands of trees were now providing a large amount of green colour in the Hives, the pollution levels had drastically decreased, and Dragon had met huge successes in the rationalisation of the Nyx production lines and materials. Forge-Temple Fafnir was operational and training Tech-Priests in addition to all its technological duties. The construction of the Hagia Sanguinala was on schedule.

Two Ork warbands had attempted to raid the Nyx Sector again but had been smacked down and annihilated in a one-sided battle at Brockton by the combined forces of the Mechanicus and the Navy. Four apprentice pirates had met the same fate, and in one case Atlas had made a big public spectacle of their execution.

A Consortium of Chartist Captains had three months ago purchased the equivalent of six mega-tankers worth of military-grade promethium and fuel and the Nyx Treasury had gained an important benefit from the commercial exchange. House Ferraci and House Belisarius, after losing two raiders each and a few months of veiled threats, had finally decided to bury the hatchet between them and House Achelieux, or at least to ignore the Navigators she employed for the time being.

And on the personal side, she had a great...lover, great friends, and she was now the godmother of an adorable Anne Dalten of Fay.

In hindsight, maybe things had been going *too* well.

“Valeriya please, go find Vladisluvius and tell him the visit of the new clothes’ factories will need to be rescheduled next week. Dragon thinks the news for Caribbean can’t wait.”

Ten minutes to finish the breakfast, speak a bit with some guardsmen, a kiss on her Consort’s lips, and the two parahumans descended the Spire to Floor 33 and the Great Strategium.

Everyone was already present, at least everybody who had been on Nyx at the time. Zuhev had returned to Petersburg after a short period of rest at the beginning of the year. Isley and several of his Heracles Wardens were conducting an operation against a slaver ring in the Hives of Wuhan under Inquisitorial oversight. Izaz and forty-plus Brothers of the Red were in the Theta Marches. But overall, nine members of the Mechanicus Council and over one hundred-plus officers were present. And those who weren’t had junior representatives who would deliver them a sum-up in the next days via heavily encrypted reports.

It would have to do for today.

“Master Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius, you have the floor.” The insect-controller told her Master of Logistics as she took her seat. A few seconds were needed to have everyone seated and a relative silence, and then the Triplex Phall high-ranking Tech-Priest began his sum-up.

It didn’t take a minute before she and most of the room lost their smiles. Oh, the presentation was excellent. Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius in the last years had rapidly assimilated the art of presenting her the main subjects in easy diagrams and schematics, and his briefings on hololith were almost an art by now.

No, the reason why she was dismayed – and she was ready to bet she wasn’t the only one in the Strategium – was at the magnitude of the defences waiting for them at Pavia.

The density of the minefields was bad enough. But the size of the space fortresses, especially this ‘ex-Space Hulk’ was a nightmare in itself. And the order of battle of the pirate fleet – or fleets, since they were obviously disunity and day-to-day clashes – was more than five hundred percent above the worst estimations.

“Thank you, Lexico Arcanus.”

The Tech-Priest bowed and replied by the usual protocol.

“The fact that Pavia is a pirate’s lair is not a surprise.” Taylor tried to keep a neutral and composed tone. The entire assembly had no need to see or hear her doubts in public. “But I am very surprised by the sheer numbers the pirates are able to muster. Now, I am not a specialist of naval warfare,” she turned to look at Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer when she spoke this sentence, “but I have a good idea of the numbers Battlefleet Nyx is able to arm and I know the billions of Throne Gelts necessary to build from scratch a Warp-capable starship. I have also seen the data and the estimates on maintenance, and manpower. The honourable Mechanicus Council insist to me regularly on the thousands, no, the hundreds of thousands Tech-Priests we have working on the maintenance of the blessed machines, the repair yards and the foundries.”

The Basileia watched the men, the women, the cyborgs and the Astartes before her.

“I am not trying to find a scapegoat. But I want to know how in the name of the God-Emperor these pirates can afford to maintain such an industrial infrastructure when one loyal Sector of the Imperium can’t.”

“May I try to give an answer, Lady Weaver?” Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus asked as he rose from the three-metres wide object that for him corresponded to his notion of seat.

