**Escalation Interlude**

**A New Hope**

“*We shall yet be free*.” The Emperor of Mankind to Malcador the Sigillite, 798M30.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**S-4697X5T4 System**

**S-4697X5T4 Quintus**

**7.625.289M35**

Thought for the day: Never forget, never forgive.

**Trazyn the Infinite**

By any commander standard, this was an impressive welcoming committee. Over four hundred thousand Warriors and Immortals of the Nerushlatset Dynasty were waiting in parade formation when Trazyn emerged from the teleporter.

The Chief-Archaeovist was completely unimpressed. After visiting Core and Colony Worlds for aeons, this minor display of Necron martial strength was just an amusing thing, nothing more. Once you had seen ten of them, you had seen them all. And honestly, it wasn’t like it was possible to converse with them. When everyone had been dragged to the biotransference furnaces, the Necrontyrs who had the ill-fortune to be neither nobles nor elite soldiers were given metal bodies of dubious quality.

After a few thousand years of war, what remained of their sentience had long been broken. By the time the C’Tan had begun to fight each other, there had been nothing left whatsoever of their personalities. The bargain with the so-called Star Gods had not just cost the Necrontyrs their souls. It had also taken the near-totality of their minds, their souvenirs, their personalities, their qualities and their talents.

Szarekh and the Phaerons of his court had thought it was a worthwhile bargain and had changed the name of their species from Necrontyr to Necron. In Trazyn’s mind, this was incredibly appropriate. The Silent King had indeed killed their entire species and transformed it by stupidity into something completely unable to create and enjoy beauty.

Thankfully, the Delphimonia Tomb-World of the Nerushlatset Dynasty appeared to have weathered the Great Sleep better than other dynasties he had visited the ruins during his last travels. No C’Tan was about to free itself like in the last Horth citadel.

The silent ranks of the Immortals he was surrounded with were a bit dusty, but their weapons looked fully functional and were shining with the deep green-black colour Neferten had taken for her dynasty colours before the War in Heaven.

While there was an impressive diversity of war reapers like the Barges, the Arks, and the Obelisks, there were no Destroyers or Flayed-mad creatures waiting on the sidelines or in the shadows.

“I have seen citadels in worse condition than yours,” the Infinite Collector declared to the dozen of Lychguards following him.

“Be silent, *thief*.”

 To his disappointment, the elite bodyguards had refused to sheathe their warscythes. This lack of trust was really sad, truly. He was not an enemy of their dynasty...he had not even come to this system to acquire anything of Necron origin. Ah, the paranoia of these Lychguards...

It took two more teleporters and six transports to arrive in front of the Throne Room of Delphimonia. On their way they saw more and more Nerushlatset battalions be roused from the Great Sleep. There were many Canoptek guardians re-assembling the decorations and diverse technologic trinkets which had been there for the receptions of important dignitaries. Trazyn was a bit miffed he was only granted the right to walk a secondary alley...ah, the jealousy of the nobility towards his achievements...

The announcement of his arrival was thus particularly terrible in rudeness and impolite behaviour.

“Trazyn the Infinite Collector,” proclaimed the Herald of Delphimonia, glaring at him so hard Trazyn was afraid he was going to destroy his ocular components. “The Thief of Solemnace.”

“Thief, thief...” Trazyn sighed. “This is really a vast misunderstanding, oh Lords and Overlords. I do not steal anything. I preserve from the ravages of entropy and war the artworks of this galaxy. Without me, uncountable masterpieces would have been destroyed in the last million years...”

“Phaerakh!” snarled a noble he was sure he had a few million years ago dispossessed from several magnificent armour parts. “The Thief admits he violated the Edict of the Silent King! He avoided the Great Sleep!”

“To hear you, that sounds like a crime. But if Szarekh really wanted everyone to obey him, he would not have destroyed the command protocols which enslaved all of us to his will.”

The next turns of processing cycle were spent ignoring the loud and rude accusations, insults and completely unjustified comments on his noble collection duties.

“Enough,” cut the voice of the Phaerakh. “Leave me with him. Except my Lychguards, leave me, my loyal subjects.”

There were plenty of whispers and metallic rumbling, but the nobility vacated the immense Throne Room in record time.

And then the Phaerakh descended from her throne.

It was a thing of beauty, Trazyn was forced to admit. Unlike many, many Overlords and Phaerons, Neferten had not been satisfied with the performance of the ‘normal’ necrodermis body the C’Tan had forged for her. Consequently, she had ceaselessly tried to improve them until she was granted the flexibility of a flesh-and-blood being.

Seeing the silver metal provide the illusion of life, Trazyn recognised she had come very close. And it helped that unlike too many Phaerakhs, Neferten had always refused the gold-jewels decorations which made you visible from a few stars away. Her armour was a pale gold with the dark green colour here and there. Her cape was red and several modest ornaments hid emplacements where the metal was less than acceptable for the eye.

“You should get rid of this nobility. It’s not like they are useful...”

The Phaerakh struck without a word. One second she was calm, the next a dimensional dagger was slashing against his torso and projecting him against the doors which by a strangest coincidence had just been closed.

“That was violent and completely unnecessary,” Trazyn complained as he rose on his two legs again.

“I think I told you what would happen should I had proof you tried to break into my vaults, Trazyn,” the acclamations of the Lychguards echoed in the Throne Room. To his relief, the weapon which had just struck him disappeared as far as it had been drawn and the elite bodyguards made no movement to continue the assault initiated by their mistress.

“Yes, yes...good to see the Great Sleep didn’t rob you of these memories,” he grumbled as Neferten climbed back the stairs leading to her throne.

“Yes. And speaking of memories, I seem to remember certain artificial and primitive life-forms I left in one of my heavily-defended laboratories on the other side of the galaxy. I think I made you observe them twice, Trazyn.”

Neferten inclined her head, her visage features showing her irritation.

“Imagine my surprise when our galactic arrays told me the very specimens my dynasty worked on to recreate the Necrontyr genetic code have escaped, evolved and spread to the entire galaxy!”

A fiery sceptre materialised in one of her hands.

“A lot of unpleasant things have happened while I was asleep, Trazyn. And I want to know why we weren’t told to awaken from the Great Sleep when it was obvious this galaxy could tolerate organic life!”

Trazyn looked at the noble visage of living metal and despaired silently. With any other Overlord or Phaeron, he would have refused and began to implement one of his escape plans.

But Neferten was not any noble. First, she was a Phaerakh-Cryptek, one of the rare members of the Necrontyr nobility to have studied the disciplines of dimensional dissonance, elemental transmogrification and other harsh disciplines against the advice of her peers. As such, she was totally the mistress of her dynasty and the programs imbedded in it. She had no need to go to the Crypteks; it was from her they were learning their secrets and skills.

Secondly...Neferten and he had been lovers an eternity ago, and while their souls had been devoured, their companionship had continued thorough the War in Heaven. He had rarely refused her something when she asked...

“Sixty-five million years is not something I can recount you in one tale.”

“I’m certain you can try,” the Phaerakh conjured an antique scroll in her other hand. “Or I will recover my dynasty’s prized possessions by force, even if I have to take a World-Engine to Solemnace and search through your collections one by one.”

That was a totally unfair threat.

“In this case, I will say the current disaster is not my fault, Neferten. I am only a Collector. No, all our problems begin and end with a single arrogant and perfidious race.”

Trazyn paused.

“I blame, of course, the Aeldari.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Craftworld Malan’tai**

**8.626.289M35**

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

After staying so long away from the verdant gardens of her home, Maea felt mentally tired watching their beauty. The flowers were still as beautiful as ever. The birds trilled in soft melodies comforting to her ears. It was a seducing refuge, a haven which was not troubled by the lesser barbaric species plaguing this galaxy.

Perhaps she would enjoy it again. But for now all she could think about was the vulnerability of this garden. How easily the Mon-keigh, the Primordial Annihilator and every enemy of the Asuryani would destroy it if given the chance.

Cycles ago, Maea would have believed that impossible. Now she was all too aware this was a real possibility in the threads of fate.

The Asuryani were powerful, yes. But the Aspect Warriors defending their Craftworlds were an exquisite blade too easily blunted and broken by the countless numbers of the primitive races.

Maea had stopped trying to watch the future. As the Harlequin had led them away from the battle and into the Webway to Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren, she had felt the horror and despair of an entire Asuryani fleet as the trap of the cruel Yngir closed upon them. There had been war, war and torrents of blood. In too many flashes she had seen thousands of Asuryani lives extinguished. Maiden Worlds were in flames or devoured by the Primordial Annihilator. She had screamed as gigantic storm of mutated insects clouding the stars and leading more monsters at the assault of the Craftworlds. The young Seer had cried as explosions wracked the Webway and the very core of the Infinity Spirits were lost to oblivion.

And it was her fault.

Maea Teallysis knew better to assume she was the only Asuryani responsible for the wars coming on the horizon, but she knew the grave threats were already lurking in the shadows. Too many Seers and Farseers had felt the same sense of impending doom for it to be non-existent.

“...and the *Spear of Asuryan* will return to Biel-Tan as soon as the hull repairs are completed to my satisfaction,” finished Autarch-Mariner Gladiel Imrik as he and the Biel-Tan Farseer walked out from a portal.

“You risk much going back,” Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren warned him before saluting her. His visage was troubled and full of concern. “This battle was a complete disaster and High Farseer Manorith and all his Twilight Spear are dead. I may be old and pessimistic, but I fear the Kaeran branch will reject all the responsibility of this defeat on your actions.”

“I know,” Gladiel Imrik answered before seating on a large stone in a meditating position. “And for all my...ambition and loyalty, I will admit I thought about not going back. The other High Farseers are certainly not going to admit their errors of judgement. But my Mariners have families waiting for them back home. They have loved ones they want to return to. The more I delay my return, the worse the punishments will be for them.”

