**Ovation 9.2**

**Old and New Heroes**

*If the new security measures put in place after the intrusion of Trazyn the Infinite had let some people believe the Spire and the most defended Levels of Hive Athena were inviolable, the Harlequin ‘delivery’ was prompt to strangle these hopes.*

*Granted, according to the testimony of the Emissary of the Queen of Blades Veth’va Xorl, the Harlequins did not have the ability to infiltrate a company or a battalion into a Hive. The Eldar clowns had no Webway Gate to open, and no warship anywhere having already bypassed the system’s defences. This forced the ‘messenger’ of the xenos to rely upon an ancient artefact called the Thief’s Whisper. Assuming the young Drukhari had understood correctly some explanations of her superior and that there was no deception involved, this xenos creation allows its owner plus one life to create temporary tunnels similar to Webway pathways between the Materium and the Immaterium. And unlike many other infiltration methods, it is absolutely undetectable by the psychic and non-psychic methods available to the best-equipped Adeptuses of the Imperium.*

*Naturally, like every artefact, it has huge weaknesses. I mentioned above that it can’t be used by more than two beings at the same time, and there is apparently a certain ceiling of psychic power which will not allow too powerful Eldar to use it as a transportation method. The Thief’s Whisper also needs to recharge for the equivalent of fifty of our years between activations.*

*Yet there was no denying that it was a formidable psychic tool to breach our security measures, and one we had no prepared counter-measures for.*

*Several new great surveillance machines were ordered in the Martian Forges, but it was quite clear for everyone that our capabilities were arriving to their limits. At some point, more security measures become utterly counterproductive, both for working conditions and the peace of mind of the very people they are supposed to safeguard.*

*Meagre consolation, some lessons were remembered from this incident. Like the point it is far easier to go on the offensive against some xenos species than it is to guard everything you care about...*

Extract from Archive C-0105-S-224, secured in the Fafnir Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by then Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

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*The most dangerous threat posed by the Harlequins to the beloved Imperium of His Most Holy Majesty is that we don’t know in advance if their deeds will help Mankind on one of the myriad of battlefronts or provoke a disaster spectacular enough to be mentioned in front of the Senatorum Imperialis.*

*Despite having records of their interventions inside Imperial space for uncountable millennia, my colleagues of the Ordo Xenos who volunteered to investigate and haven’t in the meanwhile disappeared in the Webway are no closer to the truth than our founders were.*

*These clowns are simply too unpredictable and it is this very skill which causes mountains if not planets of turmoil.*

*Clearly, when a Drukhari raider ship arrives in an inhabited system, its intentions do not take a Lord Militant to elucidate. If the defenders fail in their duties, thousands of men, women, and children will be enslaved and tortured, assuming the long-ears don’t want to commit genocide in the first place.*

*Those xenos who live in the moon-sized Craftworlds are more mysterious, but ultimately, everything they do is to the benefit of their arrogant community, the only question is when this will benefit them. Being longer-lived than a ten times rejuvenated Adept, their ‘Farseers’ can afford to elaborate strategies which will take centuries to be truly felt.*

*The Corsair Fleets are somewhere between the two, often privileging plunder, rare minerals, artworks, and slaves. On the other hand, there are plenty of battles where they have unleashed attacks on inhabited planets to prevent successful offensives against Eldar-owned assets.*

*The Harlequin forces do not work in such a transparent manner. One day, a group might assassinate an experienced Lord Admiral, the other they will save the very Battlefleet they have deprived of a leader from certain doom against the greenskins.*

*As much as I don’t think this is a very professional opinion to have, I think the only motives these multi-coloured xenos killers have for sure are a willingness to amuse themselves and terrorise the galaxy with their jokes...*

Extract from Inquisitorial file LK11-5247HH9153, dictated on the order of Lady Inquisitor [REDACTED], 200M34.

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*All these mentions about winning the peace between the Battle of the Death Star and Operation Caribbean seem really naive, in hindsight.*

*Well, naive is maybe the wrong world. Taking advantage of the years of peace to improve the technological and industrial powerbase is more important than ever for the Hive World of Nyx, for the Sector, and for the Imperium as a whole. It’s just that now that I am recognised as a Living Saint and the Sector Lady of a space region which isn’t a backwater anymore, the political and the administration decisions which fall upon my lap are without common measure with the ones I was facing before the Caribbean fleet set the Port of Lost Souls aflame.*

*Deep in my heart, I know it is not so much the Imperium which has changed than my popularity. Before I left for Pavia, it was a rare month where I had a Planetary Governor of the Nyx Sector or one of his most influential ministers visiting me; now that I have received an Ovation for this victory, there hasn’t been a single week where prestigious Adepts, Governors, Ecclesiarchy Pontifexes, and other power-makers in the Quadrant haven’t been announced.*

*As long as my name remained ‘only’ associated with the destruction of an Ork Battle-Moon and a ‘minor’ status of Saint protected by the Dawnbreaker Guard, the number of pilgrims coming in this Sector were certainly far easier to miss than the cohorts of Mechanicus Tech-Priests.*

*I take some pride in it, since it means the people I have chosen to delegate my authority and my own policies must do something good for billions of humans to be applauded like this.*

*On the other hand, it is still a bit frightening to see these crowds of millions gathering in front of my gates.*

*There are millions of men, women, and children out there, and they worship me.*

*The more that I think about it, the more I am worried by it. Millions, maybe tens of millions of people, are travelling for decades in hulls barely resisting the assaults of the infernal Sea of Souls, often dying to give their grand-grand-grandchildren a few seconds of golden light before more years of hardship and poverty.*

*I wish I could save everyone, when I see their exhausted hands, their gaunt faces, and their frail bodies.*

*But I can’t.*

*I can only hope that victory after victory, peace after peace, we will destroy the problems threatening the Imperium. And one day, maybe, its citizens will be saved...*

Extract from Archive A-0530-P-384, secured in the Fafnir Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by Her Celestial Highness the Basileia Taylor Hebert between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

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“*Praise Lisa, but come with fruits nonetheless*,” Nyxian saying written on the walls around Lisa’s Dome.

“*This is the Long War anymore. It is an Age of Nightmares and the parahumans are its vanguard*,” words attributed to Lotara Sarrin during the Calyx Nightmare, 298M35.

“*There is a name for those who let us use our powers to the most devastating effect, and the word in Low Gothic is idiots*,” attributed to Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter after the Fall of Sparta, 297M35.

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx III**

**Lisa’s Dome**

**3.853.296M35**

Thought for the day: Faith. Honour. Vigilance.

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

The first thought which came to Odysseus’ mind as he set foot outside his personal Aquila Lander was that some of his colleagues had definitely been right. Wherever the Imperial Fists went, they were building walls. Their workforce today was quite unusual if you weren’t familiar with the Nyx Sector, however. It wasn’t every day you saw an Astartes shout orders indifferently to humans, ants, termites, a few Ambulls, and some insects Odysseus ignored utterly everything about, beginning with their names.

The Lord Inquisitor spent quite a few seconds watching his surroundings.

The features dominating everything were of course the mountains encircling the valley he had arrived to, and the completed Biodome occupying a third of the space. The latter was not taller than the former, but it was still a gigantic structure, and according to his informants it had taken the next best thing as two years to build.

But now that the Battle of Commorragh had brought many, many changes, the reason-to-be of the Biodome had changed, a massive form flying inside it made that obviously clear.

As a result of these planning modifications, the entire valley was a construction site. From the human workers who brought trees and plants to the engines of the Mechanicus fortifying some key positions of the valley, the effort had to be measured easily in the tens of millions of Gelts, even if the insects didn’t need to be paid.

It felt at the same time strangely modern and yet similar to a second-rate Agri-World. The inefficient mining which had been the norm in the region had been stopped and most traces of it were removed as he spoke, and it was replaced by a few thousand extensive buildings which from a distance could appear all wood-like.

A railway was bursting into existence with a large train station nearly one kilometre away from the Biodome. Odysseus was quite unsure where this transportation line was going to, since the high mountains made trains and other ground machines quite impractical in the region.

But one could grant it to the Basileia, she didn’t do things halfway.

And it was only one of the many, many sites which were built anew all over the surface of Nyx Tertius, though this one benefitted from the presence of the insect-mistress and the Space Marines.

 Odysseus stopped sightseeing and marched with his escort of twenty towards the incomplete wall the sons of Dorn were busy working upon at a brisk pace.

Naturally, before they had been able to progress more than one hundred metres, they were intercepted by a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

It was a superb feat of leaving anyone in the dark about your presence: the olive-coloured Space Marine had stayed in the shadow of several piles of materials seemingly waiting on the right side of the road, and only when he moved was the illusion dispelled.

The member of the Nyx Conclave had been briefed by his colleagues on the Chapters present on Nyx, and was able to recognise a favourite of the Emperor’s Warbringers, one of the many Successors of the Imperial Fists having given one of their own to the Dawnbreaker Guard. This warrior was called Vilanova, unless he remembered wrong the reports of the Ordo Astartes.

“Lord Inquisitor,” the olive-armoured giant nodded once for courtesy. “I wasn’t told to expect you for an audience today.”

“The urgent affairs I had to deal with post-Commorragh have been dealt with,” Odysseus said to the member of the Saint’s Honour Guard. “I have several subjects I must speak with Her Celestial Highness.”

“Hmm.” The helmet didn’t turn in the direction of the Biodome, and the blue-tinted armaglass of the helmet’s visors stayed focused on him and his escort. “Our Lady has a few unallocated minutes this afternoon. Your escort stays here, I will accompany you myself.”

His bodyguards didn’t like that, of course, but Odysseus gave a few short orders and they took a few steps back. The aged Lord Inquisitor then followed the Space Marine; fortunately it seemed the olive-armoured protector was in no mood to hurry and if the walk pace was fast for Odysseus, it didn’t require him to run to stay next to his guide.

“Did you choose this site because of its isolated location?” He asked as the Space Marine didn’t seem inclined to begin the conversation.

“It played a part,” Space Marines were not supposed to be evasive, but this one seemed to have mastered the basics. “As I’m sure you are aware, these natural obstacles, once properly fortified and manned, are extremely difficult to take.”

“And the defences in the mountains have Imperial guardsmen as garrison.”

The brand-new carapace armours and the heavy armament left few other options.

“The Nyx 10th Siege Infantry,” the Emperor’s Warbringers’ Marine told him emotionlessly, “‘the Gravediggers’ lost thirty-eight out of fifty thousand men at Commorragh. Several companies are using these mountains as recovery bases before being once more called to serve.”

And that was all Odysseus was able to obtain from the Space Marine, though the scenes a few metres away from them were impressive enough to compensate for the lack of conversation. It was like someone had kicked an ant-hill, figuratively and literally: foundations of walls were dug faster than it should be physically possible, entire rows of trees and flowers were planted into the brown soil of Nyx, and everywhere there was an energetic profusion of work, beginning with the Astartes, but not ending with them, far from it.

It was already far, far from what the average person expected on a Hive World – despite the construction work, it had not escaped Odysseus that at no moment he had felt the need to use a rebreather apparatus – and it was just the beginning, as they entered the Biodome.

What struck first was the sheer temptation of nature. Trees, flowers, plants, and animals all produced their own scent, and there had been already some existing sensation in the valley. But here it was magnified beyond what he was used to.

This was not a jungle spreading everywhere, but there was so much greenness, so much life, so many fruit trees and legumes everywhere it was honestly quite disturbing even for his experienced eyes.

It was far warmer inside than it was outside, obviously. And in the next songs, the powerful song Rafaela had recounted in her war story arrived to his ear, luminescent and joyous.

This was quite a scenery. It was also one he was sure a lot of nobles would have paid a fortune to have in their possession for their free time.

They climbed regular white steps, and finally after a short ascension, Odysseus saw the Basileia.

Lady Taylor Hebert wasn’t alone on the small artificial hill where a marble platform had been brought in. For as many Space Marines had been busy working outside, there were plenty of them mounting guard here too.

But the greatest presence aside from the Living Saint was the gigantic moth, which was singing, eating, and agitating wings of light, creating almost visible pulses across the fabric of reality.

The Victor of Commorragh, at the moment, was caressing her massive head. No word was spoken, but there was a communication of some sort between mistress and insect, that much could be safely said.

And then the Titan-sized insect took flight again, travelling to another section of the Biodome.

“Lisa don’t like you very much, Lord Inquisitor,” the young woman commented as the Moth was no longer nearby. “I advise picking a few fruits below and offering them to her if you want to be in her good graces.”

“No offence, Lady Weaver, but I doubt I will have the opportunity to come here regularly, and as long as this moth serves her purpose, currying favour with her is not something I feel the need to spend hours upon.”

The ruler of the Nyx System could control this Titan-sized moth and create Aethergold with it; as far as Odysseus was concerned, his intervention in this was neither necessary nor his pertinent at this point. Besides, he was a Lord Inquisitor, and he had his pride. Being the fruit-provider of a gigantic megalomaniac insect was not how he wanted to be remembered as by his colleagues.

“You have made quite an investment here for this large insect companion.”

“An investment which will bring a lot of money in time.”

This made the veteran of the Ordo Malleus raise an eyebrow.

“The Aethergold of course will give you an immense amount of resources and favours the moment a flux of Noctilith arrives here regularly,” Odysseus declared, “but the owner of this Biodome will hardly win money by herself.”

“That’s where you are wrong, lord Inquisitor,” the Basileia politely corrected him, “this Biodome is only the first of several we are going to build here, and one of those will be a stadium where we will present Lisa to the public and empower different objects with her radiance in front of thousands of pilgrims. We are going to draw out immense crowds.”

Odysseus saw quite a few problems with this optimistic scenario. Space for one.

“Quite a lot of this valley’s existing ground is already taken.”

“Yes, which is why certain environments will be carved in separate valleys linked by immense subterranean corridors where Lisa will be able to fly unimpeded,” the insect-mistress revealed. “We will even build a bunker-Biodome inside a mountain soon, that way if anyone tries to invade Nyx, Lisa and quite a few sensitive assets in the region will survive anything short of a lengthy orbital bombardment and an Exterminatus.”

As he had thought before, Lady Weaver was truly doing nothing halfway.

“Digging these tunnels and making sure they don’t collapse is going to take you years.”

“Not really,” the counter was immediate. “I have Ambulls and other species digging very fast.”

Odysseus had seen the Ambulls outside, yes. But this was absolutely not...by the love of the God-Emperor, how many Ambulls was she going to use to make this project viable? The railway systems would also need to be underground, if the mountains were still in the way, and that required more insects...

After an instant of reflexion, the Lord Inquisitor decided this knowledge was not something he felt keen to burden his memories with.

It was time to speak of the very reason he had made the travel in person for, anyway.

“The Emissary of the Queen of Blades has arrived, and your security has been breached.”

Had it been anyone else, he would have added ‘again’.

“Yes,” spiders danced around the trees and the aura surrounding the Living Saint flashed dangerously. “I hate those Eldar clowns.”

“A feeling, I thing, which is shared by most of the sapient and sentient species of this galaxy,” Odysseus Tor drily replied. “I presume you’ve stepped up your security?”

“Chapter Master Isley is on it, and Dragon has ordered many expensive things from Mars,” the black-haired Governor replied, “but we’re arriving to a point the gains on this field are more and more limited. Unless I’m willing to stay all my life in a warded bunker, surrounded only billions of insects, and give my orders via twelve times-ciphered communications, we can’t be sure that the long-ears won’t find something to bypass our defences.”

“I understand the feeling, but your death would be a grave loss for the Imperium.”

“I know, but if some xenos manages to land on Nyx for an attempt assassination, I doubt it will be the Eldar.” The Basileia’s eyes narrowed. “The sons of Dorn and the allied forces which went with them have broken Biel-Tan and shown the long-ears what happens when the wrath of the Imperium is unleashed. They will understand the message, or more Craftworlds will burn.”

As about two-thirds of the Space Marines vigorously nodded after the last sentence, Odysseus was sure the Eldar would pay in blood for their transgressions indeed.

“The Emissary?”

“Veth’va Xorl, a Wych of lesser rank of the Cult of Blades. I’ve placed her in one of the palaces we are never using. As long as she stays reasonable, I will give her upper-class amenities and comfort, much as I would prefer to decapitate her and send her corpse to the incinerators.”

 Odysseus approved. As much as the Eldar of the Drukhari variety had to be killed as soon as possible in most cases, for this one an exception could be made...as long as the Queen of Blades remained alive, of course.

“Do you intend to build something similar for the Arena the monster ordered you to prepare?

“Oh no,” for the first time of their conversation, Lady Weaver was incredibly amused. “With the amount of destruction this living hurricane can unleash in a couple of seconds, I certainly don’t want the Queen of Blades anywhere near Hive Athena. I have used some of Rakarth’s bounty to buy the schematics of some types of space stations, and we have added to this several decommissioned Starforts. The Arena will be a void structure in its own right; the latter we will use for the raw materials, the former as inspiration for the Arena internal plans. And once the entire edifice is complete, it will most likely be moved beyond the orbit of Nyx Quintus. That way if she manages to blast it apart, the number of casualties will be kept to a minimum.”

As a contingency, the Lord Inquisitor had to admit it was not bad at all. There was more to discuss, evidently. There always was, when the planetary ruler made as many plans and investments as the recognised Living Saint. The emplacements and the subsidies for more Inquisitorial bases was just one of the many subjects he had to bargain personally in the name of the Conclave.

After two hours, the Lord of the Ordo Malleus bid farewell and went back on his steps to leave the Biodome. One hundred steps before the exit, he was forced to stop.

This was what happened when the Titan-moth was between you and your objective.

The gigantic insect sang, and flapped her wings in a miniature tempest of light.

“What is she saying?” He asked to the olive-armoured Astartes by his side.

Never had a Space Marine been so close to snicker in his presence.

“If I have to guess Lord, I would say it’s ‘feed me sugar or fruit, or else’.”

Of course it was.

**The Warp**

The truths about the nature of daemons were few and far between. One was that one of these empyreal entities, no matter its nature, was part of a greater abomination’s power and will. It could be a servant of Khorne, Tzeentch, and Nurgle, or one of the creatures which had somehow managed to survive while their ‘God’ was murdered, like recently Slaanesh had been.

A second truth was the hatred all living beings had for the inhabitants of the material universe. Daemons were certainly varying in sentience depending on the power they had been granted, but feeling powerful and raw emotions was not beyond their known abilities.

Daemons desired piercing the veil and feasting on the souls of the innocent, corrupting unblemished flesh, and tearing apart the foundations of Order. At their heart, they were all servants of the Primordial Annihilator, and seeing anything stand according to stable and principled laws was enraging them.

The daemons hated those who challenged the will of their Gods.

The legions trying to pierce the veil in the Nyx System had long left that emotion behind them.

Now they were truly incandescent with fury and loathing. The sheer amount of destructive emotions concentrated in a single point of the Veil protecting the Materium would have beaten several records of malevolence if the daemons were prompt to organise them.

In all answer, the song of the moth arrived to them again, and a new large orb of pure Anathema energy was hurled at them.

It was not the Astronomican’s brilliance and the tide of destruction which always accompanied it, but several thousands of daemons were disintegrated and the shreds of their essence were dispersed across the Sea of Souls, where other daemons feasted on them.

For a second or an eternity, the infernal tide dispersed and plunged deeper into the Immaterium, wishing to avoid the utter annihilation visited upon their fellow servants.