“By all means, Master of Destruction.” Taylor was somewhat curious to see what angle of approach the member of the Ordo Reductor was going to use today. In general, his ideas were blunt, but had the merit to employ well-grounded knowledge.

“Magos Alena Wismer has done an excellent job to monitor the Pavia System, but she wasn’t able to show you the industrial base of these pirate fleets because many of the yards and support infrastructure aren’t there. The Lugganath Eldar are directly funded and supplied by their Craftworld. These Eldar are pirates the moment they take their first breath, and there is ninety-nine point nine percent probability any damage they take in their raids will be repaired to their Craftworld. The Corsairs of the Sunblitz Brotherhood are similar supported by the Craftworld Alaitoc.”

“If I understand you correctly Archmagos, striking Pavia will attract us the enmity of these two Craftworlds.”

It wasn’t something that particularly gave her a planet-sized enthusiasm. The Eldar warriors were dangerous, and while she had largely improved her control range and her powers, one-on-one the long-ears had the advantage against the guardsmen of her forces.

And it didn’t take into account the minor fact that one Craftworld must already want her dead. Paranoiac or not, Taylor doubted Biel-Tan would forget soon the losses of the Battle of the Death Star, and Trazyn the Thief was an extremely difficult target to reach if they wanted pay-back.

“Yes.” Stefan Delta-Septimus had never sugar-coated her the bad news, and by all evidence it was going to continue today. “The other Eldar pirates come from the dark harbours of the Webway, and it is there they will repair their tech-damned starships.”

“Fine, I understand...for the Eldar. But the others...”

The Archmagos Reductor withdrew and let Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar touch the hololith primary control commands. And after canting something in binaric, the two-dimensional portraits appeared. One minute...where they...bounty posters?

“Each race has its own methods to supply itself and continue to raid the space-lanes and strangle trade and interstellar communications wherever they strike, Lady Weaver. The Orks are of course rather obvious. Their facilities are crude, and Pavia is just a gigantic scrap-yard for their odious machines.”

One buzzing command and the poster of an ork posing as a caricature of a pirate and a ‘Kill Kroozer’ like the one which had assaulted the Nyx Sector were amplified by a factor of a hundred. The style could have made her snicker, if the information wasn’t so horrible.

“I took the liberty to convert Solar Ducats, Tempestus Crowns and other currencies into Nyxian Throne Gelts at their current exchange rate, Lady Weaver.”

Taylor didn’t answer for several minutes, reading the information on the pirate which read like this:

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KAPTIN KIDDZ BLACKDAKKA**

**‘GORK’S HAMMER’**

**ORK PIRATE**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 500 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

**THIS BOUNTY WAS ISSUED FOR THE MOST HEINOUS SACK AND BURNING OF THE HOLSTEIN ACROPOLIS, THE WAR OF A ONE HUNDRED YEARS ON NEW GRAZ, THE CARNAGE OF VOLGA...**

The list went on for several lines. It seemed that ‘Kiddz Blackdakka’ had been a very busy ork in his pirate’s career. Fifteen planets had been vandalised and looted by the greenskin. And since greenskin propagated their spores wherever they went, war raged for centuries after the xenos’ departure.

“How powerful is this greenskin compared to the other pirate commanders?”

“He is likely the weakest,” Gavreel told her in a voice where no amusement could be perceived.

Okay, this was really bad. The young parahuman was not going to say she was going to launch an attack on Pavia just for the money, but the bounty on this pirate was huge by any standard. No pirate or outlaw in the Nyx Sector right now had more than a few millions on his – or its – head.

“Please give me the other pirate commanders.”

“By your command...”

The greenskin disappeared and was replaced by a green avian alien and what was apparently its flagship: the Warsphere *Guaathow*.

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**SHAPER QOROK TREK**

**‘THE CANNIBAL’**

**KROOT MERCENARY COMMANDER**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 700 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

**THIS BOUNTY WAS ISSUED FOR FOUR THOUSAND ACTS OF CANNIBALISM ON ASTRA MILITARUM PERSONNEL, THE DESTRUCTION OF BATTLEGROUP DEMETER-II, WAR CRIMES ON THE LIAN CAMPAIGN...**

The Kroot war industry looked rather...appearances could be deceiving, but it looked just one step above the greenskins. Though the reports of the massacres allowed to read that several times, it was more the incompetence of several officers who had allowed their inhuman opponent to win a ‘miraculous’ victory and eat them raw on the battlefield.