The space commander took a large inspiration before his shoulders shrugged in defeat.

“I will return to Biel-Tan and accept the judgement of the Farseers. The relationships between Biel-Tan and Malan’tai are already difficult enough in this age. I have too much respect for our cousins to guide the wrath of my superiors on their heads.”

“You can join our conversation, Maea,” the old Farseer whispered and Maea shyly obeyed, her naked feet enjoying the cold embrace of water in the pool as she faced the elders.

“How much did this war cost the Asuryani?” She demanded, dreading the answer.

“Without counting the scouting parties we have no information about and your Ranger escort, Biel-Tan lost two battleships, eight cruisers, twelve light cruisers, twenty frigates, thirty-nine destroyers and nearly four thousand Aspect Warriors of all temples.” The Autarch replied in a defeated voice. “The songs of mourning will echo for a hundred cycles in the choirs of our Craftworld.”

Maea lowered her head, letting her tears flow. These numbers were worse than her direst predictions. And they had not been able to recover a single spirit stone before fleeing. All these noble souls, lost to the Asuryani.

“I have asked your Masters to accept Yvraine into your home, for the next hundred cycles,” Farseer Filgonilth said gently. “I think – and Autarch Imrik approve – that should she go back to Biel-Tan with the *Spear of Asuryan*, she will certainly be severely punished for the failure of Kaeran and his allies. There is a lot of talent in her, but also a lot of anger towards the High Farseers and the Autarchs. I have explored many threads, but I have not seen one where she is accepted back at Biel-Tan for long. Her chosen Paths are unconventional, and her ideas of justice will clash with those of the High Council.”

“I...yes, I will help her and welcome her as a child of Malan’tai.”

“I am honoured by your generosity...” the far-sighting eyes closed for a heartbeat before turning aside to see the gardens in their full splendour a last time. “And now I must bid you farewell. I have a Harlequin to track. The motives of Cegorach’s servants have always been opaque, but I am afraid of the game they decided to play during this battle...”

Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren bowed a last time before disappearing into a portal he had activated without effort.

Maea watched the Autarch-Mariner, but the naval commander was plunged back into a meditating pause and there was no outwards reaction from him. Inwardly, she could only feel pity. Maea knew that whoever had failed the Asuryani in this horrific battle, it had not been Gladiel Imrik. The Asuryani fleet had been fed into a massive trap and had nearly lost everything. And Biel-Tan was a harsh and highly-militarised Craftworld. There were disturbing rumours those who failed the High Council were forced on the Path of Service for their failures.

Maea watched the celestial domes and the spires over the gardens, before turning back and beginning the short travel to her home.

In the distance, the enticing voice of a singer arrived to her ears.

“Dance, golden children, dance the song of stars...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Charadon Sector**

**Sobek System**

**7.626.289M35**

**Captain Valerian Benlio**

 “I think we are all overjoyed by this outcome, Brother Gideon, but I think I can speak in the name of all the officers present and say we would all dearly want to know what happened.”

There was no challenge in the sentences of Chapter Master Julianael of the Red Wings, but then there didn’t need to be one. The supreme commander this noble Chapter of the 6th Founding was huge and tall, even for a son of Sanguinius, and his very appearance imposed respect.

“With all due respect, Chapter Master,” replied the Sanguinary Priest of the Blood Angels, “for the moment we don’t have the entire picture. No one in this system does. What we know, is that approximately at 7.624.289M35, as order was given to our Death Companies to launch a decisive assault on the rebel citadel ‘the Corrupted Spire’, an unknown psychic phenomenon struck our forces. The effect was instantaneous and simple. Over fifty-six percent of our doomed battle-brothers regained completely their minds, twenty-three percent recovered partially their memories before their bodies succumbed to their injuries and the remaining twenty-one percent have died with the usual suicidal fury massacring the heretics.”

Gideon consulted his notes on his great data-slate.

“Without exception, brothers, those who were freed from the Black Rage were the brothers least afflicted by it, the Chaplains having marked them recently for the black.

But in a short sentence, yes, the Black Rage seems as we speak inactive. As it is certainly not a genetic issue, I cede my place to Chaplain Brutus and Epistolary Paulo.”

“One instant, Brother,” Captain Boreas, commander of the Exsanguinators 3rd Company, intervened in the debate. “You spoke of the Black Rage. What about the Red Thirst?”

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid the Thirst is still there. Whatever...boon...was used to mute the Black Rage, it was not something susceptible to suppress the Thirst.” Gideon made a small chuckle. “There has been long and loud debates as far as I can remember in every Chapter of the Blood wondering how much of the Flaw and the Thirst were of an esoteric nature, and how much was genetic. I think we have been granted the beginning of an answer, brothers.”

Valerian Benlio watched as the three other Space Marines commanders assimilated the news. Boreas of the Exsanguinators was still smiling, though this was not surprising: his battle-brothers were most affected by the Black Rage, not by the Red. Captain Talio of the Angels Encarmine 4th Company nodded calmly. Only Julianael was openly grimacing. It was, alas, not very surprising for the Captain of the Blood Angels 2nd Company. Several times during the campaign, he had seen Red Wings Astartes succumb to their blood thirst and it had not been something pleasant to watch.

But no one was showing any sign of despair and as Epistolary Paulo of the Exsanguinators advanced, followed by Chaplain Brutus of the Redwings, the good mood remained. Of the seven under-strength companies mustered to crush the heretics of the Sobek System, the Chapter officers present aboard the Battle-Barge *Europae* had seen their ranks bolstered by over eighty-two brothers they had all believed beyond salvation.

“Brothers,” the Exsanguinator Librarian began. “I will encourage you to be extremely prudent with my words. I know our brothers want answers for the celebrations which are no doubt prepared as we speak...” everyone in the conference room chuckled at the affirmation, “but while we have some facts to work with, we have a long work ahead of us before we understand completely what happened.”

The Chaplain on his right activated the hololith to reveal an image of the Primarch Himself in all his glory.

“First, it appears our brothers which were saved from the embrace of the Black Rage were the valiant souls which had some life-time left in them.” Brutus exhaled loudly. “It is not exactly a secret among the Sons of Sanguinius those afflicted by the Black Rage are reviving the last hours before the death of our Primarch. So far, every brother the Chaplains and the Librarians have been able to interrogate told us of ferocious battles on the soil of Terra and the galleries of the cursed *Vengeful Spirit*. We are still searching, but either we don’t have any of our brothers who saw the...duel against the Arch-Traitor, or they have forgotten.”

Valerian Benlio thought it was probably the former rather than the latter. The shock of the Primarch’s agony was in general sufficient to torture a Son of the Blood to death...it was likely why certain Space Marines had succumbed immediately after. The Rage had been banished, but their minds and their bodies had endured too much like their Primarch and given up.

“Secondly, we think the effect was galactic-spread. We certainly didn’t do anything in this system which was of a nature to free us from this Curse, and yet we are all enjoying this victory. At this time, we have every reason to believe the effect touched all the Sons of Sanguinius, wherever they are dispersed thorough the Imperium.”

“We will need many contacts with our brothers to confirm this,” cautioned Captain Talio.

There were many signs of agreement from the Blood Angels descendants.

“Secondly, we think this Black Rage has been psychically negated, but it is not completely gone.” The Epistolary raised his hand to forestall the protests. “Those of our brothers who are able to see the Sea of Souls describe a new protection acting as a sort of...individual shield around their souls. To be precise, it is a shield in form of tear and burning in golden flames. This shield is defending us for the time being against a tide of darkness.”

“The Emperor,” Julianael spoke.

“At the moment, this is indeed our conclusion,” the Exsanguinator replied.

“You have your doubts,” Valerian said.

“I do, Brother-Captain,” the Red Wings Chaplain answered. “While I think no one in this room will doubt the power of the Emperor, I can say safely I have seen nothing of this scale done before and nothing in our archives tells of a similar power.”

Brutus grimaced before continuing.

“Ignoring the godhood dogma of the Ecclesiarchy, this represents a monumental effort, if this boon is indeed galactic-wide. But that is not the problem.”

“Oh?” Julianael raised his cup with a half-mocking smile. “And what is the problem?”

“The Black Rage is, and we aren’t able to deny this, a result of our Primarch’s death. No matter how powerful, the Emperor would need to act according this reality. As such, His Majesty would need at the very least certain...anchors, to make an efficient counter-measure to the Flaw. We aren’t in full agreement of what would be necessary, but at the very least the Emperor would need the blood of the Primarch, and a powerful relic having belonged to the Ninth Legion.”

“I see what you mean,” Valerian affirmed as the explanation ended. “The Primarch is buried at Baal, and we haven’t received anything from the garrison of the homeworld something extraordinary took place there...”

“That is an issue, Brother-Captain. Another is the fact the Black Rage has always been heavily tied with the existence and the opposition of the Ruinous Powers. The abominations of the Warp are not invincible, but somehow, I don’t think they will be happy to see many of our battle-brothers take back their place in our companies’ ranks. They would certainly have tried to oppose the Emperor’s grand design.”

“Yes, and this is why...” whatever Epistolary Paulo had been about to say, his mouth didn’t voice the words. Instead the Librarian was fixing an invisible point no one but him in the room had the capabilities to notice.

“Apologies, brother,” the Exsanguinator was nearly ten seconds immobile. “But I have intercepted an Astropathic message destined to all Sons of the Blood. It bears the identification-codes of the Brothers of the Red.”