More came back a second or an eternity after. Again and again, the wrath of the Ruinous Powers tried to collapse the Veil separating the humans from the demonic.

But the barriers were too strong.

The light was too brilliant and terrible.

The moth and her mistress burned too brightly.

And yet the daemons hurled themselves forwards between each wave of light.

Their hatred, their loathing, and their will to destroy everything pure and hopeful...it was endless.

They could do nothing else, for if Chaos admitted for a second the possibility of coexistence, it would already be an admission of defeat.

And so like it had been done with the Astronomican several eternities ago, more daemonic legions assaulted this small halo of brilliance, despite a behaviour which was suicidal from the beginning to end.

In their rage many called for mortal psykers to rise and help them materialise into reality.

The summoning didn’t work. Fewer and fewer cultists were listening to their calls, and fewer tried to do something about this.

The planet they were coveting was shining brighter.

The Veil was getting brighter and tougher.

Over eight million curses were uttered against the damnable moth which continued to sing in joy and light. Easily ten times more that number were shrieked and screamed for the human who had dared creating it and using as a weapon against her.

“**DEATH TO WEAVER! DEATH TO THE ANATHEMA! HATE! HATE! HATE**!”

Light engulfed many of them and ended plenty of the abominations.

The War between Light and Darkness continued, and legions of immaterial monsters continued to rage.

They were utterly furious.

They were also completely powerless.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx III**

**3.862.296M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

There were several pragmatic reasons why Planetary Governors rarely travelled outside their home system. One of them, evidently, was the danger posed by the Warp.

Taylor somehow doubted that the history books mentioned one of the more infamous problems was in reality the high likelihood of one Governor murdering the other.

“Apologise, or I will meet you on-“

The parahuman woman used one of her largest spiders to make an innocent rattle.

First Duke Cristoforo Mocenigo’s face reddened, and he chose wisely to not finish this sentence.

Taylor had to turn next to the other Governor in her reception room.

“This was out of line, Marshal-Governor.”

“My apologies, your Celestial Highness.”

Taylor had to fight the urge to strangle the Governor of Megara. The apologies were supposed to be for the Governor of Atlas Tertius, not she!

Sometimes, the Basileia of Nyx wished she could thrown the problematic children – for all they were in their sixties, both men had a tendency to behave like young teenagers – into one of her vaults, ‘lose’ the key, and come back a week later to remove the bodies.

Unfortunately, it would likely provoke an informal war between the two planets these men ruled.

“As far as I am concerned, the regiments your worlds provided for Operation Caribbean have both performed in an exemplary manner,” no matter how much certain aspects of the Megaran and Atlasian societies were offending her morals, there was no denying the men – and for Megara, the women – of these military formations had fought bravely and deserved the medals and the other rewards she had given them. “And your point about comparing their efficiency is dubious, First Duke. The three Megaran regiments were all Artillery, while your own were respectively Line Infantry, Hunter-Killer, and Anti-Air. The Fay and Nyxian regiments don’t try to make competitions between the Chimeras-equipped companies and the Leman Russ crews!”

The two men nodded, but Taylor had the depressing feeling that no matter how corrects her arguments proved to be, it was a futile endeavour to mend the differences between those two Governors, and that in hindsight she should have separated their audiences by several weeks, not try to welcome them together.

“Now that is said, let’s go back to more important subjects. First Duke, you wanted to make a request.”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness,” the superb voice of one of the three Atlas Planetary Governors arrived to her ears. In appearance, he was also attractive. Unlike many nobles on Nyx or elsewhere, Cristoforo Mocenigo obviously did his best to keep himself in shape. There were muscles under his crimson clothes, and the black beard was both thin and extremely elegant.

Alas for him, most of the reports she had read implied the First Duke was elegant because a lot of his days were spent hunting and enjoying various sportive activities on Atlas Secundus, far away from the duties of his own planet.

“The discoveries of archeotech your noble regiments being quite extensive, I humbly ask for several of the new Mining Ships to be commissioned in the service of Atlas Tertius once the Tech-Priests give their approval to mass production.”

Well, fortunately this plea was easy to answer to.

“Denied.” And she didn’t have to consult her files via her insects waiting in the other room either.

“Your Celestial Highness?” Cristoforo was visibly shocked by the answer.

Wait, he had seriously expected her to agree?

“First Duke, unless you have falsified your tithe-records of the last years, your orbital facilities are not conceived to handle a single Mining Ship delivering the bounty of metals and water of the asteroid belts to your orbital storage platforms. You also lack the highly valuable starships’ crews to man these Mining Ships, the technical traditions to replace the Tech-Priests building the foundries and the manufactorums we have at Nyx.”

“But...you gave them to the clansmen of Bahamut!” Ah, this was what it was about. But since he had asked...

“’Giving’ is I think a very generous way to present it, First Duke. While it is true millions of Throne Gelts and large technical expertise were provided to improve the infrastructure of Bahamut, part of the costs and the boons have been provided as a joint effort of the Adeptus Mechanicus and my personal Cartel. But it wasn’t free. The citizens of Bahamut have accepted changes to several of their laws, amended several mining customs, and their tithing obligations will rise progressively in the next years.”

With her insects, Taylor didn’t need to look the man straight in his brown eyes to know he had visibly flinched.

“Of course, if Atlas is willing to reform to shift its economy from deep ground mining to orbital operations, I will be glad to help.”

The First Duke reddened again, before shaking his head violently and rising from the red couch he had been sitting upon.

“No, no! It won’t be necessary, your Celestial Highness!” And the Governor of Atlas Tertius rushed out of the reception room like the defunct hordes of Excess were in pursuit.

Taylor sighed theatrically before drinking some apple juice from her crystal glass.

“It’s a pity. His planet has a lot of inhabitants, a few reforms and it could be really productive...”

“With due respect, your Celestial Highness, I think the First Duke has no doubt of this. His main fear is that he wouldn’t be the First Duke by the time your industrial and societal reforms are over.”

Marshal-Governor Charles Aldringen’s eyes met hers unflinchingly.

“If you will forgive me to say so, the three Dukes of Atlas are deathly afraid of being on the receiving end of a purge like the one you enforced in this very system. They know the fate you have in mind for the surviving Wuhanese aristocracy is not one which involves golden medals and masked balls. Anything that allows them to keep their power and to keep your influence limited on their planets is attractive in their eyes.”

“As I said a pity,” Taylor allowed the young-looking Megaran Governor in his flamboyant amethyst governor to see her smile. “Especially as I had no intention to purge them.”

“I...err...your past actions...”

“Don’t support that, I know. And in the interest of being honest with you, yes, I am going to purge Wuhan like I purged Nyx. Planetary Governors and the highborn class they support have duties to the God-Emperor, Marshal, and incompetence in dealing with heresy and failing to provide competent guardsmen for the Guard is not something I appreciate. But unlike Atlas, Nyx and Wuhan have extremely large populations and influential middle-classes which are ready to jump in and reform their society if given the chance. Atlas Tertius has barely eight and a half billion inhabitants, and a super-majority of these men and women are serfs.”

In the Atlas System, there was no middle-ground. You were born a serf, or you were born a noble.

And the divide between these two social classes was immense.

Serfs, as their name strongly implied, had no right to own lands, a house, or anything better than a few mining tools and some possessions fabricated by their families. Serfs, unless they were recruited for a Munitorum tithe, couldn’t possess weapons of any kind.

The Atlas nobility didn’t really use its authority to be cruel over their subjects, since they knew very well who would need to come up with a shortfall of the tithes, but life in the mining complexes of Atlas Tertius was dangerous, exhausting, and the serfs rarely reached forty years old.

Both as a Basileia and a heroine, she wished to change this state of affairs. But there wasn’t a miraculous solution in this instance. The three Atlas Governors were all respecting the vows they swore to the Imperium, and this audience with Cristoforo Mocenigo was only the last of several where the Atlasian had refused to negotiate.

As much as increasing the life-expectancy of the serfs and economic reforms were tempting, the First Duke and his associated weren’t ready to risk weakening the hold they maintained over their society.

“Understood,” the beardless and vigorous brown-haired Megaran said after a moment. “In this case, what would be the price to pay for the production rights of one of the ‘beers’ you have found the template of?”

Her ministers had not warned about this possibility. It seemed that for all his militarist dictatorship tendencies, Charles Aldringen was able to quickly adapt.

“As I am sure you are aware, there are now tens of millions of pilgrims in this very system.”

“I am aware, yes.”

“Most obviously, they make their pilgrimage here,” which unfortunately, meant seeing the pilgrims wanted to see her and come as close as possible to her, “and depart in the weeks or the months after. But there are some who are unwilling or unable to continue the journey, and yet can still be of utility to the Imperium and the God-Emperor. If you help at least two hundred thousand of them find a new home on your Civilised World, you will have your ‘authentic Megaran beer’, though the Biologis Magi will of course regularly make inspections to ensure the sanctity of the formula is preserved.”

“Is that all?”

“You will also provide some of your most talented officers for training exchanges between the Megaran and the Nyxian PDF. In return, your men will have the right to keep this...visible amethyst parade uniform they seem to adore so much for a reason which escapes me.”

There were a few more economic concessions she wanted, trying to turn Megara into a society a bit less ‘die-hard militarist’, but these were essentially it. After Atlas had declared its unwillingness to negotiate for the short-term future, it was all the more important to have rulers interested in ruling with her.

“I have no problem with your conditions.” The Marshal-Governor raised his own crystal glass in salute. “To the future, your Celestial Highness!”

“To the future.”

**Zaibatsu Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault**

Gordian wasn’t used to wait for someone. More than thirty years ago, it had already been complicated for him to not see people running to accomplish his desires, and at that time the highborn of Samarkand had been ‘only’ a Zaibatsu-Presumptive among many.

Then again, Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault wasn’t used to leave his seat of power either. Lord Samarkand could order him to, but the ageing Master of the Samarkand Sector by the will of the God-Emperor had not manifested the will to do so apart from the moment Gordian had to renew his oaths. Several of his cousins were representing his interests in the Zaibatsu Councils and the various trade conglomerates based in the Samarkand, and it worked fine, like it had worked for his father and his grandfather before him. Why change something when it was clearly fine the way it was?

Gordian watched the large painting decorating a good half of the opposite wall’s waiting room. The *Imperium Resurgent*, it was called. On it Frateris Templars fought side-by-side with Astartes and Imperial guardsmen, under the benevolent gaze of the Primarch Rogal Dorn. The latter point should have been an allegory, as was the halo of light surrounded a flying angel crushing the xenos hordes.

It wasn’t, and it explained why he had been forced to take one of his fastest transports in person for Nyx.

And for the last seven standard days, Gordian had been forced to wait.

The apologies and excuses had been impeccable. The palace hosting his delegation was worthy of a man of his station, and the food was excellent.

But he was a Zaibatsu of Samarkand, and it had been child’s play to know that two Planetary Governors had been received in person by Lady Weaver the day before, and the ‘Marshal-General’ and the ‘First Duke’ weren’t, according to the local gossip, particularly favoured by the Living Saint reigning over the Hive World.

No, Gordian could recognise the implicit message: House von Mitsubishi-Dassault had made Her Celestial Highness wait for several years before taking her seriously; now they could very well wait for several days when the Nyxian economy was ascendant.

The Administrator-General of the Cloud System didn’t like that. The Heirs and Heiresses-Presumptive he had brought with him to Nyx didn’t like that either, and most of his courtiers and advisors had urged him to begin preparing several economic fines for the Nyx Sector.

Gordian wasn’t going to follow this kind of stupid advice, God-Emperor be praised.

It was true that theoretically, the authority he owned over the Nyx Sector in the name of Lord Crassus of Samarkand authorised him to do this, but the repercussions would be ugly if Nyx refused and went over his head to contest his decisions.

The place of a Quadrant in administrative duties was long-enshrined by M33 edicts, but nothing said in the *Lex Imperialis* that Kar Duniash was to accept Samarkand’s merchant-princes were in the right at all times. And right at this moment, with the victory of Commorragh in everyone’s ears, the ruler of Nyx was far more valuable from an economic and military perspective than his House.

It wasn’t something he had fully accepted before seeing the sheer size of the investments which were poured into the orbital industry of the Nyx System. The foundries, manufactorums, weather satellites, and the other advanced orbital devices were already surpassing the majority of the space infrastructure he personally owned, and one look could tell that in terms of shipyards, the Cloud System’s superiority wasn’t going to continue existing for long.

“Lady Weaver is going to receive you, Lord Zaibatsu,” Gordian nodded at the red-armoured woman who had spoken. If he had been in his main residence on Flamingo, he would have made a few compliments about her beauty, but he wasn’t in his home.

And besides, the red armour with shiny silver insignia and fleur-de-lys indicated this woman was one of the new ‘Templar Sororitas’ the information networks were so gleeful about. Clad in power armour like she was, the Ecclesiarchy veteran could likely pulverise his bones without even drawing a weapon.

This reminded him, as he left the waiting room and the painting of *Imperium Resurgent* behind him, that the Samarkand Sector and his House had already lost what limited religious dominance support they had enjoyed after fierce negotiations with the Adeptus Ministorum.

The arrival in the throne room was impressive, that much he was forced to admit as the throne of Nyx came into view. Two columns of Space Marines stood vigilant, their immense armours provoking a feeling of dread inside him in spite of the fact they remained perfectly immobile. Not better was the small army of insects leaning against the walls.

At first, Gordian thought they were very realistic statues, but for all their immobility, the massive beetles, hornets, centipedes, spiders, and ants were breathing, slightly twitching...well, proving they were truly made of chitin and blood.

But the most striking presence in the throne room was unquestionably the Living Saint herself.

The Governor of the Flamingo Paradise World could feel the golden power of the God-Emperor emanating from her while he was still several hundreds of metres away from her, and past a certain point, advancing was more and more difficult.

And while Gordian was perfectly willing to acknowledge his body was not the one of the prime athlete had been in his prime to attract all the Ladies in his bed and he loved too much high-quality food, his body of Zaibatsu was in good health compared to several of his noble competitors.

It was not a question of physical strength, today. It was a question of will and faith.

And as much as it was painful to acknowledge, he wasn’t strong enough to really climb the steps of the throne.

Gordian wasn’t even determined enough to keep staring at the young woman in silver-coloured armour watching him emotionlessly. The massive auramite wings were providing enough light to make the comparison with a miniature sun possible. Silver and gold radiance, with some touches of ruby and crimson, like the massive ruby carried around the neck by the Living Saint.

Everything coursed with divine power, radiance, and the authority of the Master of Mankind.

Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault for once considered himself perfectly happy to not vacillate or collapse onto the soft red carpet his foots had been threading for several minutes.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the Samarkand highborn hated how his voice sounded hesitant, and even more to address the Lady Nyx by a title which screamed his inferiority across an entire Sector.

“Lord Zaibatsu Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault,” the black-haired Basileia of the Nyx Sector answered back. She didn’t even bother making the presence of bowing or slightly inclining her head. “Your arrival to Nyx was an unexpected surprise.”

“I am sure it was,” Gordian didn’t even bother contesting the lie; he was sure the ambitious swamp-viper he was forced to call the Pontifex of Flamingo had alerted Weaver via Astropath the moment he had boarded his transport. Unless it was one of his thirty-five sons and thirty-eight daughters. The Battle of Commorragh and the announcement of the Ecclesiarch there was a new Living Saint in the Quadrant had sufficiently shaken his powerbase many souls were now eying more eagerly his ruling seat. “I requested this audience because of the recent increase in your tithes...and some discrepancies in their repartition.”

“The increase of the Nyxian tithes is directly linked to the development and the industrial reforms following the production and licensing of many excellent technological templates approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus.” The Basileia replied levelly, her eyes and her face remaining emotionless. “As for the discrepancies you mention, they are simply normal given the new situation of several Nyxian heavy transports being available to transport the tithe to Samarkand directly. The Sector has recovered enough from the war against the greenskins to satisfy some of the obligations owed to the Administratum.”

“It is against the conventions signed by recent Nyx administrations and the House of von Mitsubishi-Dassault.”

This time he managed to make the Living Saint’s lips twitch. Alas as the next seconds proved, it was not a good thing at all.

“A good thing I wasn’t involved in the decisions of the administrations which came before my ascension.”

“This is dangerous talk,” he was forced to utter as the golden aura, far from decreasing, was gaining in potency, and to his shame, Gordian was sweating.

“I will remind you Nostradamus Vandire was arrested by the Holy Inquisition, and I found several of your Heir-Presumptives’ seals on the documents allowing this scum to invite himself to the Nyx Sector. Given the crass incompetence and short-sightedness such a move imply, do not speak of me lightly of danger, Lord Zaibatsu.”

“If you are feeling wronged, they are legal means-“

“Please don’t take me for an imbecile, Zaibatsu,” the ‘Lord’ had suddenly disappeared, and Gordian sorely missed its existence. “I have no intention to waste decades of legal disputes when the majority of the Samarkand courts will rule in *your* favour like mine would rule in *my* favour if I was to ask them to intervene.”

This was not how he had wanted this audience to proceed, and he was far, far from used to having no cards to force a disobedient vassal to return to better feelings.

“Very well. But there have been many treaties at least fifty-one percent of the tithe-ships from the Departmento Munitorum and the Administratum amongst other tithing obligations, must be transported inside the hulls of one of the Zaibatsu Houses of Samarkand. This was the agreement House von Mitsubishi-Dassault and House Menelaus renewed centuries after centuries, like their predecessors before him. And you are bound by it.”

“You are essentially correct,” the fact the approval came so promptly made him even more suspicious, if it was possible. “But for this year, the percentage of Nyxian-owned hulls transporting tithes and other goods to the Samarkand Sector is somewhere between fifteen and sixteen percent. It’s well below the limits of the tithe-accords Nyx is bound to.”

Gordian had the urge to scream that every Nyxian ship which didn’t use a Conveyor of his House was resulting in an astounding financial loss. The Zaibatsu ships who were dedicated to the tithe-ships were granted a percentage of the total value of the cargo once it was delivered safely to the Administratum and Munitorum inspectors. This was a small percentage, always below one percent, but given the average sum represented by millions of tons of metals and weapons, even a tiny fraction of a single shipment represented more money middle-ranked officers earned in their entire lives.

“This is violating the spirit of the accords, if not their wording.”

“And Samarkand ordering an important military tithe with zero warning with absolutely no political defence from your part was also violating the spirit of your obligations, and half of the wording.”

Only a lifetime of political manoeuvring allowed the Zaibatsu not to wince ostensibly.

“Certain errors may have been committed by unworthy scions and representatives,” it was always easier to deflect the blame unto others, “but the system is working.”

“It is working for Samarkand. Not so much for the other Sectors when they have to fight millions of Orks and their own tithe-masters as soon as they can divert their attention from the ongoing wars.”

Gordian made a few more remarks, which were immediately countered, and he knew the upper hand in these negotiations didn’t belong to him. The woman in front of him evidently had no inclination to let the economic domination of Samarkand continue within the frontiers of her own Sector.

There were still two cards in his sleeves at his disposal.

“I am not without influence at Samarkand and my House has plenty of businesses among the different Sectors of the Quadrant. If our Houses were tied together in marriage, you could benefit from our financial reach. I have many sons and daughters-”

“No.” There was no hesitation, no invitation to develop, and no interest.

“You are unmarried,” the Zaibatsu pointed out.

“So are you,” Gordian believed he heard a Space Marine cough behind him, but it had to be his imagination. “And unlike me, it didn’t stop you from siring dozens of sons and daughters.”