The third pirate commander was not an Ork or a Kroot. In fact, it was not a biped. Take a mutated T-Rex head, combine it with the body and the tail of a scorpion, and it had vaguely a resemblance to the...being that was presented to the Nyxians and she. Its flagship looked vaguely like three tubes stuck to each other. It was called the *Jir’shack* and the Imperium had classified it as a Deadly Sting-class Cruiser.

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**FANG-TAIL N’FFJT BRAKORTH**

**‘THE BLOODY CLAW’**

**SHEED WARLORD**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS; KILL NON-PIRATE HUMANS ON SIGHT**

**REWARD: 750 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

The list of atrocities was...sick. Obviously, this pirate was eager once he had demolished the defences of a convoy or a planet to lead boarding actions, and ‘encourage’ his subordinates by creating the biggest massacres he could possibly inflict onto the defenceless civilians. In fact, the reason his bounty was so high while he had not a third of the career’s length of the two previous ones was his sheer brutality.

The fourth xenos was an Eldar. Obviously.

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**AUTARCH ULION LAKADIETH**

**‘THE KING OF RANSOMS’**

**ELDAR PIRATE**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 800 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

According to Wismer, the long-ears had a Void Stalker-class battleship, the *Anthem of Fallen Suns*. In number of starships captured, he was well-away from his three ‘colleagues’, but unlike them, he ransomed his prizes and often did not touch a single hair of the civilians. The Eldar’s ships were all painted with the marks of Craftworld Lugganath.

The fifth pirate was the first human.

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**FITZGERALD TANAKA**

**‘THE POKER KING’**

**PIRATE ADMIRAL**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 870 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

“Gamaliel, are the human pirates receiving a treatment of favour from the Segmentum authorities?”

The Blood Angel chuckled.

“No, not really. It’s just that the Navy really pushed for public executions where these traitors to humanity are concerned...”

Yes, clearly it would have been too much to expect mercy or the concept of fair trial from the Lords Commander of Ultima and Tempestus.

This ‘Fleet Admiral’ had a distinguished resume, you couldn’t say anything against that. He had won his Corinus-class Grand Cruiser in a Star Poker game, and by Navy archives in general made a habit of proposing to the captains he captured to regain their starship’s freedom by winning three rounds against him. Of course, he was also a psychopath who had destroyed a total of thirty-plus space stations and killed more than two billion people in his apocalyptically-violent raids.

The next two pirates were almost disappointing after that. The first was Eldar. The second was human. The former had a battlecruiser, the *Eternal Song of the Moon*. The latter had an Executor-class Grand Cruiser, the *Sovereign of Stars*.

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**CORSAIR PRINCE MARIUVAHN MOONBLITZ**

**‘THE MOON DANCER’**

**GENOCIDAL ELDAR**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 900 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

What she read underneath it did not improve her opinion on the Eldar. This ‘Corsair Prince’ obviously had the same methods and opinion about Mankind as the Biel-Tan Eldar. His list of victims was legion, and the number of starships stolen beyond counting and certainly incomplete to boot.

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**JAEGER DAY**

**‘VOID TYRANT’**

**NAVY DESERTER**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 930 BILLION THRONE GELTS**

An addendum below specified the man preferred to be called the ‘Void Master’, but his wishes had clearly not been taken into account on his bounty poster.

“The next pirate is part of the reason the Pavia infrastructure is not collapsing due to age and their neglect of the proper rites to appease the machine-spirits.”

And the hololith showed...seriously?

“Err...Archmagos Lankovar? I think there’s a little error in your data.” And as dozens of guards and other commanders in the room chuckled, her affirmation was not a lone voice in the desert.

“There’s no mistake.”

“It is a panda.”

When she had described the animal to several Tech-Priests and half of her Dawnbreaker Guard – the latter wanted to draw something original, the former wanted more knowledge about M3 Earth – it had been really popular.

The being on the poster looked a bit different, but the resemblance was uncanny.

“It is a Rashan, Chosen of the Omnissiah. These vile and heretek-fuelled creatures are violating the tenets of the Omnissiah...”