The Brothers of the Red? Valerian took a second to remember the information he disposed about them. There was a Chapter of Space Marines descended from the Blood, created during the 6th Founding like the Red Wings. Some famous actions, but also wars waged with an incredible brutality. Like many Sons of Sanguinius, they had bathed in the blood of planetary populations and had constantly dozens of brothers wearing the black. And last time he had heard about them, the Inquisition and the Imperial Navy had forced them to swear a hundred years-long Penance Crusade...

“What is the message?” Captain Boreas asked to his Epistolary.

“Angel’s Bane defeated. Black Rage gone. Possible Living Saint located. Nyx Sector. I request a Gathering of the Blood. Chapter Master Agiel Izaz.”

The Librarian could have told them the Emperor had spoken from the Golden Throne, and it couldn’t have created more shock and awe. One heartbeat there was silence and then the cheers began to explode. For the next minutes all sense of ceremony and protocol were abandoned and on all channels Valerian heard his brothers begin the celebrations as the Astropaths and the Librarians delivered the news.

In the storm of noise and shouts, the Blood Angels Captain turned to Gideon, who despite his legendary stone face had cracked a large smile.

“Where is the Nyx Sector, Brother?

 “Some four or five Sectors south of our current position, Brother-Captain,” Gideon replied. “I think one of our Ancients mentioned a campaign not far from these stars in the Atlantis Sector.”

Valerian Benlio gave a playful shove on the shoulder of the Sanguinary Priest, his decision taken.

“Then we’d best order our Navigators and the Shipmasters to prepare a course for this Sector. It will not be said the Sons of Sanguinius will not answer the call.” Valerian made a carnivorous smile. “And while we confirm the message, we will relay the message to our brothers. Tell them to send emissaries for a Gathering.”

“Yes, Brother-Captain...ah, how many...”

“All of them, brother.” Valerian looked at the shining vid-pict of Sanguinius and thanked their Father for giving them this hope. “Call all the Chapters of the Blood.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**S-4697X5T4 System**

**7.628.289M35**

**Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper**

Faith in the God-Emperor was the foundation of the Imperium as it stood today. That was an unquestionable truth. The Imperial Creed united humanity and bound it in the service of the Imperium and the Emperor. In too many occasions, it had proved a priceless shield against the horrors lurking in the stars. How many armies would have disintegrated against the greenskin hordes if it was not for their faith in the Golden Throne of Holy Terra? If not for the Adeptus Ministorum, would the Sectors dispersed from Cadia to Ultramar find the resources each century to resist the assaults of the xenos, the heretics and the mutants?

People needed something to believe in. That was a sad but an incontestable truth. And the Temple of the Saviour Emperor was fulfilling this role.

All very good...but she had not been taught how to control the Frateris Templars and their allies when they believed they had the proof of a real miracle!

At this moment, her vast quarters aboard the Grand Cruiser *Indomitable Resolution* and a priceless hololith allowed her to listen to the mass celebrated on the Ecclesiarchy Battlecruiser *Holy Warrior*. And the words she heard were not exactly reassuring her.

“...and once more let thank His Most Holy Majesty the God-Emperor for His intervention. Thank you, Master of Mankind for the salvation You gave with Your Holy Light. Thank you, Sword of Holy Terra for sending Your Saint and Your Angels purge the xenos, the impure, the mutants and the traitors. Thank you, Warden of the Faithful, for remembering us. We are lone souls so far from the Holy Beacon of the Astronomican, but your sacrifice will illuminate our bodies and our minds for centuries.”

Rafaela gritted her teeth. She had dearly hoped the local commander of the Frateris Templar would not say that. Small hope, she knew, and it had been brutally ended.

In theory, it took someone of a Cardinal rank to declare someone a Saint. Theodora Gaius was certainly not one.

Alas, one had just to look at the vast compartment the Frateris Templar had converted in an acceptable cathedral to know all the protestations of the Inquisition would not amount to much in this case. There had to be over thirty thousand spectators in this assembly alone, and the Emperor only knew how many tens of thousands listened to her words like her via vox, hololith and other means of communication.

Worse, the usual politic problems weren’t involved here. Rafaela had been in two occasions, the most recent instance over a century ago, involved in the pre-investigations of an Ecclesiarchy Cardinal wanting to canonise someone. In both cases, the evidence had been extremely weak – the most convincing example had been a dirty pool of water suddenly becoming pure – and yet the two characters involved had been proclaimed Saints.

Nothing of the sort applied here.

One look at the Abbess’ visage was enough to convince the Inquisitor of that. The grey-haired woman was not playing the comedy or delivering a political speech to her supporters. Her eyes shone with incredible conviction. The commander of the Frateris Templar really believed what she was preaching...

“Like Saint Euphrati Keeler Herself at the eve of the battle against the forces of darkness, I affirm this is not a question of blood, high birth or chance. It is a question of Faith. The enemies of Mankind wanted to broke us, but we believed, and no good deed goes unrewarded. The Emperor gave us a Saint to rally behind and hunt the abominations out of this reality. The Emperor Protects, Faithful.”

“The Emperor Protects,” thousands of voices answered back, but this was not the droning tone Rafaela was used to when she visited a cathedral or any church of a loyal Imperial settlement. There was true fervour in these voices, not the tired rumbling of manufactorum-workers after twelve hours of exhausting labour. There was belief, the kind of rage which burned under the surface before a War of Faith.

“In these trying times...” the Lady Inquisitor partially silenced the preaching as one of her colleagues entered her quarters.

“This Abbess is going to cause us a lot of headaches,” Zoe Zircon affirmed in a tone where amusement had been banished. Like every occasion Rafaela had seen her, her colleague was armed for battle: the usual black power armour hid most of her body and she had several blades and guns in evidence on her person. Only an extensive search would tell how many were waiting invisible but she was ready to bet it was more than a dozen.

“This battle is a series of headaches, each more painful than the others.” Rafaela commented. “And the Ecclesiarchy is just one of the problems we have to deal with.”

“I wish to say this isn’t true, but that would be a lie,” Zoe licked her lips before seizing one of the bottles nearby and pouring its content in a crystal glass. “The Mechanicus has not been a model of cooperation at the best of times, but here they outright me told me to get out before I could see anything truly interesting.”

“Really?” Zoe was no Lady Inquisitor, but she still spoke with the full weight of His Majesty’s Inquisition and had the Inquisitorial rosette to prove it. Furthermore, she was a respected member of the Ordo Machinum, the branch of their Order which monitored the Adeptus Mechanicus. The cogboys tended to be...prudent, in her presence. They certainly didn’t want to see their Forges in flames and a cyclonic torpedo coming their way.

“Really,” the blue-haired Inquisitor confirmed as she emptied her one glass in one large gulp. “I almost didn’t manage to set a foot on the *Opera Exitium*. It’s crawling with red robes and while half of them are busy praying like the Ecclesiarchy boys, the others formed ramparts of metal the moment we tried to access a private section. They authorised us to watch the anti-corruption procedures every Astartes, cogboy and guardsmen who fought against the Ruinous Powers is receiving, but it stopped there.”

“I suppose they began to quote you the Treaty of Olympus and the verses about the independence of the Mechanicus.”

“You suppose correctly.” Zoe’s dark eyes were repressed fury. “And the problem is that, with dozens of Mechanicus ships arriving in the system, we really can’t afford to anger them. For all we know, in a few hours they will transfer the STC and the archeotech they want to one of their capital ships, leave the system...and we will not see any of the technological treasures they found for a few centuries. And by the time they will want to sell some new archeotech to us, it will be at exorbitant prices.”

“Perhaps not,” Rafaela countered coldly, “the *Lance of Logic* is severely damaged, and for the moment it is the only Mechanicus battleship present in-system. I suppose they also refused to release the Alpha Legion Astartes in your custody?”

“On this one, it was the Brothers of the Red who were their uncooperative-selves. They told me frankly these Renegade Astartes had fought by their side and as thus, would answer the justice of the Adeptus Astartes. Chapter Master Agiel Izaz has called his brethren and I have no doubt the Sons of Sanguinius will come.”

“This day is getting better and better...” she remarked and her colleague nodded in return. “Tell me what sort of edge we have on the Adeptus Mechanicus leaders.”

“Unfortunately, we have relatively little on them.” It was visible Zoe didn’t like admitting it. “Most of the Explorers and senior figures are hardly key players in their Forge Worlds hierarchy. We have a file on Magos Lankovar, since we make one for every senior Stygies VIII Tech-Priest at large in this galaxy, but for a member of the infamous Xenarites he was so far discreet and techno-acceptable.”

“Until his squadron found an STC.”

“Yes, until that.” Zoe’s fists tightened imperceptibly before relaxing. “I’ve not found many attack options. The Mechanicus leaders who have gathered so far are presenting a united front against us. So far, the only chink in their armour is the guardswoman they call the ‘Saint’. According to the whispers and rumours I’ve been able to collect, it was her who discovered the STC.”

“I am unfortunately a bit rusty on the details of the Treaty of Olympus,” Rafaela said. “Does that mean they have to gain her authorisation on everything related to the STC?”

“Not exactly,” Zoe Zircon said while pouring herself a second drink. “Mars will get the original STC, that much is guaranteed. Even His Most Holy Majesty was forced to concede that point in M30, it was more or less politically impossible to deny the Mechanicus the rights to one of their prized relics. But they will be forced to give her an acceptable compensation and as the Emperor wrote it, if the discoverer of a STC demands a complete copy of the information contained in it, the Fabricator-General himself will be forced to obey.”

“Interesting,” the ‘STC tales’ had always been popular among the diverse branches of the Adeptus Terra and the common citizenry. After all, who didn’t want to be the ruler of its own planet? And all it cost you was to give something you weren’t able to read to the Mechanicus. “Mars may be forced to put into pre-production phase the new templates far faster than they want to. And we may be able to negotiate with a non-Mechanicus interlocutor for Dark Age technology.”