“We are one of the most prestigious Houses of the Samarkand Quadrant!”

“And I’ve received some union proposals from as far as Holy Terra. Your point?”

At this point, Gordian really, really wished all his advisors, financial experts and solicitors had been allowed to come with him in the throne room.

But no help materialised. He was alone, and he was really, really beginning to worry about the problems the new governance of Nyx was going to cause to his personal rule.

“Now let’s speak of the emergency promethium taxes you imposed a decade ago...”

In hindsight, the wait for the audience had been the easy part...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Argoy Sector**

**Indiga System**

**Indiga**

**5.876.296M35**

**Lieutenant-General Paul Dundee**

Paul had never seen an attempt to bring down a pack of ultraraptors with a heavy flamer.

Assuming of course that the weapon the tech-Priests had mounted on the right arm of the Dreadnought leading their expedition was a ‘normal heavy flamer’, of which he had his doubts.

Normal heavy flamers unleashed a lot of fire, but the inferno which had devoured the vicious reptiles was something else.

“Good news...” It wouldn’t do to show he was too impressed, damn it! “Good news these ultraraptors won’t be a problem for other hunters of Indiga.”

“BAD NEWS: I WON’T BE ABLE TO TAKE TROPHIES FROM THEM.”

“Evidently,” from head to tail, the aggressive fauna had been more carbonised than burnt. The Indigan officer looked at its surroundings and saw it was empty. For the third time of the day, their quarry had used one of their fire-fights to escape in the confusion. “The foxeetle fled again.”

The Lieutenant-General had known this species was truly cunning and its illusions had misled entire generations of Indigan hunters, but it was truly getting ridiculous! Two hundred hunters, forty Tech-Priests, one Dreadnought, and they weren’t able to capture even a single specimen.

“We have only a couple of hours of light left, General,” one of his fellow Indigan hunters he had hired for a few weeks informed him. “I think we’d better stop the hunt for today. Our last pursuit has led us quite away from Fort Drake.”

“If we stop here, we won’t be able to capture a foxeetle before it is time to return to space.”

“General, I don’t think we will be able to capture a foxeetle, no matter how long we track one.” The Indigan hunter blasted an ultraraptor’s corpse which had escaped the flamer of the Ancient. “These are cunning beasts, and we lack battle-psykers to break their illusions. In these forests, they have all the advantages, good equipment or not.”

This was all very good, but it wasn’t entirely Paul’s decision. For all the nominal orders placing him in command, it was the Stygies VIII’s Magos that had descended with them on Indiga which called the shots, since he provided the transport and the near-totality of the cages, neutralisation devices, stasis fields, and highly-advanced technology.

“Magos, your opinion?”

“The odds of catching a foxeetle alive within twenty-four hours have decreased to 0.02%,” the four mechadendrite-armed cogboy enunciated in an entirely mechanical tone. “The specimens of Gladiator Spiders will have to suffice. Likelihood of Lady Weaver being satisfied by the arachnids: 63.7%.”

If the Tech-Priest said so, who was he to naysay him?

“Acknowledged. Hunters, we begin to take the return path to Fort Drake. Pierre, you are in the rear-guard this time.”

“IF THE ULTRARAPTORS SEEK VENGEANCE, THEY WILL FIND ME ON THEIR PATH,” the Dreadnought swore.

“Do you really think Her Celestial Highness will be impressed?” One of the Nyxian veterans he had taken with him from Pavia asked, a less-than-amused expression on his face. “I mean, we haven’t gone after several of the biggest bugs on this continent...”

“We would need an Army Group to have a chance of success for the bigger specimens,” Paul Dundee wished he was joking, but certain insect species were dreaded hunter-killers for a reason. “And we can’t even capture them alive for the good Magos. The shuttles we have are too small for them.”

For the record, several of these ground-to-orbit transports had been used to ferry vehicles the size of Baneblades and other super-heavy tanks during the Battle of Commorragh and after.

“And besides, Lady Weaver didn’t insist upon giant insects.” Maybe because the Living Saint had already quite a few in her living arsenal, with the promise of more to come. According to the rumours the Mechanicus insect-experts had allowed to spread, the Salamanders of Nocturne were sending their monstrous Scorpiads to Nyx, and the Blood Angels had finally managed to capture one of their infamous Baal Scorpions to offer as a princely gift. “Indiga will provide insect quality, we leave size to others.”

Paul had promised several psychic breeds, and he had held true to his promise. The Beacon-fly had been one of the first species to be stocked aboard the Grand Cruiser, and they had thousands of them. Like many insects of Indiga, its main strength relied on vast numbers. A single ‘flash’ of the fly was painful for the eyes, but you recovered in a few minutes. When the Beacon-flies came into their tens of thousands however, permanent blindness from the psychic flashes was extremely likely, and this made them a particularly redoubtable asset.

The same could be said about the Cryo-crabs. The mini ice ray these pests could emit was a nuisance when one targeted you with it, but when there were thousands of them...well, it was best fire the heavy artillery or a plasma gun like Pierre did.

Aside from this, the large party of hunters had been able to acquire many Sonic-crickets, acid-spitting Black Wasps, Pyre-locusts, and of course the aforementioned Gladiator Spider, who used their terrible spider silk like gladiators of the Commorragh arenas to capture their prey, with about as much mercy for the victim caught in their webs.

“Everyone remembers the big specimens,” another Indigan hunter replied unconvinced.

“And they are useful for Her Celestial Highness, I won’t say anything against it. But there are tens of thousands species inside her swarm, and the Titan transports aren’t unlimited...”

“ULTRARAPTORS! I CONGRATULATE YOU FOR YOUR COURAGE!”

“Is he always so loud?”

“Young man, you don’t know half of the story...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Svalbard Sector**

**Tigrus System**

**Tigrus**

**6.878.296M35**

**Chapter Master Michael Yarhibol**

If there was one thing to be granted about the Orks, it was that they were always going to receive reinforcements while a battle raged.

Today was providing no exception to this millennia-old rule.

“This Space Hulk is thirty-one kilometres-long, as far as our best augurs can tell us,” the Master of the Fleet announced grimly. “And if the energy emissions we can detect are accurate, this thing has enough firepower to equal the *Eternal Crusader*.”

Michael Yarhibol watched the hololithic images of the monstrous Ork ‘innovation’. It was no effort at all to focus his hatred upon this insult to all the works of the Emperor.

“The likelihood of the Ork Warboss our Tigrus allies have been seeking for months is here?”

“Very high, I think,” the Sanguinary High Priest of the Lamenters answered. “The green beasts’ brains don’t function logically, but they are noted to love big and ugly things. This modified Space Hulk qualifies, in my opinion.”

“How long do we have until the Hulk and its huge prow-mounted cannon are in range of Tigrus’ main forges?”

“Assuming their acceleration remains regular, which is...improbable, to say the least,” the Master of the Fleet grimaced, “we have roughly four hours. Certainly less, if the mad Ork which cobbled the engines to the Hulk decides its command doesn’t need to arrive in a single piece at the end of its journey.”

And once the four hours were gone, Tigrus would burn. Many species would flinch at the idea of using any Nova Cannon or equivalent weapon against an important planet, but whoever had met the greenskins – which was the same as fighting the Orks – couldn’t doubt it would be employed, and more than once.

“We have fifty of our battle-brothers fighting side by side with the Tech-Priests and the Guard on the ground,” the Master of the Rites thundered. “Do we give the recall order?”

“No,” Michael said after estimating the delay it would represent. “Our battle-brothers from the *Sanguinem Fulminata* are restoring great honour to the Chapter by helping in the assault against the Ork beachhead. And it would take too long to recall them; this would not leave us any margin for the operation I have in mind.”

“You’re thinking about a boarding action,” the Sanguinary High Priest said out loud. It was an affirmation, not a question.

“Yes,” the Chapter Master of the newly christened Lamenters confirmed to his highest-ranked battle-brothers. “The *Red Blade* is going to do its best to destroy the engines of this monstrosity, and our Strike Cruisers will kill the Cruisers and the other escorts of this abominable xenos creation. But to give the killing blow while remaining outside the greenskins’ guns is going to take several days at least. We can’t afford to wait that long. And if I remember correctly, in Space Marines, there is the word ‘Space’, no?”

Everyone on the bridge smiled at his poor attempt at humour.

“This is going to cost us, Chapter Master. Our boarding torpedoes are all operational, but the number of Ork warriors awaiting us on this hulk promises to be in the hundreds of thousands...”

“You can say millions,” the Master of the Fleet spoke. “For as much as the Navy loves to pack humans in tight quarters, they are nothing compared to what an Ork Warboss does.”

“Speaking of the Navy and our allies...”

“Their fleet is repositioning itself, but they are still fighting against the remnants of the first invasion force. I doubt they will be in position to intervene one way or another today.”

“It’s decided, then.” Not that he had ever hesitated on the strategy to employ. “Our arrival in this system at this very moment is clearly a sign of the Emperor.” His Saint had already given the order, so this final act of guidance was not impossible at all. “We are in position to intercept the Ork fleet, and end this WAAGH before it inflicts more wounds to the Svalbard Sector and the Imperium of His Majesty. We are going to board this Space Hulk, and explain to this Ork that Tigrus belongs to the Emperor. Woe to any who challenge humanity’s right to rule the stars!”

“Remove the head, and the beasts will fight each other to annihilation,” approved a Captain.

“For the Blood and Redemption,” murmured the High Chaplain.

“For Sanguinius, Lady Weaver, and the Emperor!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Messenia**

**3.900.296M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The advantages of hosting a meeting in one of her palaces of Hive Messenia included the more modest size of the ‘throne rooms’, the absence of crowds of millions looking for each and every one of her moves, and the fact the nobles who had given the artistic trends had chosen a more modest theme – modest for Nyxians nobles, it went without saying – which involved plenty of Megaran-imported amethysts and Atlasian-imported gems like sapphires and diamonds.

The drawback, as proved once more in this instance, was the reality too often her ‘guests’ arrived before her. Her inter-Hive travels demanded more and more security protocols, and the bigger her Dawnbreaker Guard was growing, the less inclined to accept her dictates the Space Marines seem to be.

“Good morning,” Taylor told to the four Rogue Traders awaiting her in the salon Dragon had qualified of ‘sapphire rococo’ when she had visited it before Operation Caribbean.

“Good morning, your Celestial Highness,” the two young men and the two older women replied before taking their seats in a semi-circle around her couch-throne embroidered in gold and silver.

“I have gathered you today because yesterday evening, we received the expected Astropathic communications from Mars. The two Ambition-class Cruisers, dozens of Hoplite-class Destroyers, and many others flotillas transporting costly equipment and technology have left the Ring of Iron and are on their way to Nyx. If they held their initial schedule, they should have left Sol at the moment we’re speaking.”

“That’s very good news,” Wolfgang began. Today the new Rogue Trader had chosen to wear an uniform which looked like exactly like the clothes of a Navy Admiral, except the shade was a far darker blue and the many insignia and battle-commendations were shining gold and silver in colour. “Of course, we can only hope their travel will be a bit less...agitated than our return from Pavia.”

“Indeed,” though since the flotillas and the ships hadn’t a Living Saint or anyone directly ‘blessed’ by the Emperor aboard, they shouldn’t attract the kind of unwanted attention Taylor did on a regular basis. “For now, I am basing all of your schedules on the assumption the Martian detachment and allied hulls will make safe travel and complete this journey in approximately one standard year. Since the needs for proper maintenance, refuelling, and other necessary inspections must be added, the preliminary date for your expeditions’ departure is 500.298M35. Whether you want to advance it or delay it is left at your discretion.”

“I think I will depart much sooner than that,” Magdalena Orpheus spoke. Apart from the style her black hair weren’t flowing on her face to hide her scar, the descendant of Arica Orpheus had chosen similar clothes than the one she wore during her trial to answer her summon today. “My Star Galleon is ready, and the two Destroyers I use as Escorts have been repaired and refuelled. If you give the order, I can leave right after the Day of Renewal.”

“Are you certain? The Eastern Fringe right now isn’t exactly a calm and peaceful theatre.”

“I am.” There was no hesitation in her blue eyes.

“If it’s your decision...Gavreel give her the paperwork,” her black-armoured sword-protector advanced and gave the woman a container of data-slates. Magdalena winced under the weight, and posed it at her feet in the next ten seconds. “The goals of your expedition haven’t changed. The Archmagi of Tigrus await several thousand tons of machines and spare parts they have paid for; once you have unloaded this cargo, you will be on your own. Triplex Phall has signed a few repair agreements to welcome you if you need a safe harbour given the...rapidly evolving military conditions in the Eastern Fringe.”

Let unsaid was that the ‘help’ would not be free, but the woman in front of her was experimented enough to know this.

“Thank you, my Lady. I assure you I will do my best to investigate the fallen Nostramo Sector and the surrounding space expanses for adamantium resources and other vital metals.”

“I have no doubt you will.”

Hopefully this should bring great wealth and provide a first survey of what was left in this region since the Great Crusade. After the carnage of the Heresy, everything north of Triplex Phall had been abandoned, as the Imperium lacked the ability to rebuild. And once the economy had finally begun to recover, new colony projects had taken priority.

The exit salutes were made, and Magdalena Orpheus left the salon.

“Is it also your desire to advance your departure date, Lady Salvia?” Taylor turned towards the other Rogue Trader, who few would have recognised as the Rogue Trader Alyena Sinblade. The new version of her had still violet hair, but her attire was a more respectable and conservative Renaissance ensemble, with a conservative black robe hiding most of her body. It had also been her decision to rename herself Rogue Trader Amanda Salvia.

“No, your Celestial Highness,” the older Lady replied, an unbreakable devotion of fanatic burning in her eyes. “My flagship isn’t ready, and several of the archeotech and artisan-work I must transport to Baal are far from complete in the Tech-Priests’ forges. I think the Wasp will be ready to sail before the preliminary date you have indicated, but a few months are the most optimistic gain I am willing to consider for now. Unless it is your wish I sail anyway?”

“No,” Taylor quickly shook her head negatively. “I have negotiated plenty of valuable goods with the Blood Angels and their Successor Chapters, I am not going to send you with half a cargo and come back with half of the assets promised. I can wait one year; it is better your deliveries have everything the Astartes of the Blood asked for.”

It would also increase the possibility of having some Bacta to send to Baal and the Sanguinary Guards. Some Brothers of the Red would have to be detached to guard the precious substance. ‘Amanda’ was now unable to betray her of her own will, but this kind of bounty could very well attract pirates.

After receiving her own pile of data-slates, the second female Rogue Trader left.

“Dennis. Have there been any changes in your studies of the Flamewrought’s databases?”

“Yes,” the other parahuman smiled before answering. Unlike Wolfgang who had opted for the Navy blue, Dennis retained a white uniform quite similar to the Navy of Earth Bet. “The Eighteenth Legion conquered a few worlds during the Great Crusade that the Administratum has apparently lost track of since. One of them is very promising. It was a Volcanic World the Astartes discovered named New Etna, and its metallic resources were judged quite valuable for the war machine of the Great Crusade.”

Dennis gave her a data-slate with some basic information, and reading it Taylor immediately felt her eyes widen in shock. This planet wasn’t as valuable as Nocturne, but if she gave that sort of data to the Mechanicus, there would be no problems convincing a few hundred Magi sailing directly to these coordinates and mining the hell of it.

“What the hell happened to make the Administratum lose track of this world?” The Basileia she was had sadly discovered you could only limit the damage represented by billions of bureaucrats working together, but in general worlds lost in the data-transits were poor and failed to give anything valuable to the Imperium.

The world of ‘New Etna’ was different from them. It should have been an incredibly valuable Industrial World by now, or failing that, a Mining World delivering millions of tons of highly-sought metals to the nearest Forge World.

“That’s the problem. We don’t know. The *Flamewrought* is the only ship of the Salamanders left to have the spatial coordinates, and before you asked, I sent a message to the Inquisition to see if it was in a restricted or quarantined zone. It isn’t. As far as the Salamanders or every historian know, this system simply vanished several years after the Heresy.”

“Weird,” the black-haired and golden-winged insect-mistress reacted. “I suppose you want to investigate once you will have visited Nocturne?”

“This is the plan my Seneschal and I made so far,” Dennis nodded. “We will send one or two ships your way with a Mechanicus escort for all the gifts the Salamanders have for you, and then we will travel to the coordinates. Since it’s in southern Segmentum Tempestus, we might use Gryphonne IV as a supply base before the true discovery effort begins.”

“I approve...for now,” the Lady of the Nyx Sector turned towards the Dawnbreaker Guards waiting on her left. “I am going to send a few inquiries to several Space Marine Chapters of the closest Sectors. I really don’t like the idea of valuable worlds like this one vanishing for no reason.”

“We can’t forget that early M31 was a...chaotic period, my Lady,” Wolfgang reminded her. “After the Scouring, plenty of planets were left shells of their former selves. It’s entirely possible a Battlefleet commander bombed this planet until it was utterly lifeless, and failed to inform the nearby authorities before he or she was ambushed.”

“Like Terrathens vanished from living memory?”

“I admit the circumstances are strangely similar,” the blonde-haired man agreed. “However Terrathens was settled during the Age of Strife. New Etna is a far more recent attempt.”

“I can’t deny that,” and it made the former far more valuable, which was why Wolfgang had far more Mechanicus assets ‘helping’ him. “Have you managed to form a consensus with the Magi Explorators?”

“Not quite, I’m afraid,” the young Rogue Trader admitted, “Everybody agrees establishing an outpost and some naval repairing facilities on the world of Kars Zagros is a good idea, since it is for one light-year inside the Astronomican illumination zone, but anything more is the subject of...vigorous discussions. The space beyond the Frontier Worlds of this part of the Eastern Fringe is known to swallow entire Expeditionary Fleets whole, and leave few survivors. Therefore there are a lot of different methods everyone wants to attempt.”

“Make sure they don’t bicker for an entire year. I don’t like intervening in Mechanicus internal affairs, but the prize at the end of the trail is too important to jeopardise it by internal conflicts.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

**Nyx II**

**Brigadier-General Tom Cameron**

When Tom raised his head, the two moons were still there. It was a view he really didn’t think he would be able to watch without a sense of shock. Things like moons weren’t supposed to be teleported across an entire system. Their orbited a single planet, and that was that. To learn an Archmagos could break the celestial laws...

“Admiring the miracles of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Brigadier?” Brigadier-General Julian Genesis asked.

“Among other things, yes,” the officer born in the Patton System replied to his Bahamuter counterpart. “Don’t let the cogboys hear that, though. I think several of those who have just landed consider Archmagos Cawl an unrepentant heretic.”

“I am not paid to say what is tech-heresy and what isn’t,” the dark-skinned and bulky commander said whimsically, “but according to the rumours, he’s definitely unrepentant.”

“Really? I mean, I know there were heavy fines involved for the deaths and the material destructions he caused on this very planet.”

“And if the whispers from the High Command are true, Her Celestial Highness unveiled a lot of sanctions and punishments specifically for him, therefore creating a precedent on moon and other planetary teleportation.” Julian Genesis shrugged, touching by reflex the little insignia of a flaming spider above his heart. “I won’t deny this is not a light punishment, but Cawl owns several planets and major Forges, if the rumours are true. He’s certainly more afraid of truly angering again Her Celestial Highness than paying the double of the fines his bank accounts have been hit with.”