Taylor let the Magos which had decided to intervene continuing his rant against the violations of tech-mysteries realised by the Rashan.

But it was a new instance where she was remembered the Adeptus Mechanicus, when they wanted to be bigots, could be worse than the nobles, the Inquisition and the Adeptus Administratum added together. The list of ‘crimes’ were more ‘these xenos had the gall to touch our sacred technology and use it better than us’. Particularly telling was the point all the Mechanicus council members were staying silent. Not surprising, they knew her well enough to guess her opinion on the subject.

**WANTED**

**ALIVE ONLY**

**CALICO**

**‘FIST OF DIAMOND’**

**HERETEK RASHAN**

**DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE XENOS**

**REWARD: 1.3 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

Her Minister of Justice was making puppy eyes at her from the opposite side of the hololith. It wasn’t difficult to guess why. This ‘Rashan’ looked cuddly and adorable like a panda of their homeworld.

It was going to be difficult to capture it and not turn it to the Mechanicus. The cogboys had really made a colossal effort on the bounty: there were war bonds of the Confederate Saturnine Bank of Holy Terra and several cutting-edge machines that were usually not sold to the public.

At least there was no moral dilemma for the next Pavia pirate.

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**LORD-COUNT QUINTUS KALMAR**

**‘GOLD’**

**TRAITOR ROGUE TRADER**

**TRAITOR NOBLE**

**PATHOLOGIC LIAR AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**REWARD: 1.5 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

There was nothing remotely decent in the past history of the man, who by a twisted irony refused to wear anything but gold-coloured garbs and armours. Quintus Kalmar had been a Sector Lord offered a Warrant of Trade because he had ruined his Sector by his incompetence and the Administratum for some reason had not wanted to execute him. The next years had proved they really should have separated his head from his body when they had the chance. The first Rogue Trader of House Kalmar had not lasted one year before breaking the last ties he had in the Imperium and rising the black banner on the Exorcist-class Grand Cruiser *Gold Triumph*. From that point, it had only been massacres, rape, planetary pillage and starship ambushes. Oh, and he had left a colossal debt to his name in several major shipyards before the start of his pirate career.

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**LOX’ENA**

**‘SOUL DEVOURER’**

**‘SIREN’**

**OCEAN-MISTRESS OF THE UNSOUNDED DEPTHS**

**ALPHA-GRADE PSYKER**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT PSYKER DAMPENERS AND NULL TECHNOLOGY**

**REWARD: 2 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

The classification of ‘Siren’ was easy to understand. Blue-scaled, a large tail and long white hair, the alien looked like the modern representation of a Siren. The problem, unfortunately, was that by all reports, the enthralling voice was there too...and the xenos used it to catch her prey. What she did after that was absolutely deranging and disgusting.

This ‘Lox’ena’ could not survive without water. But her psyker powers according to the Mechanicus data-bases allowed her to manipulate a floating bubble where she was protected from air and the dangers of the exterior.

This pirate was commanding the Choral, a modified Eldar Crescendo-class Battlecruiser.

“Is this ‘Siren’ an Eldar which has abused from surgery to become a new sub-species?”

“Unknown, Lady Weaver.” Lankovar replied. “It has not the long-ears of the Eldar, and lacked many of their traits. But the numbers of these xenos encounter beyond Imperial space is extremely limited. It is one of the reasons the orders are to take it alive if possible; we know so little about it...”

The eleventh pirate was not to be taken alive. And it was an Eldar beyond doubt, though its very appearance was sinister and fuelled by darkness.

**WANTED**

**DEAD ONLY**

**IATH BLOODWEAVER**

**‘SHAA-DOM’S REAPER’**

**‘LORD OF CORSAIRS AND FLEETS’**

**TORTURER-ELDAR**

**EXTREMIS-PHYSICAL THREAT**

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

**THE XENOS IS TO BE KILLED ON SIGHT AND INCINERATED COMPLETELY**

**REWARD: 2.2 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

Basileia or not, she couldn’t stop a whistle. This Eldar...his list of crimes included everything the ten pirates before him had done, save maybe the Rashan and the Siren. Hundreds of thousands of atrocities had been attributed to this mass-murderer.