“It is not going to be easy. She will be already surrounded by Mechanicus, Ecclesiarchy and Astartes hosts worshipping the ground she walks upon.” The other Inquisitor warned her. “Plus the Guard and the Navy, I suppose. And the Lords of Mars will not be avaricious when the moment comes to negotiate. The Fabricator-General and his allies are certainly a lot of things, but they are not stupid.”

Rafaela winced but was forced to admit Zoe had made a lot of good points.

“The question is then how long will we have before the greatest Mechanicus fleet this Sector has ever seen emerges from the Warp?”

“I will have to consult the Navigators and the Astropaths, but I think the Ryza Tech-Priests burned their Astropaths in frantic calls before the ork planetoid exploded. There was a lot of confusion and more astropathic communications after that, but by now they must have all the independent confirmations they need about the STC database’s existence.

A sizeable fleet does not depart in an hour, but it is extremely likely they are expediting the preparations as we speak. They will also requisition their best Navigators and Shipmasters for the travel. I don’t think we can’t count on them to take more than four hundred standard days to reach Nyx.”

Time was playing against the Inquisition, assuredly. The current Fabricator-General was no friend of the Ordos, and even if he hadn’t been the departure of such a powerful fleet was going to attract the attention of several powerful players.

Rafaela Harper turned her head to watch the hololith and impressively the Abbess was continuing her sermon and if the crowd’s excitation was any indication, she was delivering a good performance.

“We must have a complete file on this new ‘Saint’ before the Mechanicus Genetors have finished healing her. Send all our Acolytes if the situation demands it, but we need more information on her. So far all we have is a name, Taylor Hebert, and what little paperwork managed to reach the Guard’s Sector Command. We need more, and we need it quickly.”

“I will give the orders after this reunion,” Zoe Zircon promised. “You will contact Lord Odysseus Tor?”

“I already have, but yes, I will send him another report in a couple of hours. Speaking of other Inquisitors, do you know if we have other colleagues close to Nyx we can call upon for such a delicate affair?”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Solar Sector**

**Sol System**

**The Ring of Iron**

**0.630.289M35**

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“...and the situation hasn’t changed significantly in Pacificus. Artemia Majoris, Urdesh and Atar-Median are remaining steadfast in their support of Nova Terra. Exploration efforts in Pacificus have decreased by sixteen percent. And our efforts in the Senatorum Imperialis to secure favourable interventionist motions have failed. We are giving a reprieve to the Moirae hereteks and I think this is a mistake.”

“This may be so, Magos,” Gastaph Hediatrix declared, “but for the moment it is the will of the Fabricator-General the Mechanicus must rebuild its fleets after the Battle of the Gulf of the Black Shadows. And we are not lacking political opponents on Terra. Don’t provoke the secessionists until we are in position to send several battlegroups to protect your Forges.”

“By the will of the Omnissiah, I will obey.” The communication ended and Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix immersed his mind deeply in the noosphere. He really needed to calm himself after these last dozens irritating Magos. The fact many had logical and acceptable points to present to him were not helping at all.

But by the Cog and the Sacred Oils, why were they thinking he had the political pressure to support their ideas? His rank was sufficiently prestigious it was true, but his tech-possessions were small and unimportant compared to the dozens of Forge-Masters and Fabricators present at any moment on the Blessed Soil of Mars.

Mars.

The Red Planet. The Great Forge of the Mechanicus. For Gastaph it was also home. For all his travels over the galaxy, there was no greater marvel than the planet where the sacred Quest for Knowledge had begun.

Mars was the greatest repository of holy technical information in the Imperium, and the Archmagos prayed it would stay true for a million years. Mars was a marvel. The Ring of Iron where his fleet was waiting in its berths was a galactic wonder by itself, but in this holy sanctuary of the Machine-God worshippers, it was only one of the countless great achievements thousands of high-ranking Fabricators had achieved in the last millennia. Mars was productive. Of the countless Forge Worlds from the Halo Stars to the Eastern Fringe, only homeworld constantly managed to deliver a yearly production of I-Maximus. Millions of vehicles of all patterns were churned by the magnificent forges of the Adeptus Mechanicus, may the Motive Force shine on their accomplishments. Tens of thousands of warships were at diverse stages of construction in the Ring of Iron.

And unfortunately, someone had to patrol and protect these prodigious holy monuments to the glory of the Omnissiah. Logically, an attack on Mars was of course a ridiculous thing to think about. The Ring of Iron had been upgraded with millions of new weapons since the Age of the Scouring. But Mars was too precious to take any risk, and thus at any moment the Fabricator-General could call on four great fleets. Two were patrolling between Pluto and Venus, acting in coordination with Battlefleet Solar or accomplishing their war games alone. The remaining two were waiting patiently in the Ring of Iron, ready to depart on the order of the Fabricator-General Himself.

Fortunately, there were rotation cycles, like every blessed duty of the Adeptus Mechanicus. And it was a prestigious duty; Gastaph Hediatrix was not going to pretend the contrary. Yet once any competent Archmagos ran the planned and unplanned military exercises, ensured the maintenance of its warships was done competently and the whispers of heretek-contagion were promptly disintegrated, the command was quite boring.

To make the year even more uninteresting, Gastaph was in command of Twelfth Fleet, not the First. And it was the First Tech-Fleet which had the great duty to protect and transport the Fabricator-General of Mars when their leader desired to be present to a session of the Senatorum Imperialis. Twelfth Fleet could and did leave its shipyards on occasion to fire its guns in military exercises and ensure everything was working in order...but not too often, promethium and torpedoes weren’t exactly cheap.

Gastaph abandoned his sighting of the Red Planet and returned to the unholy and slow reports which were always demanded by his superiors, rivals and allies. It was a waste of his time, and yet it was necessary for the care of the great, mighty and holy Arks Mechanicus in his fleet was his responsibility and his alone.

“The *Valiant Explorer* is estimated to make its return from Lucius in less than ten standard days, should the Warp currents stay favourable.”

“Battery Epsilon F-4 of the *Mirage of Technology* had to be three times appeased in the last twenty standard hours. Its Tech-Priests request a new blessing directed by a Magos...”

“Four hundred servitors are no longer able to operate at peak efficiency in the sub-decks of the *Eternity of Data*. Replacements awaited in the next two standard days.”

He hadn’t consulted half of the reports when the binaric conversations stopped on the bridge of his flagship. A son of triumph was submerging the noosphere. The Temple of Knowledge was proclaiming a progress in the Sacred Quest for Knowledge. Hymns thanking the Omnissiah for his benevolence increased in intensity over and over again. From the engines to the prow of the Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado*, a million prayers were given to the Machine God, for assuredly nothing less than a massive victory over the forces of ignorance deserved this honor.

Less than five seconds after the beginning of the song, the highly-encrypted communication arrived.

“Code Vermillion-Alpha-Alpha-Primus-Vermillion,” canted a Tech-Priest Gastaph Hediatrix had never communicated with before. “Identify.”

“Gastaph Hediatrix. Archmagos Primus Beta-Alpha-Alpha-0897364. Forge-Lord Cyprian. Searcher of the Viridian Mysteries. Mars-3-Lux-68222000. Twelfth Fleet Alpha-Commander. Blessed Command Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado*.”

“Identification correct. Primus transmission activated in one second.”

The warning was merely sufficient for Gastaph to throw himself to the ground, as the five thousand years-old hololith he had repaired for his Magos-competency lit to reveal two figures he recognised immediately.

“Fabricator-General, Explorator Primus. Twelfth Fleet stand ready to accomplish the Will of the Omnissiah.”

“Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix, loyal servant of the Machine-God,” the voice of the Master of the Adeptus Mechanicus was singing like a perfectly coordinated choir of pistons. “We have received great news from the Nyx Sector, Ultima Segmentum. A STC database has been found.”

“Praise the Omnissiah for this eternal gift, may the Motive Force shine over the Red Forges and the Quest of Knowledge illuminate our cogitators for a hundred thousand years,” Gastaph answered as pure, unfiltered joy poured in his heavily augmented heart.

“Your devotion pleases the Omnissiah,” the Fabricator-General continued. “In light of your exemplar record, it has been decided Twelfth Fleet will be granted the honour to travel to the place of discovery and bring back this holy relic of our technologic past to Mars. Explorator Primus Camus-Nero Storm,” a mass of mechadendrites designated Hediatrix’s superior next to the Mars supreme authority, “will be in overall command of the expedition. You will be his second and assume space strategic command should the circumstances warrant it.”

“Yes, Fabricator-General. In the name of the Omnissiah, we will bring back the STC and place it on the High Altar of Knowledge, this I swear on the Cog and the Hammer.”

“We expect no less,” Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom, Voice of the Omnissiah, approved. “The Explorator Primus will depart in ten standard minutes to join you in orbit. Consider the Ark Mechanicus *Omnissiah’s Victory* added to your fleet for this holy expedition. For the Omnissiah, Archmagos.”

“For the Omnissiah, Fabricator-General,” Gastaph replied and the communication ended, leaving him with a feeling of absolute joy and the sheer devotion songs coming from the noosphere.

“Prepare a course for the Mandeville Point D-4,” his command cut the hundreds of prayers voiced on the bridge. “Tell the Navigators to prepare for an extended deployment to the galactic east. Contact all the Archmagos and Magos of this fleet. We need to leave the Ring of Iron in three standard hours.”

This was going to be a difficult order, and he didn’t need the horrified expressions of his subordinates to know it. Three Arks Mechanicus, well four now, since he had just been granted the *Omnissiah’s Victory* to support the *El Dorado*, the *Star Determinist* and the *Fires of Knowledge*, were some of the largest ships of the Imperium, and their great Machine-Spirits had their pride. Rousing them so quickly was going to require a lot of blessed oils, canticles, plasma and expert supervision.