“Formidable, truly formidable,” Tom Cameron murmured. But then the higher the cogboys climbed in their hierarchy, the crazier they became. It was one of those unofficial rules that no one in the Guard whispered too high when there were red robes in the vicinity, but it didn’t mean it wasn’t true. “And I suppose the pilgrims haven’t vacated Hill 5-4?”

“They’re still there,” the Bahamuter-born guardsman smiled, something that announced undoubtedly stranger news. “But apparently calling them pilgrims is no longer appropriate, apparently. They have decided to build a church on it, and they call themselves the Cult of the Saint of the Two Moons.”

“You are joking.”

“I assure you, I am not.”

Tom had the urge to curse or do something violent in the next minutes.

“Have they heard this hill is as close it is possible to get from the artillery testing grounds without trespassing on military property?”

“I’m sure a few reasonable heads may have considered it, especially after the Megarans and the Nyxians played with their new Basilisks last week.” Julian paused. “But ultimately, their faith must have been the deciding factor.”

“I doubt their ‘church’ is going to resist for longer than a few days, especially if they build cheap.” The recently promoted Brigadier-General shook his head, incredulous at the nonsense leading to this situation. “Maybe once it will have collapsed once, they will reconsider their choices and return to the Hive World.”

“And maybe they will join the Cult of the Spiders.”

Tom sent an angry glare at his fellow Brigadier-General, veteran like him of the armoured engagements fought in the dark realms of Commorragh.

“Please don’t joke about that. I don’t know how these madmen bribed the Biologis teams into releasing a Helspider into their custody, and I by the Golden Throne don’t want to be there when the power of Lady Weaver will stop making this arachnid monster tame and controllable.”

With His Holiness the Ecclesiarch in person announcing Lady Weaver was a true Living Saint – not that there was much doubt left on the matter – every cult and religion worshipping Her Celestial Highness were legal, as long as they followed the tenets of the Cult of the Saviour Emperor.

For plenty of communities, the reactions were filled with fervour, but remained eminently reasonable. The Cult of the Spiders was what happened when things didn’t stay that way.

These religious practitioners seemed to believe that wherever the Basileia stayed, once she had controlled a spider to accomplish her will, the spider was the equivalent of a vox and a servo-skull for the Living Saint permanently. As such, they tried to buy plenty of ancient spiders to be closer spiritually to the Saint...and as he had said previously, their biggest acquisition was, of course, a Helspider.

“The Txacopec cavalry seems to manage just fine.”

“The Txacopec cavalry is about as sane as the Cult of the Spiders, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s a retired guardsman from their regiment who has given them the idea.”

At least this particular brand of madness wasn’t on Nyx Secundus. The majority of the companies of the Txacopec regiment had been sent rebuild their numbers back on their homeworld...without the Helspiders.

“Shall we see what sort of Cataphracts and new blood the Departmento Munitorum has ready for us?”

“Yes,” Tom Cameron felt far better discussing about a military subject, especially when it involved his favourite tanks. “Let’s speak about the new equipment we have been granted the privilege to test.”

**Nyx VI’s High Orbit**

**Battleship *Admiral Mecklenburg***

**Lord Admiral Danvers Alexandros**

Most of his career, Danvers had spent it fighting tooth and nail for every Throne Gelt of his military budget and adding more capital ships to his Battlefleet.

The God-Emperor loved irony; there was no other possible explanation for being granted his wishes when he was about to retire from the Navy.

“You could last a few more decades, with a good rejuvenation like the one they offer in the clinics of Hive Athena,” Max von Schafer pointed out as he had guessed his thoughts, not that he really needed to with the expression of envy which surely had to be on Danvers’ face.

“Ha! I appreciate the vote of confidence, but you all know I’m not destined to stay Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx, Admiral.” The ageing Navy officer shook his head with non-feigned regret. “Don’t take me wrong, I intend to accept the offer of rejuvenation the Basileia presented to me last month. It’s also possible I will take her up on the position of Second Naval Secretary she proposed. But Battlefleet Nyx needs someone more skilled than I am, both to play the game of politics and prepare for the great battles of the future.”

Besides, several duels had already been fought to first blood at Kar Duniash, and Danvers Alexandros was not brave enough to tell Lord High Admiral Reinhart von Lohengramm that really, all these struggles and politicking had been useless because he was going to keep his job a few more decades.

“Has the name of your replacement been announced?”

“Not officially no, but according to several old friends eager to have some good blackmail material, it should be Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller.”

“Müller...” Schafer touched one of the scars on his jaw in contemplation. “Any relation with the Admiral victorious at the Battle of the Adamantium Wall?”

“He is the same Admiral, unless there’s two of the same name in the Navy.”

The newly promoted Admiral born on Cypra Mundi chuckled.

“I think it’s unlikely. The family name isn’t one I remember from one of the great naval dynasties of Kar Duniash.”

For a few minutes, the two Navy representatives stayed silent, admiring the long lines of warships manoeuvring in neat lines to return to their berths in the orbital shipyards of Nyx Sextus. No matter how long you sailed through the void, there always was something near-miraculous at watching the might of humanity’s armada displayed like that before your eyes. Battleships were surrounded by Frigates and Destroyers; Battlecruisers were preceded by Light Cruisers. The numbers of torpedo tubes, Nova Canons, and macro-batteries were simply overwhelming.

And it was just the beginning of the build-up which would make Battlefleet Nyx a first-rate Battlefleet renowned across the Imperium. Already escort ships were arriving by entire flotilla; it wouldn’t be long before more Cruisers and Battleships arrived to inflate the firepower of the warships the Navy had in the Sector.

“For now, I do not intend to proceed to any more changes than what was already decided,” Danvers wasn’t going to shake the ship, so to speak, mere months away from retirement. “Vice-Admiral Alex Cazerne will stay in command of the Atlas Sub-Sector, and the same is true for Vice-Admiral Edwin Fisher in the Smilodon Trench.”

Those two had arrived to their current positions after many ‘proud officers’ retired in protest after Lady Weaver became Lady Nyx, and they had done sufficiently well his replacement may very well confirm them and grant them a promotion.

“The Theta captains aren’t going to be very pleased Kar Duniash designated Admiral Hauptmann to command the Marches’ Sub-Sector squadrons, however.”

“I know, but with Vice-Admiral Flint dying in his bed three months ago, I had no one with the rank and experience to replace him without creating outrage and more problems.”

The soon-to-be-retired Lord Admiral could only hope that Jacob von Hauptmann knew the true minefield he was about to sail into.

“Which leaves Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal to take the position of Vice-Admiral von Drenthe next year.”

“Yes,” really there hadn’t been a large amount of options available to him: it was either von Schafer, or it was von Reuenthal. With the industrial and infrastructure expansions ordered by the victorious Lady Nyx, Wuhan and the other worlds it held authority over were an Admiral’s station. Since Danvers had a preference for von Schafer playing the unofficial role of expert with his replacement, Reuenthal would have the Moros Sub-Sector. “And until we have a complete view of the situation, Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto will be the senior Navy officer in the Suebi Sub-Sector.”

“Her performance was remarkable at Commorragh,” the man who had been terribly wounded in the same battle said, “but I don’t think Kar Duniash is going to be fine leaving her in command there. Not without a major victory to her list of accomplishments, and all the naval transports and warships around Sparta are accounted for.”

“I agree completely, but this is not going to be something that is in my hands.” It would be the privilege of the new Lord Admiral chosen by Kar Duniash. And this lucky ‘Chosen officer’ would also have the ‘blessing’ to explain his policy and his decisions to a Living Saint backed by the coffers and the religious authority of the Adeptus Ministorum, and the enthusiast tech-worship of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Speaking of which...

“What is happening with the *Lion*?”

Schafer grimaced.

“The Magi swarming it are using it to demonstrate ‘how not to build a Battleship’, I believe.”

“That bad?”

“Let’s just say after reading one of the most coherent reports written in proper Gothic, I am really relieved I never used one of these disasters as my personal flagship. There are safer occupations in the Imperial Navy. Like being assigned to a fireship near the Eye of Terror.”

“An interesting comparison...” Danvers Alexandros grimaced. “How do you intend to use it, assuming the Mechanicus relinquish it?”

“Training ship, with interdiction to send it anywhere near the frontlines,” Max von Schafer answered with all celerity.

“I suppose this is the end of this ‘Fast Battleship’ idea, then.”

“The concept doesn’t seem completely dead for a few Magi and Captains,” the Cypra Mundi-born veteran disagreed. “But it will be likely decades before we even see a completed prototype. Von Kisher’s haste to build this class was an egregious mistake; the shipbuilders of Nyx won’t want to repeat it, not when we lose hundreds of thousands souls when one is blowing apart...”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Cathedral of Endless Darkness**

**Indomitable-Captain Qel Greatsbark**

“Victory is ours-ours!” Qel screamed. “RING THE SCREAMING BELL! PRAISE MALAL!”

“PRAISE ANARCHY! PRAISE MALAL!”

Chained to one of the tanks the brute-things called a ‘wet doggy’ for some reason Qel didn’t care about, the Screaming Bell shone and tolled, the holy alloy and the warpstone fused into a receptacle of Blessed Anarchy.

On and on, the Bell tolled.

And the Grand Western Skaven Army of the Dark Pits attacked.

Qel pushed several of his most useless servants before him in the melee. There weren’t too many brute-things on the battlefield, but better not to take any risk before reporting his glorious and total victory to the Council of Eleven, yes-yes!

“MALAL IS WITH US-US!”

“FANGS AND ANARCHY!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE GODS-GODS!”

“MALAL WILLS IT-IT!”

Kamiskaven of Clan Ozai descended from the skies of Skavenblight to crush the heretics, and Qel shot with peerless accuracy before stabbing a man-thing bearing the heretic’s ugly markings.

“ATTACK-ATTACK!”

His irritation returned as he saw three potential usurper Captains shout the same order at the moment he did. Fangs and tails! Qel was really going to bring the power of Malal upon their insolent heads!

“I AM THE INDOMITABLE-CAPTAIN! MIGHTY I AM!” The supreme commander of the Greatsbark army squeaked while pushing the incompetent Stormvermins in the way of the long blades the enemy man-things had. “ONE COIN-FUR FOR THE WARRIOR DESTROYING THE SPIRE-SPIRE!”

Enthusiast war-cries engulfed everything save the tolling of the Screaming Bell, and the assault continued.

They were winning! His plan of genius was working! Qel was the greatest warlord of the Skaven, the most favoured of Malal! Praise Anarchy, his ascension to the Council was certain now!

The cathedral shook. The bloodied stairs shook. The dark rocks shook.

“What was that-that?” The Indomitable-Captain squeaked. “Why have our big guns-guns stopped firing?”

Qel suddenly felt very-very cold. His heart was beating faster-faster.

And his eyes watched the skies, he saw the heavens which belonged to Malal turn red, blue, and green.

“The Brute-things have made one of their rituals, Anarchy save us-us! RETREAT! RETREAT!”

A lighting of red struck the spire of the lair of the brute-things. Before Qel could squeak once more, it became a raging red storm, before turning into a red heresy-thing wielding a colossal axe bigger than the Screaming Bell.

It was not alone. Joining it was something feathered blue looking like these impossible-to-eat birds the Council had ordered to kill-kill! And when the green storm struck, a big thing of pus and disease was laughing and wielding a big-big tentacle!

“**WITNESS THE MIGHT OF THE THREEFOLD ABOMINATUM**!”

Qel Greatsbark squeaked in horror, and promptly voided his bowels.

“YOU! SAVE THE SCREAMING BELL-BELL! I WILL GO-GO AND INFORM THE COUNCIL!”

The Indomitable Captain didn’t wait to see if his orders were obeyed. This was only a minor reversal, yes-yes. There would be other-other days of great wins-wins. For now it was best to scurry-scurry.

“Not my fault-fault,” Qel affirmed as a torrent of his best troops followed him to avoid the rampage of the huge heresy-thing. “Not my plan-plan. I will turn this around! Anarchy will come back-back! We will be great-great!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Argos**

**3.933.296M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The Ecclesiarchy had had a lot of flaws before she became the Basileia. One thing Taylor couldn’t deny was that they hired very good choirs of singers. Even if most of the songs were religious and were sung in High Gothic, there was a powerful sense of majesty to hear the men and the women voice hymns after hymn in the Cathedral of the Martyrs in the heart of Hive Argos.

And on the first day of the Sanguinala, the golden-winged parahuman knew the selection of the choirs was particularly disputed. The fact it was a holy day gave it a significant amount of prestige, but there was also the fact that instead of singing some ten minutes-long religious and immemorial tunes, the best choirs could show their talent for several hours if they managed to justify the trust the senior Priest of the Cathedral had shown in them.

Obviously, Taylor had only announced she would be here to attend this mass a couple of days ago. She knew the Chapel-Masters and the Pontifexes considered it a priceless honour to receive her, and that way all the preparations were complete, the mass was the same it would have been had she been not there, save a notable exception: the hundreds of thousands of Nyxians and foreign pilgrims which had assembled outside the Cathedral’s doors.

The Cathedral of Martyrs was a huge and ostentatious Gothic building built with an audience of tens of thousands in mind, but there was no way it could receive all the men, women, and children who wanted to enter.

To enter and watch her. The black-haired Lady General wasn’t naive enough to believe the crowds had gathered for the simple pleasure of praying at the feet of the marble statue of Sanguinius she had recently offered to the religious priesthood of Hive Argos.

“I could build several walls with this manpower,” Huscarl Diamantis whispered as the choir finished its song and the applause of the audience became thunderous.

“Cousin, I don’t think our Lady is very interested in building fortifications today,” Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr mildly admonished the Imperial Fist.

“She should be,” the expert wall-builder grunted. “The defences of this Hive are truly pathetic.”

“All in good time,” Taylor whispered, turning her head and giving a raise of her eyebrows to the Imperial Fist. “All in good time. While my insects do not need to be paid, quality materials and metals for top-grade fortifications are far from cheap.”

“I thought the budget of this Hive World was unlimited,” Death Speaker – the name the Executioners gave to their Chaplains – Rivera said in a tone oscillating between joke and complaint.

“Nothing is unlimited in this imperfect galaxy save perhaps the expansion of the universe and the stupidity of the Eldar,” Taylor commented absently as a new Chapel-Master began a sermon pushing for love between each human and diligence of religious worship. “And there are plenty of issues which must be deal with before military defensive spending.”

“Such as?” One thing you could say for the Imperial Fists and their Successors, they were stubborn and didn’t stop until they had the answer they wanted.

“Such as the measures I did order during my last council of Ministers when you were busy completing the last defences of Lisa’s Dome.” The Basileia answered, giving a pointed look to the discomforted son of Dorn, as a reminder to not be too absorbed in his architectural hobby next time. “According to all the information tax collectors and urban planners have compiled in the last three years, we are in the middle of a baby boom and the population increase for this Hive World and most of the surrounding system is going to erase the scars left by the successive military musters raised to fight the Orks.”

In practise, using this population boost wasn’t going to be that easy. An Agri-Hive and a brand-new spaceport were already planned for, but it may not be totally enough to give enough employment to the new generation which would come into adulthood in the next decades. And there were also going to be the education reforms. Apprenticeships’ schools, tech-learning, orphanages filled with orphans attracted by a safe home and edible food...the list of the projects wasn’t endless, but it was titanic in size.

“But now that the construction of all the infrastructure around Lisa’s Dome is on schedule and has all the manpower it requires, my priorities are to make the air of this planet breathable and moderately unpolluted.”

“The mega-cactuses are good for something, after all,” Kratos mumbled.

“Mega-cactuses, oxygen-firs, titan-oaks and several other trees are going to be seeded on several decontaminated plains and areas devoid of human settlement.” The south of the Dolos Hive-Continent – thousands of kilometres away from her current location in Hive Argos – was a prime candidate for the creation of some of these forests. And as a lot of industry was shifted in high orbit or on the different Lagrange points, the environmental damage done to Nyx Tertius had never been so low.

The Amphitrite distillation plants were all on schedule, with well over two hundred built so far, and several teams of Magi Biologis were working with algae and other ‘natural’ methods of water-purification to restore the cleanliness of the Nyxian Ocean, though this one was going to be a long and arduous process.

“I want to have a world which is worth defending, Diamantis,” the recognised Living Saint explained. “It is very good to be protected both on the ground and in space from the enemies which wish us harm, but it won’t do us much good if in a few millennia, we’re as polluted as some of the Hive Worlds of Segmentum Solar.”

For all the distance separating Nyx from the heart of the Imperium, there were plenty of horror stories concerning these orbs of pollution and obscene overcrowding, and with the millions of pilgrims arriving here, there were new ones heard every month if you had the ears willing to listen to these despairing voices.

“I may have new suggestions then, if it is your decision.”

“By all means,” Taylor told the Imperial Fist. “I will read them after the Sanguinala is over. I will warn you, their implementation may be delayed until our return from Wuhan.”

The sermon ended in a thunderous amount of applause, and Taylor left the voluminous throne which had been prepared for her in the Basileia’s lodge.

It was the Sanguinala, and the people of Hive Argos had not seen her in person inside their Hive since she had returned from Pavia.

It was the Sanguinala and as she arrived in front of the Cathedral’s gates, the crowd which greeted her had been multiplied by three or four since her arrival.

It was exhilarating to see all these smiling faces. It was also giving her a hint of fear, that she might fall them one day.

They had faith. The Nyxians and all these pilgrims had faith in her. An ocean of humanity believed in her, and while she couldn’t explain it, Taylor felt sure at this moment the wings and the golden aura were powered by this incredible religious fervour.

The Basileia could only hope it would be enough to face the challenges awaiting them in the years to come.

“AVE IMPERATOR! HAIL THE BASILEIA! HAIL HER CELESTIAL HIGNESS!”

**Hagia Sanguinala**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Having spent several months in the catacombs of Caliban, Gavreel was confident the Lion and most of the senior commanders of the Astartes would not have approved the decoration of the Hagia Sanguinala’s sepulchre.

The monuments the First Legion had built on its main recruitment world could be summed-up in a single word: austere. Morael of the Angel Guard had even joked hearing his descriptions that the Dark Angels had invented the Gothic style before it became the norm across the Imperium.

But now that the moment was to make a choice, Gavreel had to say he preferred the splendid decorations of the Dawnbreaker Guard and the Nyxian artists to the dark mausoleums where the Legionnaires of the First Legion had been buried.

If the lights were artificial and by no means powerful enough to replace sunlight in the catacombs, their Lady had insisted that the light of dawn was to illuminate the level once per day, and an ingenious system of mirrors and advanced technology had been imagined by the architects to obey the command.

And the effect was breathtaking.

As the first rays of the Sapphire-Sun arrived above the eastern mountains, the sarcophaguses of Jonas and Aslan began to appear to his transhuman eyes like teas of crystal and blood.

By Sanguinius’ feathers, it was beautiful.

Gavreel, for the first time in years, felt the need to cry.

Lady Weaver had given dozens of the biggest rubies seized from Sliscus’ treasury, and the result was a marvel by itself. As the sun touched each jewel, it was like a Primarch’s fingers were touching the immobile Space Marines. With the transparent stasis field and the last rites provided by Techmarines and Apothecaries, it looked like the two dead Dawnbreaker Guard were merely sleeping.

The moment did not last, alas. Soon enough the sun continued its course, illuminating briefly the paintings, the sculptures, the numerous illuminations to ensure the catacombs never knew true darkness.

Silently, all the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard raised the golden chalices in their hands.