The monster’s flagship was called the *Crimson Impalement*, and while its fleet was small, it had a lot more firepower than a Battlefleet should have.

Taylor wanted to believe humans could not sink that low. And immediately to disprove that, there was the twelfth major bounty.

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**PIUS HOTH**

**‘SUPREME-ECCLEASIARCH OF THE PEOPLE’**

**TRAITOR CARDINAL**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**MORAL THREAT**

**REWARD: 2.5 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

If the Rashan was the symbol of the Mechanicus insecurities, this psychopath was the Ecclesiarchy’s. The insect-mistress had a good view of Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius, and the aged woman’s glare at the picture could be described ‘pure loathing’.

And this criminal had a Zion-class Battleship, modestly renamed *The Will of Hoth*.

After this litany of crimes, monstrous deeds and proofs xenos and humans could be really united when it came to break every law of decency and honour code that had ever existed, Weaver could not help but be worried what the thirteenth and most dangerous pirate commander of Pavia had done.

The insect-mistress was not disappointed. The hololith flashed to reveal, not a bounty, but the three-dimensional vid of a tall Eldar. Like Bloodweaver, the xenos was pale and seemed to have been created by darkness. But there ended the similarities. The hair was a radiant silver, and the body, unlike the others Eldar seemed extremely muscled.

And the smile...even knowing this was a vid and not the real thing, Taylor could not help but think this was the face of a mad being. The alien had lost all reason long ago and lived only to torment the galaxy.

And the endless script materialising on the right confirmed this feeling.

**92nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**TRAVELLIATH SLISCUS**

**‘THE SERPENT’**

**‘DUKE OF COMMORRAGH’**

**ADMIRAL OF THE SKY SERPENTS**

**POISON TORTURER-ELDAR**

**EXTREMIS-PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-MORAL THREAT**

**DO NOT MISPRONOUNCE ITS NAME**

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

**THE XENOS IS TO BE KILLED ON SIGHT AND INCINERATED COMPLETELY**

**REWARD: 17 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 3 PLANETS**

The text that appeared on her data-slate made her the urge to gape. The Eldar had kidnapped the wives of several Sector Lords to...err...impress them with his virility. There were also several accusations of the *Incessant Agony*, its Dying Sun-class Battleship, having been sighted in Sectors where female Rogue Traders had turned traitor in short order. Fifty planets had been depopulated by his fleet because they had mispronounced the Eldar’s name or had somehow failed to respect an unknown custom.

“Completely amoral but at least he has the style to justify a ‘King of the Pirates’ status.”

“Indeed,” Gamaliel said. “We are going to need a lot of firepower to deal with these threats.”

“Yes,” what else could she reply? “But before I establish an Alpha-priority Astropathic communication, I want to have a plan. We will not send Twenty-Fourth Fleet and the warships of the Nyx Sector in this heavily-defended pirate’s lair without one. This ship’s graveyard is large enough, I see no need to add more battleships and priceless assets to it. I open the floor to your suggestions.”

For several seconds, the former warlord of Brockton Bay feared there wasn’t one. All the Archmagi and Magi, even Arithmancia Sultan and Desmerius Lankovar were cant-muttering to themselves.

It was the moment Wolfgang Back chose to stand from his seat and salute.

“I may have a workable plan,” the First Navy Secretary’s smile was fresh and bared his white teeth to the large audience. “My question, Lady Basileia, is in what state do you want this system once the pirate threat will be eliminated?”

“I would prefer Pavia Primus to be intact, Secretary Bach. Without air and water analyses, we can’t be sure the planet is unsuitable for human colonisation.”

This, apparently, was not a large obstacle to whatever plan the future Rogue Trader had imagined in the last hour.

“In this case, the plan is definitely workable...with some Mechanicus help.”

Having hard some of the stories of Mechanicus Magos failing to hubris and disintegrating large planet surfaces, Taylor wasn’t reassured. But no one had proposed any alternative for the moment...

“Please tell me.”

Before one minute was out, Taylor Hebert was very, very glad there was nothing valuable in the vicinity of the Pavia System.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Solar Sector**

**Sol System**

**Ring of Iron**

**0.920.293M35**

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“Your request of Skitarii and transports has been approved, Archmagos.”