And the Arks Mechanicus were not alone. Twelfth Fleet had received its orders, and thus all of its warships would go with it. Twelve battleships, twenty-four cruisers and ninety-six escorts would depart for this crucial milestone of the Quest for Knowledge.

“And prepare an honour guard benefitting the Explorator Primus’ rank,” Gastaph Hediatrix added between two series of binaric injunctions.

And to say a few hours ago he complained his career was boring...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**S-4697X5T4 System**

**7.639.289M35**

**Tech-Priest Dragon Richter**

Dragon could not help but grimace when the diagnosis scanners finished their task. The data-screens displayed a lot of technical terms she had not the background to understand yet, but the sickly yellow lines and the alert symbols shining in crimson red needed no introduction. The wounds of Taylor Hebert were severe, and she was astonished the insect-controller parahuman had not been screaming in agony before she lost consciousness and was put on a stasis field.

“It was a miracle of the Omnissiah she managed to defeat the abomination with such wounds,” Desmerius Lankovar declared, watching the same information she did and arriving to the same result.

“It is a miracle she managed to stand back on her two legs and fight for more than a couple of seconds,” the other high-ranking Mechanicus Adept rasped as he activated two more screens and his mechadendrites danced at an impressive speed on the command panels of the room. “Truly Taylor Hebert is a Saint of the Omnissiah, praise the Motive Force and the Holy Machine.”

Dragon had difficulties keeping her mouth shut. She didn’t agree Weaver was a Saint. First, because she was sure the teenage girl would be offended to be considered one. Secondly, because while what had happened against the demons was unexplainable by modern science, it didn’t necessary mean a person deserved to be worshipped. Third, she believed blind worship to be dangerous. There had been many groups on Earth Bet which had worshipped Scion, and the final battle had proved the golden-skinned entity was certainly no friend of humanity.

Unfortunately, she was one of the rare persons to maintain a logical mind. The news of the terrible duel between Taylor Hebert and the Angel’s Bane had spread at the speed of light thorough the fleets assembled in this system, and by now hundreds of thousands believed the former supervillain of Brockton Bay marched on water, regularly slaughtered demons every Monday before breakfast, and was the salvation of Mankind sent by the God-Emperor.

“Is the compartment to your specifications?” Lankovar demanded.

“It is,” his interlocutor answered, his attention entirely fixed on the servitors and Tech-Priests installing the last parts of his instruments, expensive medical equipment. “I will be able to begin the healing procedure in one standard hour, error margin two percent.”

Dragon was a bit impressed, despite herself. When Lankovar had chosen this particular Mechanicus Tech-Priest from the thousands of others who had proposed their services to heal ‘the Saint of the Omnissiah’, she had been very dubious. The idea of the cyborgs and their mechadendrites playing with genetics and life-threatening injuries was not something filling her with unbridled joy. The red robes were too fond of replacing flesh by mechanic prosthetics not always adapted to human physiology.

On this instance, she admitted for the moment the Mechanicus healer was proving her wrong. The name he had presented himself was Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies. The Arch-Genetor was apparently a rank for Tech-Priests specialised in biology, genetics, organic anatomy and more subjects. Contrary to the main actors of the Adept Mechanicus, the men of the Biologis division believed flesh was not inherently weaker than metal, but a different type of machine. As a result, Hark-Alpha Dipodies was notably different from Lankovar, who hid his metal enveloped behind a mask of flesh. The Arch-Genetor had a lot of mechanical parts like any Magos, but his looks of a natural bald middle-aged man were perfectly visible when his hood was not hiding the view.

“The data on her blood will improve neatly my intervention,” Hark-Alpha said as a sea of binaric continued to pour on the screens. “I am preparing a nutrient bath which will accelerate regeneration and reduce the pain to tolerable levels. While a stasis field prevents more damage from being inflicted, it is not something the great precepts of the Divisio Biologis recommend for an extended period.”

The ‘nutrient bath’ was certainly the massive column of clear green liquid in the sterilised room on the other side of the transparent armourglass, Dragon guessed.

“How much surgery will be needed?” The Stygies VIII Magos queried.

“Unknown at this point, but the Saint’s legs will certainly need a long medical operation.” Plenty of mechadendrites were agitated in anger. “This ‘glancing blow’ did too much damage in the first place. As per your wishes, I will only inject identical vat-grown flesh to replace what has been crippled.”

A couple seconds were spent in complete silence before the Tech-Priest hailing from the Forge of Dantris III raised his head again.

“For what it is worth, I detect no sign of any taint in the Saint. You can reassure the Inquisition spies waiting on the upper bridges.”

Rasps and shadows of smiles appeared on every face able to show the expression. Between the fall-out at Wuhan and the general unpleasant reputation of the Order, the Inquisition was not enjoying a lot of popular support and even less love.

“In seventeen standard minutes, everyone save my assistants, the Astartes and three guardsmen in sealed armour will vacate this compartment,” it was not voiced like an order, but Dragon knew Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies was deadly serious. “It is not the most complicated healing I was hired for, but it is one I have no desire to fail in the eyes of the Machine-God. Preliminary estimations: fifteen to seventeen standard days before return to consciousness.”

“Prudent.”

“Logical and prudent, by the grace of the Omnissiah,” the Arch-Genetor affirmed as new containers began to fill with green, blue and red liquids and the stasis field containing Taylor Hebert was pushed through the decontamination airlock. “As for my payment...”

 Why was it anything but a surprise?

“In the case a holy STC template with Biologis applications exist in the Sacred Database, I want the formal agreement I will be the first to negotiate a primary print-out with the Saint.”

Dragon had to admit the dedication of the Arch-Genetor was something to respect. Lankovar looked at her, since she by default had become the Mechanicus representative seconding the new Colonel of the Fay 20th.

“I approve, in Colonel Taylor Hebert’s name.”

“Good,” and the Arch-Genetor then began to buzz long algorithms and encrypted commands of binaric to his assistants, giving them no more attention. Desmerius Lankovar and she left the room, leaving Gavreel Forcas and three troopers of Fay to serve as a last guard of sentinels.

“If only the Tech-Priests of Ryza were so easy to handle...” Lankovar murmured in lingua-technis as they travelled back to the bridge, dozens of Space Marines and Skitarii saluting as they passed by.

**Harrowmaster Jeremiah Isley**

The room was not that bad. A bit bland, except the mural painting of a Blood Angel arming himself for battle, but Jeremiah had seen worse in the last centuries. A bed adapted to his size, a table and a chair to eat the meals servitors were bringing him twice per day, a small ablution room and a wardrobe. There had also been a library before he was assigned it, but the crew of the *Opera Exitium* had removed its content before his arrival. The book shelves were near empty now. For a reason which escaped him, they had left the prayer books.

Perhaps they thought he was going to implore the Emperor ten hours per day to forgive him? The thought gave him the urge to chuckle. He had never considered the Emperor a God, and he was not going to start now. No matter how much the events had been...challenging to accept.

The smile he had on his lips disappeared as he reminded himself the will of the Emperor was not a guarantee of survival. The battle they had just fought could have easily led to the entire destruction of his Cohort and the forces his command had fought alongside. That much was impossible to argue with.

As it was, survival had been a very near-thing. Jeremiah had no idea of the total casualties the Sons of Sanguinius had suffered, but he knew the Twentieth had been severe. At his arrival in this system, he had two hundred and nineteen Astartes. When the Death Star Battle-Moon exploded, he was down to sixty-two, many of them critically injured. When they were confined to secure rooms, they were fifty four Astartes and a Dreadnought left. His subordinates were fierce and redoubtable, but Warp corruption had taken its unavoidable toll.

They could have fled in the aftermath of the battle. The Alpha Legionaries had chosen deliberately to conform to their standard colours to establish a rapport of trust as they escape the war zone, but they could have easily passed as Blood Angels, seized an escort ship and escaped to fight another day.

They hadn’t done it. Their contribution in the battle against the Chaos forces were sure to be reported in many circles and Jeremiah Isley knew for sure he and his Astartes would endure eternal torment if they were captured by Khornate forces. As ironic as the idea was, the custody of their cousins was far safer than sailing across the galaxy for now. The World Eaters had a tendency to be a bit bloodthirsty in their feuds, and the loss of several hundred Traitor Marines and a Goliath-class battleship was not exactly something you forgot in a year. And the madmen of the Twelfth were just the first problem. They had fought under Alpha Legion colours, so there was the distinct possibility Voldorius and his friends would choose to pursue them before they blemished further the name of the Hydra among the Traitor ranks.

Yes, this room was far safer. This wasn’t the same thing as saying it was truly safe, however. Before they were confined to their present rooms and relieved of their weapons and armours, the Inquisitors had already demanded them to be delivered in their custody, and he had been pleasantly surprised their cousins had refused the order.

As the hours passed he tried to remember the victories and the celebrations of the Great Crusade, but ultimately, whatever he thought about, his mind was always returning to the gold flames. To the intervention of the Emperor. To the proof the Master of Mankind continued his long vigil on the Golden Throne.

He almost missed the door of his room opening.

“May I interrupt your meditation for a short moment, cousin?”

The Cohort commander stood quickly from the bed.

“Of course, Chapter Master,” Jeremiah spoke. “After all, this is your ship...and your room.”

The senior officer of the Brothers of the Red wore a more ostentatious tunic of red and gold, though it remained sober and modest compared to current Imperial fashion. Besides, the Ninth had never adopted the policy of the Twentieth to protect its leaders by keeping them anonymous. The Captains descending from Sanguinius led by example from the front...a fact which explained why those who managed to survive centuries of service were generally some of the deadliest warriors of this galaxy.