One by one, they came in front of the fallen Templar of Blood Librarian and the Angel of Defiance Sergeant.

One by one, they saluted and emptied the blood in the chalice.

Oaths had been kept, and duty waited for no one.

One by one, they left the catacombs, knowing that one day, the life they had chosen would lead them back here.

Gavreel could think of worse fates.

Dawn, after all, came every day. And the same was true for hope.

Jonas and Aslan had given their lives, and in time others would join them. Because there were causes greater than a hundred or a thousand Space Marines. As long as Taylor Hebert lived, the enemies of their gene-lines would know nothing but fear.

**Lisa’s Dome**

**Alice Gaius**

Alice tried very hard to hide her exhaustion when the transport hatch opened and the familiar order arrived to her ears.

“RUN!”

There was no time to lament herself on the fate of her poor legs, unfortunately. They ran. The first thing which had been impressed upon them when the Sanguinala Games began was that the judges spoke with the voice of the God-Emperor. Refusing to comply with their instructions was ground for instant disqualification.

Fortunately, the road they had to race upon here looked and felt brand-new devoid of any irregularities. Compared to some of the trials they had completed before this very moment, it was almost easy.

As all the roads converged to a massive golden gate in construction, there was little doubt to where they were supposed to go. It gave Alice the will to continue, because she felt her endurance decreasing with each stride. And many boys were overtaking her. The young teenager clenched her jaw and tried to not burn out her last reserves.

At last, the order to stop and form lines came. Astartes and Games’ assistants barked, removing boys and girls who for one reason or another had failed their demanding expectations.

And all the surviving participants were faced by a line of Space Marines.

Despite the tiredness, despite the long hours of physical trials, Alice couldn’t help but feel awe at the sheer presence the Emperor’s Angels presented. They were clad in massive red armours, and while not one had a weapon in their hands, there was absolutely not a shadow of doubt a single one of these warriors would be capable to kill them all if this was their decision.

The line only included Brothers of the Red, though Alice noticed from the corner of her eyes there were also a couple of famous Black Templars and Iron Drakes watching them.

“Aspirants!” One of the Brothers of the Red Marines took a step forwards and his voice boomed across their ranks without effort. “I am Battle-Brother Radelleon. I will oversee the ninth trial of the Sanguinala Games. You are to be commended to have completed the eight which came before it.”

The red helmet slightly moved, as if to detect the slightness weakness in them.

“As any of you must have understood so far, we have significantly altered the order of the Games and brought new trials into existence. For the first Game, you had to complete a ten kilometres-long obstacle course.”

As if they could forget this ‘memorable’ event. Alice had prepared hard and she had no problem running, but this ‘obstacle course’ had been a torture by itself. They had crawled in no less than ten pits of mud and disgusting substances. They had climbed by hand immense walls. They had done plenty of things Alice had no wish to repeat, and it had been only the first Game.

“For the second Game, you had to prove your adaptation skills by completing a biathlon circuit.”

And while Alice had no idea who had sponsored this, the man or the woman was definitely a sadist. No one among the participant had ever done something like ‘roller-skiing’, and the penalties when your paint-rifle missed a single target were forcing you to do two supplementary laps, aggravating exhaustion in a sport which was definitely neither easy nor relaxing.

The Space Marine recapitulated the other Games, which had been difficult in their own ways. The wrestling tournament was hard, and the orientation race in the middle of the night in the lower levels of a Hive had been...well, disorientating. Next they had been strapped to simulators with – according to the instructors – most of the commands and systems of a starfighter seat. The goal for this one had been simply to stay alive when facing waves after waves of enemy until the Space Marines were satisfied by their resilience.

After that, they had been tested on their adaptation skills again as they were introduced to what the Brothers of the Red called a ‘biking race’, which involved climbing up and down a mountain with two wheels-contraptions. The more classic trials of fencing and weight throwing had followed.

“The Ninth Game is unlike any other, for you will compete against time itself, but also indirectly against your fellow participants. Behind me stands Lisa’s Dome.”

The whisper of a melody was heard, and Alice and all the other participants knew immediately what resided in the huge Biodome they had never seen before.

So that was where the giant moth had been moved to after the Ovation.

“For those of you who were not present on Lady Weaver’s return or are slow to understand, yes, this Biodome is the home of the great purifier-moth called Lisa. Personally I think it is evidence itself, but striking this great agent of Lady Weaver will is grounds for instant elimination, assuming Lisa doesn’t choose to retaliate.”

Yes, Alice had to agree it would be very stupid. Not only was the moth a holy agent of a Living Saint and the Basileia would destroy the potential career of any trying to hurt one of her mounts, the very act of striking something bigger than Knight walkers when you had your bare hands and the moth could kill you by landing upon your body was...idiotic.

“What you may not be aware, however, is that this moth has quite an appetite, and loves new fruits and delicacies. For today, Her Celestial Highness has commanded Lisa to only eat the first sample of fruit, sugar, pastry, or honey which has been presented to her.”

Alice Gaius could see where it was going.

“By great chance, however, our Tech-Priests have been kind enough to list you all the foods this gourmet insect had swallowed since this morning, and new cargoes of fruit have arrived from Nyx Quartus and beyond. Between these, you should have all the information you need to provide a meal to Lisa. And you will need to, if you want to complete this Ninth Game. Several of our battle-brothers are following the mistress of the Dome, and will record your achievements.”

Wait a minute...oh by the Golden Throne. Not only they had to find the best food for Lisa, they also had to track her wherever she moved. This was...this was promising to be a big challenge...

“Next restrictions, in order to make the Game more interesting.” By this point, Alice was almost sure this was this Astartes who had engineered the biathlon and the bike racing. He had the sadist personality for it. “You only can take a fruit per person inside the Dome. If it isn’t one the noble moth accepts, you will have to return here and try with another. You have only four hours to convince Lisa to accept your gift. And of course you can’t steal the edible objects your fellow participants have. While you are in competition with each other to find the best food for our Lady’s moth, it is an indirect competition. There will be no violence between the aspirants.”

The Space Marine didn’t tell them it was grounds for instant disqualification, but he didn’t need to.

“LET THE MOTH GAME...BEGIN!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Fay System**

**Fay**

**5.951.296M35**

**Brigadier-General Tanya Sevrev**

Civilians from Nyx and Fay had not a lot of points in common. Their devotion towards the new Living Saint of the Nyx Sector set aside, the Hive World and the Civilised World were hardly close neighbours.

But when it came to partying on the Day of Victory of the Sanguinala, it didn’t matter which culture the soldiers and the civilians belonged to, there were no issues with partying vigorously in the streets and every location opened to the festivities.

“I think the average worker is going to have difficulties travelling to his workplace tomorrow morning,” the veteran of the Fay 20th smirked as from the observation balcony several people looked like they didn’t really remember their own names.

“I think the overseers and the industrialists will be tolerant...exceptionally,” her former superior and now the Governor of the Civilised World answered. “This Sanguinala was as much the holy week’s celebrations as it was a feast to celebrate the Victory of Commorragh. I authorised an increase of the budget after the astropathic news arrived, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one.”

“Assuredly,” Tanya feigned to approve gravely. “There are rumours even the so-noble rulers of Atlas decided to raise a few toasts to the Basileia.”

“They must really have tried to get dead drunk after that,” Ilvyna Dalten chuckled, and the other blonde-haired woman followed suit. The Atlasian nobles had stopped their legal attempts to contest how Lady Nyx exerted her authority over trade and core prerogatives over the Sector, but unless you were somewhere far, far away from all civilisation for over a decade, it was impossible to ignore the Basileia and the rulers of Atlas’ political views were extremely incompatible.

“You sold them the wine?”

“I wish I did,” Ilvyna sighed. “Alas, while the reputation our vineyards have managed to gain in the last couple of years is excellent for the Sector as a whole, it doesn’t extend to Atlas. These stellar ‘paragons of nobility’ are spitting on anything which isn’t Atlasian amasec.”

“I am not surprised. Nothing has really filtered of Lady Weaver’s last negotiations with Atlas, but...well, the Governor of Megara and she made several economic announcements, and I know for sure a certain First Duke was present at that audience.”

“Interesting,” Ilvyna smiled. “I had heard similar rumours.” The light promising unpleasant things for the Atlasian nobles rapidly disappeared in her eyes. “On the other hand, financial investments or not, the Atlas System is still going to be a significant player in the Sector’s affairs for the next decades.”

“Even with all the industrial reforms, the Tech-Priests’ gatherings, and the new objectives recently negotiated?”

Tanya was of course only lightly associated with economic affairs at the highest level; so far after their return from Pavia, her only moves had been to buy lands on Fay and a nice private hostel in the upper levels of Hive Athena. But what she had seen on Fay so far was incredibly impressive: a small shipyard coupled with cargo platforms, mining extraction on the rise in the asteroid belt, plenty of brand-new roads and cities, plans to add more, and this was without counting the renovations to several parts of the capital and the introduction of several machines and installations coming from STC discoveries and Mechanicus transfers.

“We are making great progress, but don’t forget that the system of Atlas has three inhabited planets, and if their numbers can be trusted, this grants them a population of seventeen billion as a whole. If we don’t count the worlds recently annexed in the Suebi Sub-Sector, the only systems which are surpassing by far Atlas in industry and population are Nyx and Wuhan. Theta, Iris, and Calypso have three inhabited planets, but for different reasons they fail to give two-thirds of the tithes Atlas’ Dukes give to the Administratum.”

“You’re right,” Tanya was forced to concede, “but Theta’s Grand Solicitor, for one, met with Lady Weaver and accepted her conditions. Isn’t it possible that as more and more Tech-Priests and valuable personnel spread over the Sector, the gap between Atlas and other systems will soon be erased?”

“Maybe,” her former superior was not convinced, the Brigadier-General could see it clearly. “They are certainly going to fall behind in productivity per head; that much I won’t dispute. But a lot of their population consists of serfs owning little else but their own lives and the clothes on their back. And unlike Byukur and Menelaus, they haven’t made the mistake of insulting and downgrading most of their armed forces for a small private guard.”

Tanya could have added the Nyxian Ministers weren’t exactly eager to go on the warpath as long as the tithes were paid, but there was no need to. Unless First Duke Cristoforo Mocenigo or one of his friends committed a major mistake like beginning to worship the Ruinous Powers, it was likely this unpleasant state of affairs was going to continue.

“How long do you intend to stay?” Ilvyna asked, hinting the subject of certain Atlasian issues was closed.

“At least two months. I left two companies of the 20th at Hive Athena with Colonel Tovar, but all the veteran regiments really need to rebuild their strength now before any serious action can be considered.”

Commorragh had been an immense victory, but a lot of Fay blood had been shed to achieve it. Like all the other regiments which had participated, too many friends and companions had lost their lives to not feel a bit melancholic.

“I also need to confirm you aren’t against the idea of building a nice ‘Grand Reliquary’ on your world.”

This time Ilvyna outright laughed.

“Our Pontifex and his assistants haven’t stopped pestering me last year I needed to ‘donate’ enough funds for the new Cathedral they wanted to build in the south. It will be my pleasure to refuse them, and to allocate plenty of Throne Gelts to this grand project.”

The blonde-haired Governor raised an ironic eyebrow.

“I sense an attempt to partially divert the torrent of pilgrims this way, however.”

“I can’t possibly answer this half-treacherous declaration.” The Guard veteran virtuously replied.

“Obviously,” Ilvyna nodded like it was the wisest thing in the world. “And on a different subject, has a certain proposition been made between two young women of high rank?”

“No,” Tanya shook her head in feigned horror. “But I have a feeling it shouldn’t be too long now. Most of the Governors and their relatives are making marriage proposals to one or the other since they have returned from Commorragh. It’s only a question of time before one snaps and proposes.”

The Brigadier-General maintained an expression of perfect innocence before opening her sizeable carnet.

“Do you want to join the betting pool, Governor?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Theta Marches Sub-Sector**

**Portsmouth System**

**Portsmouth**

**5.956.296M35**

**Chapter Master Felix Sulla**

“It will do.”

Felix didn’t need to be a good reader of human expressions to know his interlocutor was surprised.

“Forgive me Lord...but...”

“I am hasty in my judgement? I assure you, I am not.”

Felix had served as Captain of the 3rd Company for four decades. His official title among his brothers had been ‘Bastion of Defiance’, and like all his predecessors before him, he had tried his utmost to be worthy of the name the Primarch had bestowed upon them: the Sentinels of Terra.

Now that his new mission had been approved by his gene-sire, the former Imperial Fist was not going to fail in his duties, and hastiness was not something he was going to be accused of.

But the new Chapter supposed he was going to have to explain his choice, as boring and distasteful the prospect was. To be how had Lady Weaver called it...diplomatic?

“To build a new Fortress-Monastery, there are certain criteria which always come into account, Hegemon,” the veteran Astartes explained to the Governor of Portsmouth, who for some farcical historic reason, was called the ‘Hegemon of the Free Waters’ - often shortened to ‘Hegemon’. “Most of them the defensibility of the landscape we build upon. On this aspect, the site is near perfect, as we are blocked from the north and the west by high mountains few armies can cross without trying to raze them with gigantic terraformation engines or orbital bombardment. Southwards of this position there is the Danish Ocean, and with a minimum of defences, the threat of an amphibious operation coming from it will be minimal.”

“I understand,” the silver-haired man answered. By the Fist, this hairstyle and the hat were truly ridiculous, especially as Felix knew the man had received a rejuvenation five years ago. “Based on the rumours which spread from the Magma Spiders and the Iron Drakes choices, I would have thought, Lord, you would build your Fortress-Monastery far closer to my capital or on the other side of planet.”

This was admittedly a good point, especially for a non-military leader.

“My fellow Chapter Masters have their own traditions and priorities,” the Chapter Master of the Fists of Roma told Hegemon Leonardo Martim. “Some of them I share, some of them I don’t caution. The closeness of a capital so close to a Fortress-Monastery is not one I advise. I want to believe Portsmouth will not be a besieged world for millennia to come. This is an outcome every Fist of Roma will strive for. But reality rarely conforms to the Fists’ wishes, and there are enemies who are not shy about bombarding heavily a planet if they think they can crush all resistance in a few hours. Therefore I, as a Chapter Master and a son of Dorn, will not offer potential invaders an easy concentration of civilian and military assets to eliminate in a single strike.”

There were also several tactical points he wasn’t going to tell the Governor of Portsmouth. First, that even with the extremely advanced technology the Mechanicus was willing to share, the capital of Portsmouth was far too spread over the countryside to install a conventional energy shield protecting the entirety of its surface. Secondly, the Imperial Fists had enough dark memories of the Siege of Terra and countless other catastrophes to know that the closer you placed your Fortress-Monasteries from a city, the bigger the wave of refugees were when panic reigned and the authorities’ order collapsed.

“The White Mountains provide great defensive and training grounds for our Chapter. There are enough lands here for us to not disturb anyone, and there are plenty of sources of water.”

Yes, this was a good place to build a fortress. The purity of the snow high up in the mountains was giving him some good feelings about Portsmouth. The wind was cold, but not freezing. This planet was not Inwit to be certain, but it could in time become a proper base for their Chapter.

“I presume you wish to return to the Capital?”

Felix stopped watching the mountains and the defences and the plans he had for the new fortress he and his brothers were going to build here were temporarily placed on hiatus.

“Yes,” the new Chapter Master declared. “I want to see the sons of Portsmouth who want to join our ranks.”

And he wanted to tell them in person that the first obstacle on their path would be to travel to Mount Ruivo, the second highest big hill mere hundreds of metres away from here.

Since the aspirants were approximately two hundred and thirty kilometres away from this point, this would provide a proper challenge.

Felix Sulla respected the ‘Sanguinala Games’ of the Brothers of the Red and thought the idea had merit to recruit boys who would one day be the backbone of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter, but this wasn’t the way of the sons of Dorn.

“You will be impressed, I assure you. The announcement was incredibly popular and I think over half of the teenagers of Portsmouth City tried to volunteer...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Sub-Sector**

**Sparta System**

**High Orbit over Sparta**

**Frateris Command Cruiser *Grace of Lemuria***

**5.999.296M35**

**Judge Missy Byron**

When Missy had seen the preliminary data accumulated on Sparta, her first thought had been that the basic Administratum category of ‘Ice World’ could sum-up most of the things said about this world.

And now that she was in orbit over it, the Minister of Justice of Nyx had all the confirmation Sparta was a lot of things, and it didn’t involve being a good colonisation prospect for humanity.

It was beautiful if you loved massive balls of ice, and maybe one day when peace had returned to the galaxy it could serve as a winter sports’ resort.

Even with a lot of optimism however, Missy didn’t see that happening on her lifetime.

“When do you want to launch your offensive, Lady Byron?” asked Pontifex-Crusader Vishwa Ousadevi.

“As soon as military feasible,” the young parahuman immediately replied. “Practically, the time your railway system will need to transport the Nyx 1st and the Mechanicus tanks to their advanced positions on the frontlines in front of Keeler’s Fortress.”

“Isn’t it proceeding too fast?” A Confessor of the Ecclesiarchy spoke without having been invited, and Missy gritted her teeth at being imposed ‘religious help’ in a military headquarters when these men were clearly nothing of the sort.

Fortunately, she wasn’t the only one to be unamused by the presence of so many idiots.

“Be quiet.” Chapter Master Agiel Izaz of the Brothers of the Red said coldly. “Your incompetence has already been noted, don’t aggravate your case.”

All whispers and ongoing grumbled protestations stopped in one second.

“In case some people wish to wait, let me remind you there is a colossal blizzard raging several thousand kilometres north-west of the frontlines. Assuming the weather predictions are correct, there is less than two weeks before it reaches the Crystal Peaks Mountains. After that, Sparta’s winter will turn the world into a frozen hell where only Space Marines and void-sealed armours will be able to operate with some efficiency.”

“But you have these-“

Missy clicked her fingers, and a Commissar dragged one of the Ecclesiarchy representatives unwilling to shout his mouth out of the room.

“The next person who interrupts me without asking permission to, I will send him or personally to Sparta via the closest airlock,” the Shaker promised. “Now as I was saying, we can’t afford to wait. We have two fortresses to storm if we want to bring the rebels to their knees.”

“There are three fortresses! Don’t you-“

Missy clicked her fingers, and one of her Arbites assistants ‘escorted’ the loudmouth out of the room. It seemed that proving she wasn’t bluffing was going to demand a few summary executions, then.

“There are only two fortresses to be concerned about, Keeler’s Fortress and the Cardinal Kunar’s. Once those two are back in Imperial hands, we will be easily able to deprive the rebels of the Shankar Promethium Plant and cut the energy production supply of the enemy.”

Missy turned to the lone Magos representing the Adeptus Mechanicus.

“Data on the ground will need to be collected and analysed,” the cyborg-cogboy said. “But the pipelines and railways are intact as far as Outpost XZ-5 several kilometres east of Viveh. Assuming destruction is minimal save at the two rebel-held fortresses, the Mechanicus will be able to repair the installations in a matter of weeks. Then we will improve them, I swear it on the name of the Omnissiah.”

There were some angry expressions in the assistance, but Missy really didn’t care. Promethium mining and extraction procedures, when they weren’t significantly Mechanicus-automated, were true nightmares for the humans working on them. There was a reason Taylor had invested so many expensive technologic assets into improving the living conditions of the workers, and it wasn’t just to make herself more popular.