Sometimes, Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix was ready to recognise the advantages of having a direct representative of the Fabricator-General as your second-in-command outweighed the drawbacks.

The Noosphere channels, by some incomprehensible logic, seemed more efficient when high-priority cants coming from Mount Olympus were used.

“And the special cannons for Plan Collateral Damage?”

Yes, the name was completely ridiculous. However, the Basileia had insisted, and as much as he hated to say it, the effect it was going to have on the defences of the Pavia System.

And besides, if the attack worked a third as well the initial objectives asked for, the pirates were going to receive a surprise; hopefully the last one in their miserable lives.

“They are prepared as we speak. Loading will be complete in twenty standard hours.”

Hediatrix canted a praise of satisfaction. Efficient actions deserved recognition, and in the last year Archmagos Felicia 24-Toledo had proved her worth enough times for him to have no doubt that her skills were worthy of her rank.

It was logical, for Arks Mechanicus’ commands were not handed lightly, and the *Utopia Planitia* she used as flagship was more powerful and had an even more prestigious history than the *El Dorado*.

“In this case, I think the Twenty-Fourth Fleet will soon be ready to make its inaugural travel to the Nyx Sector.”

As far as capital fleets went, this one was definitely on the smaller side. In the section of the Ring of Iron where Hediatrix had gathered it, there were ‘only’ two Arks Mechanicus, three Battleships – one of them from Phaeton – one Ordinatus-Barge, one Bombardment Cruiser, two Heavy Cruisers, ten Cruisers and the dozens of escorts to provide protection against smaller enemies like pirate raiders.

But numbers could be misleading, and this was the case in this instance. In coordination with Nyx and Lady Weaver, the Twenty-Fourth Fleet was going to ‘acquire’ reinforcements at every stopover in Segmentum Solar and Ultima Segmentum. Once they reached Nyx, the battle-line would be strong of seven battleships, which was far more respectable.

And naturally it didn’t include the Navy reinforcements, the *Enterprise* of Lady Weaver, the Space Marine warships, or the naval forces of Legio Defensor waiting at Ryza.

Hediatrix had wanted to add a few more Mechanicus assets to the capital units, but the forces simply weren’t there to be transferred to his command. The Secessionists of Pacificus were the main enemy and as such the frontlines were going to be awarded the bulk of the fleets and the resources...for the time being.

“Speaking of which Archmagos...I received a...suggestion from the Fabricator-General. It would be best for Twenty-Fourth Fleet to depart in less than twenty standard days.”

This was a...strange suggestion. The Fabricator-General was just below the Omnissiah, and he could have easily phrased as an order. Yes, Gastaph Hediatrix and the rest of Twelfth Fleet had been welcomed in triumph to Mars at their return, but the influence they had gained from it was far from unlimited. It was not Martian Magi who had discovered and safeguarded the STC database.

“I see no material or moral issue for a...twelve days departure.” The Archmagos Prime said. “May I ask the reason of this...courteous suggestion? Our timetable is not lax, but we have integrated the vagaries of Warp travel reasonably to arrive in time for the Sanguinala of 295M35 at Nyx.”

“Cawl is coming back to Mars.”

Ah. Yes, it was a very good reason. Amazing how six words could change everything.

“I will accelerate the preparations.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.269.294M35**

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

Now that they were able to coordinate and adopt the millennia-old ‘four fingers’ formation, the flyers’ ballet of the Aeronautica Imperialis was starting to be a thing of beauty. They were still imperfections of course, but the Thunderbolts, the Marauders and the Valkyries were behaving like a real air fleet and not the unruly inexperienced mob so many squadrons had been four years ago.

“They are getting better,” Wolfgang commented next to him.

“One part of me wants to tell you they could only get better,” the time-stopping parahuman said. “I know the war against the Orks caused an insane attrition rate the Navy had to compensate somehow, but cutting down the training hours and keeping the old peace-time curriculum was just a recipe for disaster.”

According to Dragon – which had become by default the foremost specialist of Earth Bet’s military history – the Imperial Navy had adopted in the Samarkand Quadrant the same short-sighted and crippling policies the Luftwaffe of Adolf Hitler and the VVS of Josef Stalin in the early stages of World War II.