“Well, I am not going to say you’re wrong,” sometimes Jeremiah resented how much the Blood Angels looked like the paragons of beauty and grace sprouted by Imperial propaganda. Perfect blonde hairs, blue eyes and taller than most Astartes, really the Sons of Sanguinius were so pretty the charm had to make everything simpler with non-Astartes...except perhaps the long teeth. “This is a courtesy visit overdue, but given the aftershocks of this battle, I’m afraid my Chapter and my Space Marines were far too overworked to inform your Space Marines of what was happening outside.”

“Must I conclude the situation is getting better?”

“No, cousin,” Agiel Izaz said bluntly. “No, it is not getting better. I have hundreds of Tech-Priests running everywhere on my Battle-Barge, and Ecclesiarchy, Mechanicus, Guard, Navy and of course the Inquisition are all clamouring and demanding my attention every minute.”

“That bad?” Jeremiah had known there was going to be a storm of epic strength in the waters of Imperial politics.

“There are dozens of Mechanicus, Ecclesiarchy and Navy ships arriving every hour, and unfortunately I fear what we are seeing is the vanguard, not the core of the problem.” The Son of Sanguinius was tired, and Isley felt sympathy for him. Undoubtedly, keeping them away from the Inquisition must not have been easy. “We are enduring, but I think my Chapter will be happier at the end of this gathering.”

“The girl?” He had no need to ask for a name. Not after the battle against the Bloodthirster.

“An Arch-Genetor and several healing specialists have begun their work a few hours ago. They are optimistic. This is all I know.” The Brother of the Red expression became darker. “The Black Templars are here.”

The Harrowmaster gritted his teeth. The Alpha Legion methods had never been popular with many Legions, and the Sons of Dorn were certainly among their worst detractors. But after Sigismund had taken command of the Black Templars during the Second Founding, the Eternal Crusaders had rapidly become the blade of vengeance against Traitor and Renegade Astartes. And to say there was a little enmity between the Templars and the Hydra was like saying the Eye of Terror looked somewhat threatening.

“I won’t blame you if you accept their terms.” Jeremiah was sincere. The Inquisition was forced to use other Imperial branches to fulfil its goals, and so far in Ultima Segmentum, their power was not that great. The Black Templars, on the other hand, could gather an impressive armada if they felt the situation warranted it.

“Noble of you, cousin, but that won’t be necessary.” Agiel Izaz told in a low voice. “It seems the Astartes sworn to our heroine recovered some gene-seed and archeotech belonging to them, so they are willing to wait until she wakes up before demanding a trial for you and your Astartes. Their worship of the Emperor has its importance too. Of course, they are also profiting from this delay to convince several of the newly arrived Chapters from the righteousness of their motivations.”

“We will be judged by our cousins, then.” At least if they waited until the main witness was able to speak, there was a chance they would have witnesses willing to say good things in front of their judges. Whether it was going to be enough was an entirely different question.

“Yes, I suggest preparing a good defence which will give you a chance to satisfy the Sons of Sigismund...”

**Missy Byron**

“There has to be a mistake,” this was her first reaction.

“There is no mistake.”

The virtuous expressions on Leet and Clockblocker’s faces were obviously not a good sign. Though the ‘obviously’ was kind of redundant, she knew.

Was it too much to ask for a serious and sane parahuman in this galaxy? But no, of all people she had to be given the two least serious parahumans of Brockton Bay. And to make it more problematic, Dragon and Contessa were far too busy right now in their duties to keep an eye over these two menaces, which meant babysitting the two of them was her responsibility.

“Assuming for a second or two I choose to ignore how much Imperial laws you’ve just broken by listening to the communications of the Imperial Guard...”

 “Oh, we didn’t break...” Leet quickly closed his mouth as she began to glare at him. For a second or two, Vista wondered how the supervillain could make a ‘borrowed’ standard grey-black uniform look so bad when he wore it, but the Brockton Ward decided she had no wish to explore this particular bag of problems.

“I suppose this was a mutual effort with the third member of your little group.” Because as if the situation couldn’t get worse, the two unbearable parahumans had ‘recruited’ and added a member of the Imperial Air Force to spread their horrible sense of humour further in the stars. And if this prospect didn’t give her enough shivers to begin with, Wolfgang Bach was a son of Lord General Militant. Translation: the moment the two idiots in front of her were caught doing something they shouldn’t be doing, the firing squads would not be far.

“It might be,” replied evasively Leet, which was certainly the greatest affirmation of guilt she would hear him utter. “Oh, come on Vista! In two hours, there will be whispers of these announcements on every ship present in this system. Gossip and rumours are still travelling faster than light, thirty-fifth millennium or no!”

Idly, Vista wondered if Dragon would understand if she took one of these ‘power maces’ and explode their skulls. That way, the two would stop giving her headaches. Probably.

“I suppose you will not leave this compartment before you have spread the news. So out with it,” the revelations were going to be known in a matter of minutes from the prow to stern of the warship after that. The hundred or so Tech-Priests and Guardsmen who tried very hard to pretend they weren’t listening to the parahumans’ words made this an absolute certainty.

“Okay...” The erratic Tinker gave a good look at the data-slate in his hands, though Vista knew he didn’t it. “I suppose we will have to call our august and saintly commander ‘General Weaver’ in a few hours. And I don’t know if it’s humanly possible to wear all the military decorations the authorities of the Nyx Sector are giving her.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Come on, it can’t be that bad.” Vista would have liked her voice to be less hesitant than it was at the moment. The moment this apocalyptic battle ended, most Tech-Priests, Priests and Guardsmen had become completely crazy when it came to Weaver, and the situation was looking more and more like a madhouse.

“Not that bad?” Dennis blurted incredulously. “Missy, they gave her let’s see...two Crimson Medallions. That’s the kind of thing you earn for doing your duty even as you receive mortal wounds. They also gave her one Ribbon Intrinsic. That’s the kind of thing they commonly give to squads, companies or even regiments who have gone to Hell and back. Or to the Warp and back, I suppose.”

“Okay, that’s impressive,” the space-manipulator parahuman agreed. “But it isn’t...”

“That was just the beginning,” her fellow Ward continued. “After that they gave her the Triple Skull. After all, her regiment received hideous casualties in these battles. And her insects hammered the orks so badly the Golden Skull was a formality at this point. The lesser medals had all to be given in addition to that, of course. So ‘Colonel Taylor Hebert’ is now the glorious owner of three Xenos Hunter-Killer Distinction medals, eighteen Eagle Ordinary awards, five Silver Skulls, the Gold Candle of the Candle System, the Calypso Shield of the Calypso System, the Carnifex Supreme Trophy of the Patton System...damn it, there are so many of them, I am not going to list them. We would be still here tomorrow.”

Okay, it looked reason had definitely gone to play in the abyss between the stars.

“Give me the basic info, I will guess the rest,” She said in a defeated tone, wondering how the insect-controller was going to react at this avalanche of recompenses.

“Fine...” Leet resumed his annoying talking. “Obviously, they gave her the newly created ‘Death Star Cross 1st Class’. The Frontier Warden Class 1st Class was also a given. The Nyx High Command determined her actions represent ‘a triumph of the greatest qualities of the Guard in His Most Holy Majesty’s service’. They gave her the two highest recompenses of the Sector, the Nyx Imperial Cross and the Sapphire-Sun of Nyx, which by the way immediately confirms her as a Colonel.”

A green button was pushed on the surface of the data-slate and the villain frowned.

“Yeah, it is more or less a title of nobility on its right. By the way, this means we should all call our favourite swarm menace ‘Your Excellency’.”

“You’re joking,” Vista declared with a hint of horror in her voice.

“Not at all! Okay, the Mechanicus is busy minting her new medals just for her...they have decided to call these skull-red objects the Commendation of Metal and the Cross of Knowledge. The Ecclesiarchy already made clear she is to be gifted the Order of Saint Clare’s Sword and the Light Halo. Which, by the way, should give her a sort of regimental command authority over all military forces of the Ecclesiarchy.

“Get on with it,” she placed her head in her hands. “I’m sure there is more.”

“Yes...they have enough high-ranked officers by now present in this system to agree to a decision...in short, she is to be given the Ultima Honorifica. Aside from the...huge increase in pay and privileges, the ridiculous address titles and all advantages which go with it, it is an immediate promotion of two ranks. As a consequence, she bypasses the Brigadier General step entirely and is now a Major General.

Whether she is going to stay that rank for more than a few days is the question.”

“What do you mean? Surely...”

“They commended her, Missy,” the time-stopping Ward said gently. “At the highest level. It isn’t decided if the Segmentum authorities or higher will accept, but it is an open secret she is now considered for the Star of Terra and the Order of Ollanius Pius. And each of these two rewards automatically grants its wielder a promotion of three ranks in the Guard hierarchy.”

“I...I don’t know the structure of the Guard. Are there that many ranks above Major General?”

“Hmm...that’s a good question,” Leet said thoughtfully while playing with his slate. “Above Major-General, we have Lieutenant General, Marshal and General. So if she gets one of the two highest decorations to exist, she will be a full General. And yes, there are three ranks above this rank: Marshal-General, Lord General and Lord General Militant. It’s the limit, however. The only guys more ranked than the Lords Militant are the Lords Segmentum Commanders...and the Lord Commander Militant of the Imperial Guard, but it’s more a political job.”

“Wolfgang told me it automatically places you on the List.”

“The List?”

“The preliminary list for the Senatorum Imperialis...the heavy encrypted and high secret stuff the High Lords use for when they want to call for a Crusade...you now that List.”

“Oh...”

“They’ve also confirmed all the survivors of the battle against the Ruinous Powers are technically responsible for the destruction of this monstrous battleship, so all survivors will share the reward.”