As horrible as the working conditions had been on Nyx, unfortunately, they hadn’t held a candle against the pre-revolt penal system of Sparta. On Nyx after all, the workers had been badly paid and by no means treated gently, but they had still been free men. The men and women sent to the ice orb had not this chance. Prisoners weren’t paid, and they certainly weren’t free to leave.

“Whether the rebels have the promethium industry available or not, they won’t surrender,” the Pontifex-Crusader warned her.

“Maybe not,” Missy agreed. “But without any promethium to warm themselves, their supply lines in disarray and their moral shot down to hell, they won’t survive long.”

“They have Mushroom Haven,” Vishwa Ousadevi countered. “They will still have some food to avoid starvation.”

Missy threw a look at the little green dot at the end of the lines of fortresses and penal facilities the Ecclesiarchy had built on Sparta. Again one more mistake the Adeptus Ministorum of Atlantis had committed.

Penal Worlds were not supposed to be independent militarily or economically, for obvious reasons. The risk of prisoners taking control was non-trivial at the best of times, and the last thing the Imperium wanted was to confront heavy defences when the moment came to retake the world.

The imbeciles of Atlantis had not listened to any of the Munitorum envoys and other Imperial experts sent to change their mind, and here was the result. Sparta combined a line of fortresses impossible to flank by the means the Frateris Templars had at their disposal, a spaceport – which had to be retaken with a mountain of loyalist corpses – and last but not least, a promethium power plant and underground mushroom harvesting facilities.

“True, but they will need to devote more of their limited resources to keep Mushroom Haven functioning,” and the ex-prisoners had to keep millions working in these underground facilities, because they had never been automated or conceived to be easy to operate in the first place. “Not that it really matters, in the end. I am going to deal with them...permanently.”

And she wouldn’t lose a lot of sleep in the process. The criminals sent by the Ministorum to Sparta were hardly the kind of people you wanted to reintegrate in a civilised society. Her credentials among the Adeptus Arbites had been enough to give Missy access to the figures, and there were grim. Over seventy percent of the prisoners prior to the revolt were accused of crimes varying from numerous murders to rape, when it wasn’t active participation in insurrection cells or membership in forbidden cults.

Somehow, she didn’t think it was the ‘thought criminals’ demanding democratic reforms who had emerged on top after the successful insurrection.

“Still, I suppose we will give the rebels of the...what are they calling themselves again?”

“The Communist Revolutionary Syndicate for the Spartan’s People,” informed her pleasantly Agiel Izaz.

Communists. On Sparta. If there was something good on this galaxy, Leet would only learn of it in a few decades. Not that they really were true communists: collectivisation hadn’t happened, and the inflated names taken by some of the rebels betrayed some megalomaniacs in chagerge.

Missy had thought this bad idea had died with Earth Bet, but it seemed she was going to have to dirty her hands to convince everyone a few of the ancient nauseating political ideas were not tolerated.

“Yes, I am going to give this ‘Revolutionary Syndicate’ a chance to lay down their arms and surrender before our offensive begins. Those who are carrying arms can go to the Penal Legions, we always need more expendable cannon fodder in the Eastern Fringe. Those who stayed cultivating mushrooms will likely be transported to a secure Agri-World where they will live and die providing new harvests to the Imperium.”

Vishwa Ousadevi’s dark-skinned face was best described as very unconvinced.

“I can vox these terms, but do not expect them to answer by anything save insults and heretical speeches.”

Speaking of heresy...there were still too angry faces...time to purge the Frateris Templars’ opponents before the offensive began.

“Oh, you won’t have to do that, Pontifex-Crusade. My new secretary is going to take care of it. Isn’t that right, Mr. Bear?”

And if the expressions of the Frateris Templars had been angry when she informed them of the Mechanicus participation, it was a child’s tantrum compared to their reactions when they saw her lovely black-and-white furry ‘secretary’ enter.

It was difficult to mistake him for anything than a Rashan, evidently.

“HERESY! SHE IS NOT WHAT SHE PRETENDS TO BE! TEMPLARS, ARREST THESE HERETICS!”

“Chapter Master, I think we are going to use a lot of airlocks before descending on Sparta.”

“YOU HAVEN’T THE RIGHT TO LET A XENOS LIVE ON THIS HOLY SHIP!”

“I am the Law. I have every right.”

Taylor had asked her to remove the biggest problems against her rule in the Suebi Sub-Sector, and it was best to begin here and now. The *Grace of Lemuria* should never have been built like it was in the first place; it was bad enough this Lunar hull had only a third of the firepower the Navy took for granted, but was it really to have baths and toilets decorated in gold, and the equivalent of a yearly tithe in precious metals and luxury items for decoration and parties?

“The *Codex Astartes* completely supports this action, Judge.” The red-armoured Astartes told her solemnly as several platoons of the Nyx 1st stormed in and began to arrest many Frateris Templars and Priests.

“Really?” a Scout waiting behind him sounded very surprised.

“I believe the passage refers as dealing with the infiltrators and the incompetent officers in your order of battle before you confront the real enemy.” Agiel Izaz smiled, and this was the expression of a predator having found his prey. “Sometimes we of the Blood listen to the wisdom of the Ultramarines...”

**Sparta**

**Fortress of the People – ex-Saint Keeler’s Fortress**

**Citizen-General of the Revolution and the People Morgantia Zapata**

“The Enemies of the People have asked for our surrender again, Citizen-General.”

Morgantia Zapata had a good laugh at that. Would the lackeys of the Corpse-God ever truly learn true Spartans had sworn to never kneel again?

“The Enemies of the People are so stupid they can’t help themselves. Ask the Promethium Citizen-Director of the People if he can spare a few heads to be delivered to the corpse-worshippers.”

“Right away, Citizen-General!”

In this case, the demand for heads was literal: Morgantia was going to take great pleasure in sending the decapitated heads of the Enemies of the People to their masters.

“Stupidity of the Enemies of the People aside,” the People’s Delegate to the Committee of Defence Affairs grinned before returning to seriousness. “Their forces seemed to have been heavily reinforced.”

On that point, the People’s Delegate was completely right. The Fortress of the People guarded the only pass allowing an easy crossing of the People’s Crystal Peaks, and with the elevation the fifty metres-tall walls granted them, there was no way to miss the endless rotation of the mag-trains between the spaceport and the camps of Treachery and Oppression.

“Yes, but I doubt it will do them any good.”

The last enemy assaults against his command had been bloody failures, and he saw no reason today was going to be any different. None of the People’s scouts deployed to observe the enemy’s movements had noticed heavy concentrations of artillery or sizeable fortress-crusher walkers.

The brave citizen-soldiers of his vanguard had reported a worrying amount of tanks and enemies in power armour, but what good was it doing to do to the Oppressors when they couldn’t approach the Fortress of the People’s walls without being slaughtered by its mighty guns?

“To be honest, Citizen-General, I think we are quite lucky today. The Citizen-Director in the Promethium extraction mines was beginning to worry about a certain deficit in thousands of hands to provide us the liquid of the People’s Oppressors. With this assault coming, once again the People’s Army will be granted the opportunity to capture and turn the Enemies of the People to more productive actions.”

“You are completely confident about repelling the oncoming assault then, Citizen-General?”

“Citizen-Delegate, at the risk of sounding arrogant, the only question is how many waves of attack the Oppressors’ infantry will launch at us before realising their men have no chance to breach the People’s walls. The People’s efforts have repaired the damage the last assaults did, and the stocks of ammunitions are plentiful. The geography of Sparta means every flanking effort is going to be on foot and easily blocked, and the People’s guns are better trained and longer-ranged. The People’s victory is certain.”

No, there was no problem about this assault. Though Morgantia wished the Committees weren’t going to ask too many questions about the ones which would come after that once the oncoming winter was over.

So far, there was no problem with ammunition, but the real problem was the maintenance of the field guns. The majority of the spare parts for them had been stocked at the spaceport, and both technicians and parts had been blasted apart when the loathed corpse-worshippers had retaken it.

This wasn’t the only problem, of course. While he was too loyal to the People and the Committees to ask if there were issues, the number of mushroom rations delivered to the Fortress of the People had decreased again six days ago, and it had failed to return to normal levels as he was explaining the situation to the Citizen’s Delegate.

“The People’s Committees will be pleased to hear the survival of the Revolution is not at risk for this season.”

“As long as I am alive, the only way the Oppressors’ attack-mastiffs will pass these gates is dead or in chains, Citizen’s Delegate. The blood and the lives of the People built this Fortress, the blood and the lives of the Oppressors will be spent by the billions trying to conquer it!”

It didn’t matter if the guns broke or the Hosts of Tyranny and Oppression came by the billions on this world. Morgantia had lost four brothers on Sparta in the promethium mines. Four brothers executed like chattel because they were too wounded to continue working in the dark pits of the false-priests. He was the last now of his family, and he would not kneel, surrender, or show any form of weakness to the Enemies of the People. He would die first, but before he was going to send millions of them to the corpse-god they loved so much.

“If you give me a few minutes, I am sure I can write a message for the Defence Committee-“

Citizen-General Morgantia Zapata stopped talking, as his eyes were witness of something impossible.

The People’s Crystal Peaks were tall mountains of snow, ice and millions of tons of stones and iron ore. There were so imposing even the Oppressors who had ordered the People to build the railway line and the Fortresses had used this pass and several others to link the People’s Spaceport and the Mushroom Haven of the People.

The Enemies’ artillery had tried to unleash a few avalanches by shooting at some sections of the Peaks, but it had quickly proven fruitless.

These mountains were older than the Oppressors, and would likely last several millennia. By then the Revolution would be triumphant.

But under his very eyes, the closest northern peak was distorting, stretching impossibly.

“What...what in the name of the People?”

The fortress began to shake. The mountains themselves were shaking. The peak was contorting, distorting, stretching impossibly in shape no peak or natural landscape should take.

Morgantia should know, he had been a member of the Cartographer’s Guild before being arrested by the Oppressors.

But while his eyes insisted it couldn’t happen, a good third of the upper mountain was ripped apart from its stone foundations, and began to levitate. And it rose higher and higher by the second.

The Citizen-General’s mind screamed it was impossible, that there was no way it could happen.

It had to be a nightmare! It had to be!

But the impossible mountain was moving, slowly but surely, in the direction of his fortress! No, the Fortress of the People! It was the Fortress of the People! It was going to stand! The nightmare was going to end!

The unruly snowy mountain arrived on top of them, casting an immense shadow, and depriving them of the weak Spartan sun of the People.

And then it was like whatever’s abominable power had allowed this failed, and an entire mountain fell on them.

Citizen-General Morgantia Zapata, former criminal of Atlantis accused of three murders, two rapes, and numerous acts of arsons and pillage against Ecclesiarchy properties, former penal prisoner of Sparta, traitor to the Imperium of Mankind, began to scream like a possessed man.

And then he, like the five hundred thousand soldiers of the fortress he had defended against the Frateris Templars, died pulverised.

**Scout Phanuel**

Space Marines didn’t know fear. Phanuel hadn’t known it since he became part of the Chapter of the Brothers of the Red, so of course he had assumed the old adage was true.

Besides, if Commorragh had not been enough to give him fear, there was no way his two transhuman hearts and the psycho-indoctrination in his brain would allow him to experience the feeling again, right?

These thoughts, obviously, had been before Missy Byron, Judge of the Adeptus Arbites, Minister of Justice of Nyx, dropped an entire mountain on the rebel fortress.

Yes. An entire mountain. She had dropped an entire mountain on the rebels.

It took him about ten seconds for the veteran scout – after Commorragh, all the survivors were by definition veterans – to realise he was gaping like someone out of air.

Phanuel closed his mouth.

Missy Byron had dropped an entire mountain on the rebels. Alone. Unsupported.

Phanuel had believed Lady Weaver was the most dangerous parahuman alive, but now with the benefit of hindsight...

“Praise the Omnissiah and the parahumans!” Of course the Tech-Priest was the first to regain some measure of reason and thinking ability, for a certain definition of it. A glance at the high officers of the Frateris Templars showed there were nowhere near able to shake off the effect of having assisted to the destruction of the fortress which had stopped their offensives for the last years.

By the time the friend of Lady Weaver returned to their position, the shock had begun to dissipate a bit.

“I suppose it is a good thing we didn’t intend to use the Saint Keeler’s Fortress,” the voice of their Chapter Master sounded...almost resigned. “I suppose you have interesting targets in mind, Lady-Judge?”

“Yes, Lord Izaz. While I’m flattening the pass to ensure all our vehicle columns can go on the offensive, it would be perfect if you and one or two companies of the Nyx 1st could go after the Shankar Promethium Plant. I know you will need to land a few kilometres away to avoid the anti-air guns, but all of your effectives will be in power armour, and I think that as the rebels fail to vox-contact their doomed fortress, panic is going to spread in.”

“The Promethium Plant will be back in Imperial hands by sunset, Lady-Judge.” All of the Space Marines present saluted Missy Byron by striking their fist against their power armours before walking at a sound pace towards the Thunderhawks.

“What are you waiting for?” the voice of the fortress-crusher resonated. “The Mechanicus, the Space Marines and the Guard are preparing their forces for a lightning offensive! Why are the Frateris Templars standing idle?”

“YOU DESTROYED A FORTRESS!” a Frateris Templar shrieked incoherently.

“Yes and? If you want to serve the Basileia, Templar officers shouldn’t let small details like that go in the way of your duties!”

**Fortress of the Never-Ending Revolution – ex-Cardinal Kunar’s Fortress**

**Citizen-General of the Revolutionary Defences and the Struggle against Oppression Hridayesh Induj**

All night Hridayesh had hoped that in the obscurity, the Oppressors and the People’s Enemies had tried to exaggerate the strength of their numbers.

But as dawn came and some luminosity appeared on this very grey morning under heavy clouds, the Citizen-General saw most of its last hopes crushed.

The Enemy’s forces were millions strong, and they were advancing towards the Fortress of the Never-Ending Revolution.

There was no sign of refugees or desperate counter-attacks from the People’s forces.

There was no sign any man or woman defending the Fortress of the People had survived its fall.

“How did they do it?” The words escaped his lips in a whisper, and he didn’t regret it. “How?”

The Fortress of the People had withstood every Oppressor assault until yesterday without a single breach in its solid walls or any deluded Oppressor’s butcher managing to set foot upon its ramparts and staying alive.

In the improbable situation it fell, there should have been plenty of time for messengers to flee and vox-broadcasts to be made!

Instead since yesterday only silence had come from the People’s Lives Pass.

And Hridayesh Induj was wise enough to know this silence was all he was ever going to receive now.

“All right,” the Citizen-General tried hard to present a confident face to his men and avoid the kind of defeatism which saw you demoted and sent in front of a People’s Committee tribunal. “We all know the situation, Citizen-Colonels. What I want to hear are solutions to return the course of this People’s war in our favour.”

“Yes, Citizen-General!” the younger of his Citizen-officers present with him on the top of the defence tower saluted impeccably. “We need to counter-attack and liberate the Promethium Plant of the People, Citizen-General! The refinery and delivery of promethium is of vital importance to this fortress, Citizen-General!”

“Too many ‘Citizen-Generals’...” an officer murmured in the background, followed by a few chuckles, only to stop when Hridayesh sent them a dark glare.

“I tend to agree with you, Citizen-Colonel, but there are a few problems where the proper execution of a counter-attack is prepared.”

“Yes,” the doyen of the People’s officers present caressed his long white beard. “Like with what vehicles we are going to counterattack with. Over half of the tanks and armoured carriers we had were at the Fortress of the People. Without them, I doubt we can send more than thirty or forty thousand men to the Promethium Plant.”

“The mag-train...”

“The mag-train won’t function since last sunset, Citizen-Colonel.”

“And the pipeline coming from the Power Plant has also been shut off.” The Citizen-Quartermaster explained darkly. “The Mining Facilities M-1 and M-3 have gone dark. M-2’s vox-operators are informing us they are on the receiving end of a full-scale attack by troops in black power armours.”

“Power Armours? Are you certain?” The Oppressors’ troops and butchers, may the ice freeze them all to death, had a lot of equipment the People’s regiments had put to good use, but power armours had never been part of them. At best the Oppressor’s officers had gaudy and lavishly decorated carapace armours.

The Citizen-Quartermaster nodded in a sign where there was no hesitation.

“They have mass-produced power armour, Citizen-General. And they know how to use it.”

“Not that it’s going to be a problem,” another Citizen-Colonel muttered in a tone Hridayesh Induj didn’t like at all. “They’re at the mining sites, while we’re able to be totally encircled.”

“There will be none of these defeatist talks under the People’s watch!” the Citizen-General reprimanded the guilty officer. “We are significantly outnumbering the Oppressors of the People!”

But to his alarm and surprise, the black-bearded Citizen-Colonel didn’t desist.

“With all due respect, Citizen-General, have you gone into the ramparts and seen how empty they are? Most of our ‘indomitable regiments’ are already suffering from lack of food, and they are staying in the underground facilities where they can get away from the cold.”

“The Citizen-Colonel is right,” the Citizen-Quartermaster confirmed to his displeasure, “less than ten percent of our total effectives have reported at least once on patrol duties this last week, and the People’s call to muster and defend the Fortress has only seen an increase of two or three percent. For that matter,” the brown eyes stared at Hridayesh impassibly, “we have to really consider the dramatic consequences of being encircled. The mag-train line behinds us to Rajender is our food lifeline, if the Frateris Templars cut it, we are doomed to starve...or should I say starve more than we already are?”

The former crime-lord of Vijayanagara slapped him for such defeatism.

“There will be no encirclement. We are going to lead daring flanking attacks which will bleed and disorient the Oppressors’ hosts!”

“By the winter blizzards, how in the frozen hells are we supposed to do this when the enemy has brought more than thirty thousand tanks?”

“You are proud soldiers of the People! Your valour-“

The ground shook, violently.

Hridayesh Induj ran out of the tower to see what had just struck, but what his eyes told him absolutely made no sense. The foundations of certain walls were distorted, provoking violent movements of undulation which threw off hundreds of People’s soldiers and guns onto the Haven Plains below. Certain walls had broken, as the sections separating them had lost dozens of meters of height.

Other walls and towers getting taller and taller....like the one they were onto, the Citizen-General realised with rising terror.

Worse, the snow was coalescing into gigantic ramps before the downsized walls. And the Oppressors’ butchers were preparing to use them.

“We must...we must...”

A Citizen-Colonel screamed madly and threw himself from the parapet. An Earthshaker gun broke off from its metallic restraints and began to crush everything on its descent, killing three more of the People’s officers.

“Sorcery,” Hridayesh spoke. “It is sorcery! The Oppressors have cast their lot with the very forces they’re pretending struggling against!”

But as he turned around him, he saw most of his officers were dead or had abandoned him. Cowards! Cowards all of them! He was going to-

The whole world shook, and suddenly the tower twisted and became even more unstable.

The sound of ferrocrete and other building materials being shattered and destroyed was next.

The Citizen-General of the Revolutionary Defences and the Struggle against Oppression cried, as the noble struggle of the Communist Revolution was doomed without having the opportunity to strike back.

Ten seconds later, the defence tower crumbled and Hridayesh Induj died.

**Supreme and Impregnable Fortress of the Syndicate – ex-Ecclesiarch Veneris II’s Fortress**

**Grand Citizen-Marshal Vagish Uttam**

“So this is how it’s going to end. The Frateris Templars and their new abominable weapon have managed to defeat us in a mere three days...”

“Such defeatism is unbecoming of a General-Secretary of the People!”