The result was eminently predictable. A few aces survived with hundreds of victories and made the delight of Imperial propaganda, while the rest of the pilots were lucky if they lasted five missions before being brought down by a greenskin air-maniac.

And with every defeat, pilot instructors of the Academies were ordered to abandon their classes and go to the front compensating the military losses. That way, each new promotion of pilots was sure to be less trained, less prepared for the harsh realities of the frontlines...and of course less motivated, as they saw the older boys and girls who had graduated one year or mere months before them return in coffins and be celebrated in large-scale funeral marches.

“You’re right. I only wish Lady Taylor could have let me spread the fighter and bombers training and academic reforms to the Sector as a whole. As it is, the pilots who will graduate this year will be approximately ninety-two percent of the reinforcements the Navy and the System Defence Fleet will have.”

It was true the other Academy-outposts at Wuhan and elsewhere were rather...less efficient and terribly organised.

“You heard the Basileia and Dragon.” When those two found common ground, it was in general worth listening to and obeying... “We made enough enemies pushing for the reforms here, and the officer ranks of the Imperial Navy are their obstructionist-themselves. Without a victory and a marked improvement in performance compared to the old style of Aeronautica training, the opposition won’t bulge.”

Wolfgang’s expression was anything but amused.

“The imbeciles...but what can we expect of nobles?”

“That they try to defend their privileges.”

Truth to tell, before passing the first laws, Dennis had not realised how vital the Aeronautica Imperialis status had become to the high and middle nobility. Neither had Wolfgang for that matter. Because while they had been busy overhauling the Nyx System Defence Fleet and removing the various dead weights, the Guard and the PDF forces had been busy breaking the stranglehold the aristocrats had over the upper ranks of the ground forces.

This had made the Aeronautica Imperialis and the Imperial Navy the last fiefs of the nobility in the war machine at Nyx, but the latter had to contend with foreign aristocracy as well. These sons of Dukes, Counts, Viscounts and Princes had not appreciated at all being told they were going to be sharing their courses with the impoverished nobility, the children born in merchant families, and humiliation of humiliations, the commoners.

“I hope they will remember this when they will serve as training targets for the Eldar.” The First Naval Secretary growled. “The old Academy course is good to be welcomed in a Governor’s court, but for the battlefield, dancing and etiquette lessons will be their doom. I checked what the Wuhanese-based squadrons consider their best, and believe me, they are going to be slaughtered. Even the boys and girls in the fighters who are one year away from graduating have more flying hours than them.”

“And we are going to send many of them to Petersburg for the war games in a few days unlike them. Damn.”

One more time, the byzantine and labyrinthine structure of the Imperium of Mankind gave him the urge to cry in despair. Between their supporters and the positions they held, the parahumans present on the Hive World would have been the masters of a planet if the system was anything like the defunct United States of America. In the Imperium where the number of secret and public organisations was enough to fill a large library by itself? Not a chance. And Dennis was wise enough to know the young woman occupying the throne at Nyx had ten times the power of an ‘average’ Planetary Governor...

“You oversaw the training of the new pilots far more than I. Who are the most promising students of the new generation?”

“There’s plenty of time left for new talents to come into their own...but I think Freya Brasidas and Kurt Nils.”

The Second Naval Secretary grinned.

“Aren’t those the two you described recently as ‘promethium and flame’?”

His friend laughed.

“Yes, I believe I did. They really, really don’t like each other. They are after all from different backgrounds and have very little in common. Freya Brasidas is the eldest child of the Duke of White Shield of Euboea Hive. Kurt Nils is one of the promising worker-class teenagers which selected after the arduous selection-contests of 292M35.”

“You believe the instructors will be able to convince them to shoot at the enemy rather at each other?”

“Why not? We have the Battle of the Death Star as evidence that miracles indeed exist...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.999.294M35**

**Apprentice-Graduate Hannah Bator**

Clade-Quintus had told her that information on her target was critical. As such, it was primordial to read and assimilate every part of the pre-assassination briefing they were handed.

Hannah had done it diligently.

And there had been zero, emphasis on zero, mention of any Space Marines operating anywhere near the target.