“There was a reward? This Goliath-class battleship had disappeared for several thousand years...”

“But it participated in the Siege of Terra, and...a certain Lord Guilliman established a few special accounts for any commander who would destroy the capital ships having avoided the ‘Scouring’.”

“How much?” Vista asked in a low murmur.

“Two billion Imperial Crowns for a confirmed destruction of the *Certamen Ferale*...in the local currency, it is something like fifteen billion Throne Gelts...”

The compartment was suddenly filled with cheers and explosions of celebration, and what was left of sanity died mere seconds after.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**S-4697X5T4 System**

**7.670.289M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

Odysseus knew the offices of every branch of the Imperium were going to present this as a true Imperial victory and of course present the forces nominally under their command as the ones which had struck the true blow.

The Lord Inquisitor was sadly sure none of these imbeciles would come here to observe the huge debris field created by the explosion of the Ork Attack Moon and hundreds of warships.

For this was the real meaning of an Imperial victory: it was paid in flesh, blood, loyal Imperial souls and millions of tons of ceramite, plasteel and adamantium.

The Battle of the Death Star, for this was the nickname shouted by a thousand Astropaths and a trillion mouths across four Sectors, had forged a legend for the subjects of His Holy Majesty, but it had been a harsh struggle. Assuming the losses of the Renegade Astartes were added to those of Imperial forces, the warships totally destroyed amounted to one battle-barge, three cruisers, five light Cruisers, two heavy frigates, seven frigates, eight corvettes, eighteen destroyers, and thirty-four auxiliaries of diverse tonnage.

It didn’t give a complete picture. One battleship, one battlecruiser, two cruisers, three light cruisers, one heavy frigate, ten frigates, twelve corvettes, twenty-four destroyers and countless lesser escort and auxiliaries would need years of repair before returning to duty.

The latest report he had before him gave a casualty list of one hundred million, nine hundred and seven thousand, two hundred and fifty dead. The number of wounded and people who would need bionic replacements was stupendous too: Inquisition analysts estimated it was going to reach largely over one million.

And yet, it remained a one-sided victory for the Imperium.

The Acolytes of Rafaela and the other Inquisitors were still trying to count the losses of the Ork Warboss Gruzzkull Mag Uruk Starsmasha. With the greenskins, guess-estimates were going to be all they had, but even the lowest numbers had made several experienced men and women collapse.

One Attack Moon, eight monumental Space Hulks, five battleships, twenty-two battlecruisers, seventy-eight Cruisers, one hundred and thirty light cruisers, three hundred-plus frigates, seven hundred-plus destroyers, over two thousand warp-capable lesser warships Auxiliaries and over eighty thousand attack craft had perished, and Odysseus thanked the Emperor for this.

Several Sectors could have very well burned before the Navy managed to muster a sufficient force to destroy this xenos-tainted moon. The number of orks killed was literally beyond comprehension. Vice Admiral von Schafer’s staff had published a minimum number of five hundred and eighty-seven million orks killed. It was certainly a conservative figure, below the real butcher bill which had occurred.

And this didn’t count the *Certamen Ferale* and the seven or eight hundred Traitor Astartes who had joined the orks in death. Or the dozens of Eldar warships and hundreds of warriors they had left dead on the battlefield.

The aftermath of a battle like this should be simple. Let the victorious soldiers celebrate a bit, purge those who were obviously tainted, and then transfer the core of the intact regiments and squadrons to a Crusade or another counter-insurrection battlegroup.

It wasn’t. In fact, thanks to the errors of certain previous imbeciles among his own Order and the veneration the Mechanicus felt for everything STC-related, he had been forced to leave colleagues in charge of the Nyx purges and come here in person.

One look at a hololith was sufficient to imagine why.

Less than ten thousand kilometres away from the cruiser *Fidelitas Aeterna*, a massive fleet of Mechanicus and Astartes ships was moving slowly around the wrecks and debris. Seeing so many assets of the Mechanicus in one place was a rarity. The Explorator fleets were constantly competing in the Quest for Knowledge, and many Forge-Worlds experienced tense relationships due to what could only be called industrial-technological warfare. But it was rarer to see so many Space Marines gathered in one location. There were already fourteen Battle-Barges escorting the *Opera Exitium*, and not ones of lesser renown. The *Sigismund* of the Black Templars was here, as was the *Europae* of the Blood Angels, the *Victus* of the Flesh Tearers, the *Honour of Nihilas* of the Death Strike, the *Crimson Spectre* of the Angels Encarmine and many, many others, escorted by Strike Cruisers and lesser escorts.

It was not an understatement to say that this muster was large enough to raise a lot of eyebrows, including his and those of his colleagues present in the Sector. Adding the discovery of a STC to this recipe and the potential existence of an Imperial Saint...the situation was far too explosive to his taste. The Sector was saved from the Enemy Outside and the Enemy Beyond, it was out of the question to let the internal influence struggles ruin everything.

“Prepare my personal shuttle...we have an investigation to begin.” Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor commanded. As one by one his acolytes, assassins and experts in one subject departed to fulfil their duties, he let a sigh escape his lips. “Were things simpler when I was young?”

**Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan**

“The soul of the Machine-God surrounds thee. The light of the Machine-God protects thee. The power of the Machine-God invests thee. The precision of the Machine-God preserves thee. The skill of the Machine-God increases your capacity. The soul of the Machine-God surrounds thee...”

Arithmancia Sultan joined her cant to the thousands of Tech-Priests for twelve litanies before returning to the balcony where most of the high-ranking Magos and Archmagos were working. The greatest part of the day’s duty was done for the present, and while she could have stayed to admire over and over the data flowing in her newest creation, her full processing power was not needed at the moment.

Twelve was the sacred number of the Mechanicus cult, and she honoured it as her station befitted. Logically, canting the tech-prayers when there were already plenty of eager subordinates to take her place could not be described as an efficient decision. Moreover, the ground level was a bit crowded with these guardsmen, Astartes and foreign Tech-Priests protecting the altar.

 And the sight was far better from above.

From above the twelve holo-projectors connected to the two thousand and forty-eight Phase Crystals were shining of the light of the Machine God, deciphering the encryptions, assimilating the precious data of the tiny and yet so precious little black container protected by multiple force-fields placed on the high altar of the *Lance of Logic*. Three Chimera-sized plasma generators gave their energy for this great and sacred endeavour.

The difficulties had been massive to arrive to this point, and Arithmancia was not speaking of the battle against the enemies of the Omnissiah. No, plenty of Magos had intrigued to be the ones who would be tasked by Magos Desmerius Lankovar to make the first print-out of the holy STC database. In the end, her presence and her actions during the Battle of the Death Star had granted her this honour.

There had also been the problem of the process itself. Assuming the database had ever possessed a noosphere connection or a similar technologic marvel to interact with other devices, it had unfortunately not survived the long millennia and the brutality of the xenos. The STC copying device was as such partly inspired from several archives of many Magos Explorators. It was also far larger than the discovered STC container, ten metres long, two metres wide and one metre high. The Ancients had been able to store a holy STC in an object the size of a tank shell, but the Mechanicus was unable to repeat this feat...for now. Many, many things had changed in the last seventeen standard days. The knowledge available to the Adeptus Mechanicus had been improved and the battle had been an insignificant price to pay for holy discoveries like this one.

Logically, Ryza had not won as much as Stygies VIII; right now the only copies which were agreed to be built were for the Chosen of the Omnissiah. But the assistance of the *Lance of Logic* and the rest of her Mechanicus fleet had been decisive in the military clash, and helping the creation of holy copies would grant her more advantages and influence. Plus she had the formal agreement of one audience with the Saint. It was far more than ninety-nine percent of the other Magos and Archmagos had been able to obtain.

“The procedure is continuing within the margin of error you established a standard hour ago, Archmagos.”

Arithmancia examined the variables and canted back an ‘Acceptable’, before marching to the last operation runic-data control display. Unlike the rest of the Tech-Priests present at this height, the servant of the Omnissiah was not Ryza-born. No, Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund had been born and trained in the mysteries of the Omnissiah in the Forges of Tigrus, on the Eastern Fringe of Ultima Segmentum. Arithmancia had decided to approve her presence in this important section at first to ensure the ‘concerns’ emitted by her vocal opponents in the ever-expanding Mechanicus fleet were negated, but there was no denying the young Magos was particularly gifted in the analysis and reconstruction of databases.

“Have you been able to acquire new insights on the holy STC, Magos?” The Ryza Archmagos queried once she was sure her binaric question was not going to perturb a complex and crucial step in the Magos’ work.

“I think so, Archmagos, although I must warn you there is a high percentage of error for every insight. As long as no servant of the Machine God will be able to work on the pure and holy data directly, there will be an unacceptable percentage of uncertainty.”

“Logical and unsurprising,” Arithmancia knew the Tigrus Tech-Priest had been forced to say this remark, the importance of the STC and its doctrinal consequences demanded it. “Your firsthand observations will have to suffice for this day.”

“Acknowledged. With these warnings in mind, I think the first extrapolation of the Chosen of the Omnissiah and her Tech-Priest advisors were correct. This is undoubtedly a holy STC database, and it was built to protect a thousand standard templates.”

The confirmation made her mechadendrites shiver. The five templates confirmed to be intact were already a prize beyond imagining, as between the high-ranking Magos already arrived in the S-4697X5T4 stellar system, they had been able to confirm none of these templates were owned by the Mechanicus. But one thousand? It would have been a prize worth half the Imperium...

“I have not been able to discover for now the method of the attack which damaged the database, but there is a quasi-certainty it wasn’t the orks. The xenos were unable to breach the outer armour, and besides weren’t even able to realise the holiness of the device they had in their claws.”