“Oh shut up, you old hag!”

“The Revolutionary Syndicate is ever-victorious! To pretend anything else is defeatist and treacherous!”

“Did you implant yourselves with the propaganda implants of the imbeciles we used to command the ‘Glorious People’s Armies? Oh wait! You did!”

“Let them come, I say! These walls will break them like the Fortress of the People broke them a dozen times!”

“And when grox will fly, discourse on Communism in High Gothic, and play smash-ball, I will take your words seriously! Now shut up!”

“We must surrender!”

“The Revolution will never surrender! We will fight to the last man! We will resist even if we don’t have a single lasgun working anymore!”

Vagish Uttam sighed before leaving his seat and marching out of the Headquarters of the Supreme Committee of the People.

He was sadly certain his remaining lifespan was measured in hours now, and listening to the insane prattle of his ‘colleagues’ of the Supreme Committee was not how he was going to spent them.

“Grand Citizen-Marshal!” a young man came out rushing from the mag-elevator. “Urgent news!”

“Let me guess, the enemy has finally taken Vaninath.”

“Err...yes, but how did you know?”

“Experience,” experience and the confirmed presence of Mechanicus cohorts before the hammer fell down on the Cardinal Kunar’s Fortress. Plus naturally the fact there was not that many locations loyal to the Communist Revolutionary Syndicate able to vox-call anymore after the last three days. “What could they tell us about the forces opposing them before the communications ended?”

“Giants. Giants in blood red armour.”

Vagish shuddered before managing to restore a shadow of calm in his behaviour.

“The Angels of Death.” Well, that explained why a lot of defences and the promethium assets had fallen like a series of broken toys.

“I thought...I thought they were just corpse-worshipping propaganda, Grand Citizen-Marshal.”

“Evidently not,” the older man gloomily replied before making a gesture for the youngster to follow him. “It explains in part the sudden increase in deadliness and intelligence of the Templar butchers opposing us.”

“Only ‘in part’, Grand Citizen-Marshal?” Vagish Uttam grunted as the doors of the mag-elevator closed down and the old machine allowed them to descend at full speed towards his personal bunker.

“It doesn’t explain how they were able to pulverise and breach the walls of our Fortresses so easily. I don’t care about propaganda, but even if the Space Marines are ten metres-tall, they can’t collapse fifty or sixty metres-tall walls just by looking at them!”

“The vox-calls were a bit...confused, at the end.”

‘Confused’. It was a nice word to say the men and the women of that citadel had screamed in terror and pleaded for salvation to come as a sea of Frateris Templars stormed the defences of the Cardinal Kunar’s Fortress.

Certain members of the Defence Committee had convinced themselves this had been a glorious last-stand, easily costing the ‘People’s Oppressors’ ten millions in dead and crippled troops.

This was pure grox-shit, of course. The defence tactics all their ‘Citizen-Generals’ had been told to employ insisted on the necessity to hold the walls at all costs...which by a deep tragedy, had meant the most experienced troops had died first without killing any enemy when the fortress-crushing phenomenon began.

“The chain of command was broken without warning, with all the Citizen-Generals and Citizen-Colonels dead in a few minutes,” those worth considering true soldiers, at any rate. “And with the fall of this stronghold, our revolution is most certainly doomed.”

“But...Grand Citizen-Marshal! This citadel has a functioning shield! It is the greatest and the most heavily defended bastion of the Revolution!”

“And the enemy has proven walls could be made of synth-leather for all the good it makes us. Maybe the shield will save us.”

“But we won’t betray the People. We will fight to the end, like true heroes!”

Vagish Uttam had a feeling he knew why the youngster – certainly one of the many, many bastard sons of the whores the previous Pontifex-Governor had used during his ruling years – had been kept here as an errand boy.

He was an idiot.

Only the most naive and morally blind insurgents could close their eyes on the price rebelling against the Imperium had cost of them.

Yes, they had thrown off the shackles of the Ecclesiarchy and their Frateris Templars. Yes, it was better to die free than at the bottom of a promethium pit mine.

But this revolution had not been glorious, and they had not fought like heroes. Heroes did not keep more than four hundred million people killing themselves inside the Mushroom Haven caverns to feed the rest of the population. Heroes did not enslave the prisoners they made and their former tormentors to make them work in the very mines and factories they had left for. Heroes did not lead bloody purge after bloody purge to search for non-existent ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and ‘People’s Enemies’.

The human cost was appalling. Before the general insurrection, the first-and –last ‘Grand Citizen-Marshal’ thought based on captured archives there were maybe four billion humans living on Sparta, three and a half of them being penal prisoners.

Three years of massacres, tortures, exploitation of their former enemies, and random executions had left them bleeding and weak.

Maybe this weakness had escaped the Frateris Templars until this offensive. Save the spaceport, nothing the butchers had expelled them from had been known for having a high density of population, and since the rebellion had been concentrated in a few large super-fortresses, the satellites weren’t able to determine their real strength.

But now the enemy knew the rebellion had at best one billion survivors able to walk without staggering every five meters, and this number had only been true before the ‘Fortress of the People’ and the ‘Fortress of the Never-Ending Revolution’ were silenced by the loathed Imperium.

The former had cost them half a million of dead soldiers plus two or three million ‘citizens’, and the second easily nine or ten times that. And one must also count all the outposts like Vaninath or the Shankar Promethium Plant which had been taken by surprise in the last three days.

The last point was particularly bad, because it meant the enemy had discovered some of the result of the Revolution’s atrocities. There would be no surrender after this, or at least not one which didn’t end in firing squads and them being doused on promethium before a flamer was lit.

But the worst part would be the propaganda. Vagish Uttam had thought that if they fought a few more years, the Atlantis Sector would crumble under the weight of revolts as people realised they had been lied to and liberty was just waiting to be seized.

Instead, the Imperial vid-casts would show the utter destruction of the rebellion, and to add insult to the injury, they would gloat about the rebels had destroyed themselves in orgy of cannibalism, petty tyranny, senseless murders, and incompetent governance. They may even convince a few thousand ‘errant souls’ to be ‘forgiven’ among the Mushroom Haven population, if they wanted to add a few more nails to the Rebellion’s coffin.

“At least, in a few hours I think it will be over...” His dark expression vanished as he entered his own bunker. Whatever was going to happen, his officers deserved the best of him and...and...so much blood...so much blood...

Why was there so much blood in his bunker?

Why was there a large hole in the ferrocrete?

“Apologies for the destruction caused, rebels,” the giant who came out from behind a destroyed sculpture to the Glory of the People was red-armoured, both in paint and the blood covering it. “The new grenades the Mechanicus gave us are a bit too powerful for this kind of work.”

Vagish Uttam found himself staring at a very big, very ominous gun.

“The Emperor’s Judgement awaits, traitor.”

**Former Penal Camp of Rajender**

**Pontifex-Crusader Vishwa Ousadevi**

Five days.

It had taken five days of hard fighting to achieve what had been impossible for the Frateris Templars in three years of hostility.

Vishwa had been extremely surprised by the respect the Angels of Death had shown to Her Celestial Highness’ envoy at first. With the benefit of hindsight however, it was clear the Swords of the Living Saint simply recognised the sheer level of destruction Lady Missy Byron was capable of before she delivered the God-Emperor’s judgement upon the rebels and the other traitors of Sparta.

It was...extremely humbling to realise that compared to a power which allowed a human to crush citadel after citadel, he and his Frateris Templars were nothing. The Pontifex-Crusader had sent his forces to kill the rebel survivors when the order had been given at Cardinal Kunar’s Fortress and Ecclesiarch Veneris II’s Fortress, but he wasn’t stupid enough to believe the Judge had really needed their intervention.

The lightning raids of the Adeptus Astartes and the full power armour-equipped regiment of the Nyx 1st, yes, those had proven a great asset. The Tech-Priests who were in the process of repairing the mag-train railway system and automating the promethium facilities? Yes. The millions of men of the Frateris Templar? Not so much.

The military campaign was over, and Her Celestial Highness’ representative had won. There wasn’t a lot more that needed to be said.

“Do you know why Sparta was colonised in the first place?” the young woman in vivid green power armour asked in a tone that suggested she already knew the answer.

“I’ve heard the rumours, like every soldier who read the preliminary reports on the planet,” Vishwa replied, trying not to sound too scandalised at the xenos amusing itself at creating a snow castle several metres away. “It was the result of the ‘Ice Diamond Affair’ I believe.”

Originally, the first human presence on the Ice World had been a Cartel based on the Baltic Sector. If the data could be trusted – which was rarely the case – the first surveyors had come for the promethium reserves the planet was supposed to have.

Unfortunately for them, while there was promethium in the floor of Sparta, it was too difficult to dig with the kind of minor investment the Baltic Cartel had sent here. Several mines had been opened, and a promethium plant was built according to the STC specifications of the Imperium, but decade after decade, it had become increasingly clear the Atlantis market was not for the Cartels unable to maintain good relations with the Adeptus Ministorum.

And then the few Cartel men still exploring Sparta had found a ship buried under the ice, east of the Crystal Peaks, about to be sundered in one of the big canyons which made the northern hemisphere of the planet so ‘welcoming’ for humans.

Many had died in the exploration of the base, but a few had been able to get out and return to their base, and in their purses they had extremely valuable gemstones the Cartel paying them had promptly labelled ‘Ice Diamonds’.

Nearly-immediately, rumours had spread the ship had mined these priceless objects on Sparta itself, along with the usual whispers of curses, doomed ships, and countless other wild stories. The Hierophant of the time being an Hierophant with all the power it implied, had decided to stake his claim for the planet and send millions of criminals formerly detained on another Penal World here.

That way, the Hierophant was gaining in every aspect: he was removing parasites and violent scum from his master’s list of problems, he was expelling a Cartel from the Atlantis Sector which had caused him plenty of headaches, and he was going to win a lot of incredibly valuable gemstones.

Except no one had found a single ‘Ice Diamond’ since the quest for them had begun, and while plenty of Penal Camps had been opened, billions of lives terminated on the Penal World and decades of work pursued on a nonsensical idea, no one had been able to find a single gemstone.

Somewhere along the way, it had simply become an excuse to get rid of the penal prisoners when the promethium mines and Mushroom Haven were at their maximum of inmates’ capacity.

And despite the best efforts of Frateris scouts and other Ecclesiarchy-employed explorators, no one had managed to find the wreck which had started the entire affair.

From the very beginning to this day, Vishwa Ousadevi mused as ill-omened clouds coalesced to the North, the colonisation of Sparta had been a succession of errors and tragedies.

“Yes, it was,” Lady Missy Byron approved. “I was curious about it, so I used my powers to dig a bit and made my results known to the Tech-Priests. Unfortunately we haven’t an ‘Ice Diamond’ around to analyse, but the Mechanicus of Nyx does not believe possible the prize was dug anywhere on this planet. We could be wrong; after all we haven’t exactly explored meticulously the region where the mysterious ship was found.”

“But you don’t believe so,” Vishwa was hardly surprised, and in all honesty, he really didn’t have any hope on the subject left well before the penal insurgents launched their terrible and bloody rebellion.

“No, we don’t.” The Minister of Justice of Nyx opened her hands in an apologetic expression. “I can delay the process a few days if you want to, but the orders I received before my departure demanded I declared a necessary administrative change should the infrastructure be too damaged and the possible mining gains negligible.”

As the fortress-demolishing woman had the diplomacy to not point out, it was clearly the case here.

“I understand.” The Tech-Priests were certainly going to receive the infrastructure in order to increase promethium mining and refinery. They were welcome to have this world. “Can we organise a little ceremony for the transfer of powers at Saint Pius’ Spaceport?”

“I see no problem with that. Ten days, to give your troops the opportunity to be part of the audience?”

“The High Command of the Frateris Templars has no objection to this.”

Not after how thoroughly it had been purged by the smiling woman in front of him.

**Judge Missy Byron**

Missy saw the Pontifex-Crusader’s figure fade away in the distance with some mixed feelings.

On the one hand, Vishwa Ousadevi wasn’t a bad man, and she had just lied to him, removing him from a title of Planetary Governor he had every right to claim.

On the other hand, though he wasn’t a bad man, the Pontifex-Crusader was a Frateris Templar commander, and to say she had not been pleased with some of his choices was an understatement.

After a few seconds of deep thought, the Shaker parahuman concluded the lie was the thing which bothered her the most. By all rights, after the military effort exerted by the Space Marines and she, the Frateris Templars and the rest of the Ecclesiarchy authorities had really no room to complain stripping Sparta from the diocese.

“The Pontifex-Crusader has left, Teddy. You can stop playing.”

“At last!” the translator on the Rashan’s chest expressed in Low Gothic. “I’m frozen everywhere!”

“I will ask the cooks to prepare you a lot of warm infusions and your favourite meals once we’re back to our command headquarters,” Missy promised, trying not to laugh at the attempts of her adorable ‘secretary’ to get all the snow out of his bright yellow suit. “You showed excellent initiative there, building a snow castle to distract him.”

“Thank you!” Teddy kicked one of the snow towers he had spent several minutes assembling. “Are these twenty-plus kilograms worth it?”

Missy used her power to throw the snow several feet away, revealing the large pile of black crystals some penal prisoners had excavated there several years ago before no doubt a furious overseer told them the product of their hard labour was worthless.

Because this was no useless rock the Imperium had found on Sparta.

It was Noctilith.

“Oh yes, Teddy, this harvest is completely worth it.”

Although for now, it opened more questions than answers given what humanity knew about Sparta...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Brockton System**

**Hellhound’s Orbit**

**Cruiser *Age of Light***

**5.035.297M35**

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

The current situation was rather less hectic than during the Battle of the Star.

It didn’t mean, Machine-God save him, that there weren’t some major issues.

“I see the Magma Spiders have been extremely enthusiastic in their hunting efforts.”

“Yes, Archmagos,” Alena Wismer canted with the tone of a Tech-Priest having spent too much dealing with the Space Marines. “There isn’t a day where a dozen of lava-plesiosauruses aren’t killed by one of their ‘magma-harpoons’.”

This extermination effort might seem weak at first view, but one had to consider the fact the beasts the Astartes were hunting could likely swallow a Battle Tank without effort.

“Of course, the lava-plesiosauruses are beginning to adapt their hunting patterns too,” his second continued with a grim expression. “It’s isn’t mere incompetence which led the previous expeditions to Hellhound to fail, Archmagos. The beasts aren’t meeting the definition of sentient, but they sure possess some vicious cunning to defend their territories from intruders.”

“But the Magma Spiders lost none of their battle-brothers?”

“For now,” his subordinate replied. “I know one Space Marine needed a Bacta injection after being substantially burned, and his armour was of course a near-total loss.”

This wasn’t a good sign at all, Desmerius Lankovar acknowledged. The lava-plesiosauruses were revealing themselves to be a dangerous threat. No Space Marine Chapter in the Sector would be able to use Hellhound as a training ground for their Scouts, except if they gathered in company-size.

“Leaving aside the danger represented by this lethal fauna,” the Stygies VIII-born Archmagos changed the subject, “your opinion on the Ryza Archmagos who was chosen to command the Hellhound mining operations.”

“Archmagos Dubrovnik 12-Bey has in the last cycles proven himself true to the reputation one expects from an exalted Tech-Priests of the Furnace of the Shackled Stars,” Alena answered using the ancient nickname reserved to the great Forge World of Ryza, “he is efficient and relies on a lot of plasma-fuelled technology to accomplish his designs. The orbital infrastructure is respecting the difficult schedule he handed to the Nyx Mechanicus Council, and on the ground, his teams are working night and day to stabilise the planetary crust on the island chosen to host Mechanicus operations. My only concern is that he has a tendency to promote Ryza Tech-Priests over those coming from other Forge Worlds, and he is positioning himself to be the leading force in the extraction of other rare metals from the lava.”

“Let not be said ambition and efficiency are incompatible...” though really, Desmerius supposed the Council and all other authorities shared a bit of the blame there. The very reason the Mechanicus had begun new mining operations which didn’t involve the diminishing debris fields of the Battle of the Death Star that still hundreds of starships were still searching lied in the presence of Noctilith on the aptly-named world of Hellhound. “The Inquisition is keeping several eyes on him, yes?”

“Many Acolytes are there for the official business,” his second confirmed. “And where there are, the Masters shouldn’t be far away.”

“Then continue as you have until your replacement arrives in two standard months.” It wasn’t an ideal solution, but with so many projects and so many things to keep an eye on the Sector right now, it would have to do for the beginning of this year. “Omnissiah be praised, the creation of the Prometheus Citadel should have begun by then, correct?”

“Correct,” the binary cant arrived within the second. “I wish I could stay here participating in this macro-engineering project, the schematics and the technologies employed are really fascinating...”

“You will have the opportunity to return and admire the finished work I think,” Desmerius wasn’t going to apologise; he had really need of Wismer elsewhere after all.

“And I won’t have to discover firsthand how big a lava-plesiosaurus can grow,” Wismer told him in a far more pleased cant.

This made Desmerius pause his industrial calculations about the worth of Hellhound.

“I thought the thirty meter-long monster the First Captain of the Magma Spiders killed personally was the biggest adult ever encountered?”

“It is, but before it was found sleeping on top of a promising Noctilith mining site, the biggest beasts we had seen were twenty-six metres-long. It is entirely possible that, much like the infamous Salamanders of Nocturne, the lava-plesiosaurs never stop growing as long as they’re alive.”

“Laws of the Machine,” the Master of Exploration grumbled. “What is wrong with this lava planet?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**3.040.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“I was very busy with my Volkite research, *your Celestial Highness*.”

Taylor didn’t react loudly to the title. She knew that the Tinker expected this kind of reaction.

“Come on, Dragon. Every time I call, you’re busy with one research or a big project. You’re coming less and less out of the Fafnir Forge-Temple.”

“Well, obviously,” the draconic female Magos replied with an evident bad faith, “my Forge-Temple is getting bigger and host more production lines, you know!”

Taylor just watched with a patient look until the Tinker admitted defeat. With the practise she had in the last weeks to convince some irritant people to bow to her will, the insect-mistress had gained plenty of experience on the subject.

“I’ve heard the Spartan rebellion is finally over,” the Minister of Industry said after a few seconds, as the Space Marines took position to block the crowd of hundreds of thousands which now seemed to follow each and every one of her moves no matter what precautions were taken.

“Yes, finally the butchery has come to an end.” If the Basileia had needed evidence to prove humanity really didn’t need the Ruinous Powers to behave like imbeciles, then Sparta would have been perfect to prove this point.

“Missy has done her best...”

“Oh, Missy has done an excellent job!” She had almost forgotten Dragon hadn’t been able to see the latest report coming from the now very thoroughly depopulated Ice World. “Unfortunately, the secrecy a certain Cardinal of Atlantis and his devoted Hierophant imposed on all military operations means that in every way which matters, Missy arrived three years too late. See by yourself.”

A large data-slate was handed to the other parahuman, and Dragon didn’t take long to devour the information.

“I see the Frateris Templars decided to...take the matter of the prisoners into their hands.” The disgust of Dragon was impossible to mistake for anything else.

Taylor didn’t blame her. The black-haired parahuman had had a direct line to watch the atrocities perpetrated by the Frateris Templars at the Cardinal Kunar’s and the Ecclesiarch Veneris II’s Fortress, courtesy of the notable increase of the Dawnbreaker Guard’s Librarius.

To say there hadn’t been many survivors was the understatement of the day.