For ten seconds, the Apprentice-Graduate maintained her composure. She was pretending to be an unremarkable male brown-haired trooper. She was in a crowd of several thousands and the spaceport was immense.

If this was a recruiting ground for this blue-red armoured unknown Chapter, it was not impossible for it to be a coincidence.

And it had to be a coincidence. The last person she had killed had been this too nosy lieutenant in the hydroponics section of her transport. There was no way they had found the corpse, since it was serving as fertiliser the last time she checked.

Moreover, this ‘Nyx Sector’ was a backwater of little importance. It was not a location where the nobles and the ruling classes were aware of the Officio Assassinorum, never mind the skills and tactics of the Callidus Temple.

No, this had to be a coincidence. But what else had her briefing missed? The industrial facilities in orbit and the number of starships were already far above the figures she had been allowed to see. An economic recovery after a disastrous war could explain this, but the additional presence of Space Marines?

Hannah Bator’s briefing had been either incomplete or been completely sabotaged. And then there was the problem she was in competition with two others for the assassination mission. For Tziz Jarek, there was no problem. The arrogant bitch was too slow and too cautious, certainly what few remained of what she had been before entering the Temple for the first time. But Cass Damascus was her near-equal in many ways, and her contact in the Jupiter shipyards had seen her boarding a Ferraci ship. And yet the target lived, the vid-casts were clear on this point and there was no mention of...

“ATTENTION CITIZENS! CLEAR THE STREET! THE ASTARTES AND THE GUARD ARE IN PURSUIT OF AN ASSASSIN!”

There was no time to do anything else but run and pray the God-Emperor it was going to be enough. Before the gates of the spaceport, four red-armoured Space Marines planed in their jump-packs, and suddenly behind her several lines of carapace-armoured troopers were running, shotguns and lasguns primed to fire.

Hannah ran and cursed the souls of the Assassinorum data-briefings’. Two Chapters of Adeptus Astartes? In a single spaceport?

There were plenty of alleys and corridors, and fortunately ten thousand of men, women, cogboys, children. She changed twice her looks, first in a clothes shop as a long black-haired woman with thin hips, then two corners later as a big-breasted blonde.

It didn’t work. Five heartbeats later, an Astartes raced out from an exit that shouldn’t have been able to let pass his gigantic armour. The alarms continued to scream, and people had unfortunately taken notice she was running in the other direction while bystanders were leaning against the walls or falling onto their knees whenever the Astartes ran close.

“STOP CALLIDUS OR I WILL OPEN FIRE!”

At least that answered whether they knew what she was. Maybe she had been a bit too careless with a Polymorphine injection in public. Or maybe the captain of the transport had his doubts and one of the Astartes had recognised the importance of the tale too fast.

Too many questions, but the answers were unimportant. The mission came above all else. And there was a last gambit. If she could kill a few Space Marines, impersonating one wounded may be feasible...it was going to hurt terribly, but it would give her an opening and Imperial Assassins forged their victories.

Hannah fired her digital-ring, drew her long poison blade and executed a perfect text-book handspring double front which should have allowed her to stab the Astartes in the throat by one of the weak points at the jointure of armour and helmet.

She missed.

The Space Marine had parried the laser of the digital-ring with one of his gauntlets, and threw himself a metre away, avoiding largely her attack.

And then it counterattacked with a sort of weird power sabre.

“Surrender, Callidus!” the red-blue giant growled as their blades clashed for the first time.

“There is no surrender, there is only DEATH!”

The enemy’s blade went so fast her reflexes barely allowed her to parry the first offense. Something in her left arm broke during the second. The third...

The Apprentice-Graduate of the Officio Assassinorum managed barely to keep her eyes open...what...why there was a sword embedded in her chest...

No, she couldn’t fail. She couldn’t fail! She was...she was an Imperial Assassin...she was the blade of the shadows, the vengeance of the God-Emperor...

“Assassin neutralised. Contact the Inquisition and see if they can send us an Acolyte or two for the autopsy. We are going to close the spaceport sections from H-4 to H-10 to see if explosives and poison bombs have not been left behind.”

Hannah tried to open her mouth to tell them not to bother, but everything seemed too exhausting...too unimportant.

The assassin closed her eyes and knew no more.

**Author’s note**: The stage is set...the muster will end next chapter.