A large and complex sphere began to materialise between Lydia-Beta Rosamund and Arithmancia.

“This attack literally reduced hundreds of templates to the smallest form of data-packages and the defence-encryption systems worsened the problem when they activated. We will not know before trying, but my estimation on the recovery process of the missing information is...awful.”

 “Regrettable,” and the Archmagos sincerely meant it. “What about the templates the discovery expedition had been able to confirm the existence?”

“That process was far more satisfying, praise the Omnissiah,” the young Magos replied. “The sacred procedures preliminary to the print-out allowed us to locate any data-package which could have been safeguarded by the data-protections of the holy STC. An easy process of cyber-verification by noosphere-cooperation ensured confirmation or denial in milliseconds. We will process to secondary and tertiary salvation-blessed-binaric processes the next cycle, but for this copy the official count is of 5 complete and 29 incomplete templates.”

“Praise the Omnissiah and glory to its Chosen,” Arithmancia Sultan spoke, a song of binaric which was repeated and emphasized on the noosphere. “The working hypothesis is that many of these templates,” she pointed a mechadendrite to a column shining in blue, “will be fragmentary?”

“Yes, Archmagos. The last four are indeed so damaged I do not think we can fault our Stygies VIII colleagues for missing them. The data is erratic and parse, the encryptions have been defiled in a violent manner, and the holo-images to tell us what exactly we might be working with will in all probability be incomplete. Overall, using an arbitrary measure unit comparing them to the intact templates, I temporarily classified four ‘fragmentary’, eight ‘very damaged’, six ‘damaged’, six ‘incomplete’, six ‘partially-complete’, and four ‘near-complete’.”

“Very good work,” she complimented the Tigrus Tech-Priest, “we will need...” a discreet alarm she had connected to one of her secondary noosphere signature interrupted the rest of her sentence. Under the circumstances, she didn’t mind too much. It was a massage from one of her informers the Chosen of the Omnissiah had regained consciousness.

**Major-General Taylor Hebert**

When she woke up, she was floating in a tank of blue-red liquid. As far as post-battle wake-up went, this was not a particularly unpleasant one. There was no pain and the liquid was like a relaxing bath. Of course, it was not water and she had a rebreather over her mouth and her nose. And she couldn’t see anything outside the tank.

Fortunately, it didn’t last. Seconds later, mechanical arms - which screamed ‘Mechanicus’ with their decoration and their design – appeared at feet-level and they began to scan her legs. The big syringes waiting patiently next to them were not exactly reassuring, and she was quite relieved that after a few seconds, all the arms withdrew. The quantity of liquid decreased minute by minute and her feet at last touched down.

There was no pain, which was...impressive. Her last memories were a bit hazy, but she distinctly remembered fighting against an arch-demon and getting her legs broken in the process. Sure, she had not the time to demand a medical diagnosis before the abomination showed her how little it cared for life...and once she had thrown him back through Hell, she didn’t remember anything.

For nearly a minute she stood in the empty tank, the mask over her face was removed and tubes and cables which had been tied to her back loosened their grip. Then at last the armourglass opened and she saw the familiar robes of the Mechanicus.

It was familiar, and yet different. The majority of the Tech-Priests she had met until their latest battle had been clothed with variation of red, black and white. These ones had large strips of green and blue on their clothes, though the green was more common. Curiously, and unlike the rest of the cogboys, they were showing a lot of flesh rather than metal. However, they had also a lot of surgery marks and the skin in some times had a shade which definitely didn’t look natural.

All of the check-up was done in near-complete silence, the Mechanicus ‘doctors’ buzzing sometimes something unintelligible to their friends. For roughly two or three minutes this was what happened and then they handed her a parade Guard uniform and other clothes before leaving.

Taylor didn’t put them on immediately. Instead, she turned to look at the empty tank where she had been recovering several minutes ago. It was not a mirror, but it would do. She had changed. A lot of scars she had seen on her skin as she fought for the control of Brockton Bay were completely gone. She was not going to miss them. The golden strand of hair neatly illuminating her black hairs on the other hand, however...

A reminder she had not been on drugs after all when she had fought the demon-general.

The very evidence this galaxy was far, far more dangerous and weird than she had assumed in the first place.

And it was the confirmation that the words ‘the Emperor Protects’ weren’t just an empty platitude.

There had to be some monitoring cameras she wasn’t able to see because as finished adjusting the uniform, the great metallic door opened again to let pass Dragon and Vista. She had seen the Ward during the last battle, but given how...chaotic the entire affair was, there had been no time to talk.

“How long?” Taylor asked, grimacing as her throat spoke in a whisper instead of the conversational tone she had intended to voice.

“You stayed unconscious for seventeen days,” the Tinker answered. “No pain?”

Seventeen days. Damn. A lot of her fights had been deadly situations, but...this time it had been too close. If with the best advanced healing-technology they had taken that long...

“No, the Mechanicus healers did an excellent job,” she answered, proving it by standing and walking at a slow pace around the empty part of the laboratory-infirmary. “Good to see you again, Vista.”

“Good to see you again, oh Saint of Insects,” the Ward girl chirped.

Taylor raised more than an eyebrow at the nickname.

“I don’t think feel very...holy...” the former supervillain replied and the two parahumans in front of her smirked like she had said the funniest thing. Her frown of incomprehension seemed to amuse the two even more “By the way, why is this uniform for a Major General? I assumed I was going to be promoted Colonel.”

“There have been...military upheavals,” declared Vista with an innocent expression which made Taylor instantly suspicious. “A lot has happened in seventeen days. Many issues are still in flux, and a lot await just your presence.”

“What sort of ‘issues’ are we talking about?” Without her insects around, she could not pretend having the same impeding sense of doom some spiders felt before their death, but there was a shadow of it.

“It would not be proper for us to discuss it before you meet with your admirers.” Dragon replied, the sentence sounding prepared just for the occasion. “You will need this.”

The Nebula’s Shard and her scabbard were handed first. While she didn’t draw it to see if the crystal blade had returned to its normal appearance, the scabbard had been heavily redecorated, with delicate gravures of golden angels battling demons. As a result, this looked very much like a parade sword...

“The Mechanicus?”

“Yes, but the Ecclesiarchy commissioned them for the task.” Wonderful, simply wonderful. How many powerful organisations had she attracted the attention of this time?

The second object she was handed was the ruby she had cut the tendrils of darkness near the Hell Gate when the monster hadn’t been looking. It was beautiful, now that she had the time to examine it. It was a great ruby in the shape of a tear...and someone had set the gemstone in a big golden medallion with a silver necklace.

The moment one of her nails was about to touch the red jewel, a flashing sparkle of gold was lit and she passed it quickly around her neck. Taylor swore she was going to figure out how the...phenomenon worked, but not right now.

“The medallion has an internal refractor shield big enough to protect you and the Baal Ruby, by the way,” Dragon commented. “The Space Marines insisted it had to be protected by the best technology available.”

“You will have to explain me how it functions,” she told the Tinker as she felt a new familiar feeling. An insect had entered her control range. Sure enough as the door opened for the third and final time, she was greeted by two neat lines of saluting guardsmen...and a middle-sized Dreadnought-beetle.

“You transport is advanced, oh my General,” Taylor gave a dark look as the two parahumans began to giggle, of all things. Her vengeance was going to be terrible. She didn’t know what the two had planned, but she knew she was going to give them pay back for the problems they had left waiting on her desk for seventeen days.

Taylor climbed on the back of the beetle, before seating herself on the neck of the insect. Lankovar had done a good work with the growth of this one. Her insect-transport was big enough to bear her weight, but still small enough to pass by the doors at the end of each corridor.

Walking across the new warship felt like a strange and worrying experience. It was clear that this warship was not the *Magos Laurentis*, it was far more richly decorated, and it looked like half of the crew and thousands of people had waited just for her arrival. This made her...uncomfortable, very uncomfortable.

At least the hundreds, no the thousands of Guardsmen, Tech-Priests, Navy and other men and women present cheered and looked genuinely happy to see her. Salutes were returned and as she left each compartment she could hear the cheers and the acclamations behind her.

The travel lasted several minutes, but she knew the final destination was not far when she saw the first Fay, Wuhan and Andes uniforms stand guard on her right and her left, soon joined by a few Ulm troopers. Many had new prosthesis and scars...and she knew many faces had no friends by their sides. How many had fallen on the Battle-moon? The losses had already been severe before the demons invaded...

Her thoughts were stopped as she arrived in what had must have been a storage section of the warship they were aboard, but now had been transformed in a neat parade ground.

Except the troops waiting several steps below the balcony where she had just arrived were not guardsmen or Skitarii forces.

They were Astartes.

Hundreds of them.

There had to be at least over a thousand of them: a true sea of red, gold and black, with many white and blue armoured Space Marines providing other shades of colour in the back and against the walls.

Slowly, Taylor descended from her beetle and saluted by reflex, noting Gavreel and a good half of her staff as well as three Captains of the Fay 20th were there. But inside she felt...out of place. All these transhuman warriors...yes, she had vanquished a demon, but wow these many Space Marines...

A giant wearing a golden armour took a step forwards. His power armour was the very representation of an angel. In his hands he carried a chalice and a large banner...a banner representing a tear-like ruby with wings.

“Hail Taylor Hebert,” the Astartes proclaimed. “Commander of the Swarm, Shield of Angels, Conqueror of Worlds, Vanquisher of the Angel’s Bane!”

“HAIL!”

And then to her stupefaction the golden-armoured Astartes bent the knee.

“We are in your debt.”

A heartbeat later, all the other Astartes imitated him.

In one second, there were over a thousand Space Marines bending the knee in front of her.

What...what was she supposed to do?