“I already wanted to disband the Frateris Templars before that. The events on Sparta confirmed this was the right decision all along.” Taylor said to the Tinker as they took seats in a bright red armoured ground car to leave one of her palaces behind them.

“The Imperial Guard has done some nasty stuff over the last decades, including in the Nyx Sector, you know.”

“Yes,” it wasn’t an easy admission to make, but the Lady General currently under half-pay status acknowledged it was true. “But here, the atrocities were part of the problem. The officers of the Frateris Templars were often unable to give orders, because certain young officers and thugs of the lower ranks had formed their own private armies within the existing brigades! The discipline and the chain of command were nearly inexistent in the rare assaults Missy allowed them to participate into!”

That the Spartan Campaign had ended in a total and one-sided victory with five days of annihilation had nothing to do with the Frateris Templars, and everything to do with the devastating performance of the newly-created Nyx 1st Armoured Infantry, the presence of an under-strength company of Brothers of the Red, the Mechanicus logistic support, and of course last but not least the skills of Missy.

“At least it is over,” Dragon sighed, “I suppose the liberated ‘rebels’ of Mushroom Haven are going to be used for propaganda purposes?”

“That’s my intention, yes,” there were less than two hundred thousand men and women left, courtesy of several ‘Syndicate’ die-hards having organised mad charges and suicide pacts, and few of them had any good will left in them where their ‘liberators’ were concerned. No matter how good the propaganda, these ‘heroes of the People’ had been worked to death – literally – twelve hours per day to make sure the rebels didn’t starve. “I am most probably going to send them to Matapan after doing my best to convince them the Imperium is truly the best solution of a long list of evils.”

Sparta had been really an ugly litany of slaughters, crimes, and violation of basic morality. The food production centres and the promethium power plant had not been built to handle populations of several billions, which meant that every time the temperatures fell under a certain threshold, the dying were in the millions.

But it had been a Penal World, and so no one had tried to stop it. The fact it had been a pet project of the Hierophants of Lemuria to curry favour with the Cardinal of Atlantis hadn’t helped potential opponents finding themselves a conscience.

“And Sparta? You want to give it to Missy?”

“That would be a reward raising a few eyebrows, no?” Taylor declared sarcastically. “But no matter how my dear Minister of Justice deserves it, too many people would begin asking questions why I feel the need to give a worthless ball of ice to one of my key advisor-ministers.”

Neither Dragon nor she had anticipated Missy would find Noctilith deposits on Sparta. Neferten had suggested nothing of the sort, and her worlds were in the ‘northern’ Suebi Nebula, not far at all from the ex-Penal World.

“I will transfer large sums on her bank accounts under ‘services rendered’ every time we find precious deposits of this ore,” Missy had done the important preliminary job; the insect-mistress wasn’t going to steal her gains when she had done little save providing some of the ‘auxiliaries’ for the hostilities. “Sparta is going to become a minor Mining World, with a proper Governor and a large Mechanicus civilian force. The main export will be promethium. And that’s everything everyone will need to know, save the Astartes and the Inquisition.”

Both Cardinal Prescott Lumen and the Pontifex-Crusader had approved, so the ramifications on politics would be minor. Except in one particular case, but there was a reason Missy was going to stay in the Suebi Sub-Sector for the foreseeable future...

“Is the world not too...undefended, if outside elements decide to mount a hostile intervention?”

“The Mechanicus is going to provide several thousand Skitarii and underground facilities, which will have the nice advantage to remain out of view.”

Dragon played with the hood of her red robe.

“Now I know why I was the first informed.”

“Does this mean you will have difficulties convincing the Master of Skitarii?”

“Oh no, I should manage. Epsilon-10 Blue-Crimson is always complaining we don’t use enough of his Skitarii for serious purposes, this mission should satisfy him greatly. And on a totally different subject, I see your favourite Dreadnought has come back. You hadn’t informed me of this detail.”

Taylor turned her head as the ground car decelerated to arrive near the parade ground which was their destination of today, and as Dragon had informed her, Pierre was there, a new hat which was certainly of Indigan provenance.

“I wasn’t aware he had returned.” But now that he was there...Taylor knew the little ‘surprise’ was going to be extremely interesting.

“I know that smile. What kind of saintly thing have you prepared for us today?”

“Hey, this is all a coincidence!” Dragon didn’t look convinced at all. “Neither Isley nor any Heracles Warden warned me Pierre’s ship had landed, and I didn’t check all the recent arrivals in-system. What is going to happen is not my fault.”

Even in the days following her ascension to the throne-seat of Planetary Governor, Taylor hadn’t tried to read the list of every ship visiting Nyx and their passengers. The days weren’t long enough to waste her time on that. On average, one or two members of the Dawnbreaker Guard and at least half a dozen Magos kept an eye on it, to inform her if there were prestigious arrivals.

Apparently, Pierre had evaded their vigilance. The golden-winged parahuman wasn’t even going to pretend she was surprised.

“We are greeting someone important, I suppose.” Dragon noted as they left the aircar under a thunder of applause. No matter how secretive the preparations, the public had caught on very quickly when several thousands of guardsmen and several dozen Space Marines gathered together. “You don’t offer a walk on the red carpet for everyone.”

“No, I suppose I don’t,” and for some events, a Basileia was legally required to make a pompous ceremony, or pay several large fines.

Today though, the ceremony had been prepared because the victor of Commorragh wanted to welcome properly her ‘guest’, not because it was one of these obligations that made you wish there wasn’t an appointment to the dentist booked at the same hour.

“LADY WEAVER, I AM BACK!”

“And having once more ignored the proper procedures I see,” there were incorrigible people, but they were nothing compared to her incorrigible Dreadnought. “Since you are here, I suppose you can walk with me and greet the honoured guest of this month.”

For the first time, the Heracles Warden’s Venerable Ancient appeared to have a clue of the elegant trap he had wandered into by his own fault, but under the gaze of the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard and hundreds of thousands of spectators, refusing was simply not an option.

The large Mechanicus lander chose this moment to appear in the sky, and less than thirty seconds of manoeuvre later, the pneumatic hisses were heard and the hatch opened.

A Dreadnought emerged from the transport, under a music symphony once used to greet superior officers of the Astartes Legions. Despite having seen schematics and data of it before today, Taylor was impressed by the elegant design. Contemptor Dreadnoughts were undoubtedly rarer and more expensive to maintain than the Castraferrum models, but they combined lethality and speed in a way their ‘successors’ didn’t.

“Master of Rites of his Legion, Grand Veteran of the Wars of Unification and the Great Crusade, Loyal to the Death and Beyond, Indomitable Rampart of Vigilance and Determination, the Venerable Ancient Rylanor!”

The reaction of Pierre next to her was shorter and more interesting.

“OH NO...”

But it was a bit too late to escape.

The survivor of Isstvan III continued to advance towards them, as everyone, Space Marines included, bowed or knelt before the formidable presence of the millennia-old Dreadnought.

As she could observe him closer, the Lady General in her knew Rylanor would need more reparations to be fully operational. When the Inquisition had confirmed for certain the Ancient was one of the loyalists Legionaries who had stayed true to the Imperium on Isstvan III, funds for reparations had been unlocked on the Forge Worlds on the path of the Nyx Exploration Fleet, but many of the Forges had not the specialised equipment to solve every problem in mere days.

But even if the Dreadnought wasn’t fully operational, it was a very dauntless projection of martial power, and the Tech-Priests had chosen – probably at its owner’s demand – to repaint him a pure white with bright gold for the aquila.

“Welcome to Nyx, Lord Rylanor.” Bowing wasn’t supposed to be done by Living Saints, but Taylor did it nonetheless. For thousands of years the Dreadnought had awaited on Isstvan that someone remembered it, and if it had been an enemy, the Mechanicus report had made evident the Master of Rites had been solidly prepared for this eventuality. “I am Lady Taylor Hebert, Governor of this world in His name.”

“WELL MET, YOUNGSTER. ARE YOU THE ONE WHO AVENGED US?”

Directly to the point, then. The insect-mistress would have preferred not to do so in such a public setting, but it was probably unavoidable.

“Yes. I have severely wounded the Naga with help from my allies, and deprived him of the power he usurped from the Phoenician. And as the power of evil died, the abominations which betrayed you died in the cataclysm of Commorragh. Your loyal brothers have been avenged.”

“THEN YOU HAVE DONE A GREAT SERVICE TO AN OLD WARRIOR AND THE GHOSTS OF AN ERA. I WILL NEVER FORGIVE WHAT YOU HAVE DONE FOR OUR HONOUR.”

Rylanor shuddered and at this second seemed to really realise who was standing on her left.

“PIERRE, TRECHEROUS SNAKE!”

Taylor was not far from giggling. The ex-Alpha Legion Dreadnought looked everywhere for an escape, but there was nowhere to run to.

This was going to be *fun*.

“LET ME GIVE YOU THE PAYMENT YOUR TRAPS DESERVES!”

**Fafnir Forge-Temple**

**Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund**

“And then Ancient Rylanor finished soaking Pierre in red paint under the cheers of the crowd.” Dragon Richter finished her tale.

“I’m sure the spectators loved it,” Lydia-Beta Rosamund said, some amusement introduced in her cant. It wasn’t every day you saw two Dreadnoughts spar in public.

“The crowd loved it, especially since they think everything was organised in advance,” the Minister of Industry told her. “Personally, I just thought our dear Basileia wanted to punish her sneaky Dreadnought, and his unanticipated return gave her an excellent opportunity to have some pay-back.”

“I’m sure the Dreadnought of the Heracles Wardens deserved it.” The blessed machine was loyal, but prone to several infamous antics which were known in every Hive of Nyx. “We have received several high-priority astropathic communications from the Parliament of Blessed Mars in the last hours. The secessionists have been pardoned, and the final values of the tithes have been properly recorded.”

“Whose Forge World’s Tech-Priests are we going to welcome, then?”

“Forge Worlds, plural,” the Artisan Magos corrected. “It appears the pledges of the Forge Worlds of Artemia Majoris and Atar-Median were sufficiently close that the Fabricator-General himself declared them of equal importance. We will thus receive the greatest part of this production output.”

The newly promoted Lady Magos Dogma rapidly consulted the Noosphere before grunting.

“This is going to change things...or should I say it is going to change a lot of our plans, again?”

“I think it is likely one of those understatements some of the non-Mechanicus ministers are so fond of,” the Tigrus-born Magos answered with a smile. “This represents an unexpected but happy increase in the material resources we will receive for the gains made at Pavia and Commorragh.”

“True, but it also represents an extremely huge number of secessionists we will have to assimilate into our ranks and properly train to our standards,” Dragon Richter answered, readjusting her red robes flowing over her artistic scaled-like clothes.

“The advantages, I think, outweigh the drawbacks,” especially since the advantages included some brand-new Scout Titans. “Legio Defensor and our gallant Knight allies in part are sure to appreciate the reinforcements.”

“I’m sure they will,” the unofficial Mistress of Dragon Armours replied after a nod. “Do you think it is going to cause more problems among the Council?”

“In one case, yes,” Lydia-Beta Rosamund informed her superior regretfully. “Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1’s performance has been...sub-par since Cawl created a gravity tunnel to move Formicarium from the outer to the inner system. At a moment where we need to increase step by step our security, he’s far from rising to the challenge.”

“I have not the authority to fire him, Lydia-Beta.”

The Tigrus-Born Magos stared inquisitively at the talented Lady Dogma. This was theoretically true, but no one in the Nyx System wearing the red robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus had missed that if the Chosen of the Omnissiah had a favourite among the Nyx Mechanicus, it was certainly Dragon Richter. Her suggestions and resources demands were far more likely to be approved than any Council member by an order of three or four percent, at any rate.

“Lady Weaver is very attached to the alliance with Anvillus,” the Mistress of Dragons canted after a few seconds. “And not just because the Blood Angels and the Chapters of the Blood depend on them for armour and ammunition. They are going to be heavily involved in the infrastructure-building of the God-Machine’s Fosses for the Legio Defensor at Alamo, for example. And I think many of the prime Artisans in your department also come from their Forges. Any attempt to remove them their Council’s seat is likely going to deliver a negative message.”

“Not if in exchange an Anvillus Archmagos is named Regent of the Tharsis Forge and proxy of the Chosen of the Omnissiah for the Parliament sessions.”

“That...that could work,” Dragon conceded. “Though the competition for this position is already ferocious. And of course removing a Master of the Council is likely going to create plenty of arguments to fill it again. We are already under a lot of fire with all these Forge Worlds’ representatives who want to be advisors to the Basileia...”

“You know my opinion on the subject.” Lydia-Beta had not been shy telling her superior and sometimes fellow dabbler in artisan creations that twelve high figures had worked in the pre-Commorragh era, but with the Nyxian Mechanicus taking control of many industrial assets of Wuhan and extending its reach across several Sub-Sectors, the current roster of the Nyxian Mechanicus wasn’t enough. Master of Exploration Lankovar and several other Council members had to leave Nyx right after the Sanguinala to oversee the biggest projects, and the Tigrus-born Magos had a feeling things were going to get only more hectic on this front. “And as much as I had no part in this, judging by the importance of the tithes Atar-Median and Artemia Majoris sent our way, there will certainly be two very high-ranked Archmagi in nominal command of these forces.”

The supreme ruler of Nyx could likely get away with not giving them a high seat among the Council, they were secessionists after all, but it was only an emergency stop-gap.

“I see.” Two words which certainly acknowledged the unavoidable. “On the other hand, if we increase massively the number of seats of the Council, the Basileia will of course want competent and efficient Tech-Priests in them, and with important fields to oversee and administer. I don’t want to suggest an increase of seats just for the pleasure of boosting the representation of certain Forges at the top of the Nyxian production facilities.”

Yes, this was something which wouldn’t be accepted by the Chosen of the Omnissiah, or by certain of their fellow Council members, honestly.

The conversation turned after several minutes to the situation on Tigrus. Lydia-Beta could only repeat what had arrived one day ago; the newly-renamed Lamenters Space Marines had blown apart an Ork Warboss with his gigantic Space Hulk flagship, and the fighting on the ground of her homeworld had ended in Imperial victory, though the fighting continued in the asteroid belts and the mining moons of the outer system. The current balance was in favour of Mankind, but the Orks were far from recognising their defeat.

Production quotas for the next month were quickly discussed, before the subject of Dreadnoughts came back at the centre their exchange.

“I’ve been wondering if you had the expertise to build Contemptor-Pattern Dreadnoughts.”

“The answer is a definite no,” Lydia-Beta admitted. “In my long tech-apprenticeship, I was taught many secrets about the building and the reparation of Dreadnoughts of the Castraferrum Pattern, and even this knowledge is dated; as I’m sure you have noticed, we haven’t build a single Dreadnought in the last years.”

There were several reasons for that, though the most important was obviously the first three Space Marine Chapters who had established themselves didn’t order any. The Brothers of the Red, after their Penance Crusade, had plenty of the noble machines to be repaired, but after it was done the lack of important casualties had made sure reparation was all her workshops had to do. The Iron Drakes had also declared they didn’t need any, and no Heracles Warden so far had manifested a willingness to be entombed in one, generating rumours about a ‘Pierre curse’.

“I haven’t missed it, no. But with Ancient Rylanor here, I was wondering how much of the ancient technology of the Contemptor Dreadnought I could use in the future Dragon-Dreadnoughts.”

That was a very interesting point. And the first answer she could give...

“Above all, you will have to find a more tolerant Master of the Magisterium, because I don’t think Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1 is going to give his blessings to it.”

“Which would be a shame!”

The words brought an intense feeling of frustration and panic in her improved form. Of course, *he* was still here.

“Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl,” Dragon canted neutrally, as the formidable escort of Skitarii and Magi of Nyx escorting in permanence the Martian Lord took position around him, ready to neutralise him if he agitated his mechadendrites the wrong way.

“Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter,” the Radical cant back, “I couldn’t help but hear the end of your conversation, since I deliberately tried to hear it. As it happens, I am not unfamiliar with the schematics of the Atomantic reactors-”

“Have you finished your bureaucratic punishment?” the Minister of Industry mercilessly interrogated him.

“I estimate eighty-one percent is done,” the disrespectful Archmagos shrugged. “I was taking a small break and visiting some of your interesting production lines when I heard you conversing.”

“Then you can obviously return to work,” Lydia-Beta admired how Dragon could remain so stern and unflinching in front of an Archmagos of Cawl’s seniority.

“Come on, my dear Lady Magos Dogma! It was just a small astral displacement, and your mistress doesn’t complain much about the results!”

“But I complain about the fractures you just created in the fabric of the Nyxian Mechanicus!” the Minister of Industry of Nyx exclaimed. “Have you any kind of idea of the protestations and vehement accusations we had to face following your stunt of megalomaniac?”

“I have-“

“Millions, Archmagos! I had to install two new data-servers for the Noosphere communications such was the numbers of protests we received in the first hour! I had to personally reassure thousands of my students and assistants! We had to spend hours of data-sharing in every Hive and major industrial asset to ensure an anti-heretek crusade wasn’t launched against your person! Do you think it amused me to do that when we were already in the middle of the greatest reforms and reorganisation Nyx had ever known?”

Staying silent, the Tigrus-born female Artisan reflected that the parahuman known as ‘Leet’ and Archmagos Belisarius Cawl had without doubt a point in common: they could achieve the rare feat of angering Dragon.

“I am curtailing hundreds of years of inefficient and obsolete procedures,” Cawl defended himself.

“And making the unanimity against you,” Dragon retorted. “Your achievements are worthy of commendation, but your methods are shedding distrust and defiance where we should be greeted as heroes!”

The tone of the debate, already far from civil, had devolved into furious shouting when High Magos-Enginseer Cathar-4-Fredrick arrived and sent Cawl back to his torture-cell, also known as a bureaucratic processing node.

Positive point, the witnesses of this loud event were all Noosphere-ecstatic of admiration for the Lady Magos Dogma when she left. It wasn’t every day that anyone who wasn’t the Chosen of the Omnissiah dared giving the Radical how they felt about his actions...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Claire 47**

**4.056.297M35**

**Grand Architect Cyrene Versailles**

For the moment, the only human structure completed was the entrance avenue of white marble. There was also the five metres-tall statue of an Astartes – certainly a Salamander had served for the sculptor’s inspiration carrying in his arms a wounded guardswoman.

This didn’t bother Cyrene. All great creations had to begin somewhere, after all.

“All the opposition, political or other, has been handled,” the female Perpetual told to the student she had chosen to build what promised to be one of the greatest monument projects of the decade. “All the other architects subordinated to your orders will arrive within the month, and already over fifty thousand workers have been assigned to the construction of the Gaius Mausoleum. And if you need something, you only have to ask...provided you stay in the realm of the reasonable, of course.”

“Of course,” repeated Moira Fergus, a thin brown-haired woman whose love for white marble had always impressed Cyrene. “I don’t think there will be many problems for the foundations of the Monument and the initial first months. It’s supervising the thousands of sculptors on the ‘Army of the Martyrs’ and the impressive dimensions of the white dome which are going to be the challenge.”

“I have every confidence in you, Moira.” And Cyrene was sincere; given the hypothetical numbers of pilgrims who would in time come to Claire 47 for the express purpose of visiting such a grandiose mausoleum, the millennia-old architect wasn’t going to leave the duty to an incompetent priest. “I’m sure you will do an excellent work. The Gaius Mausoleum promises to be a piece of artwork by itself, and one I would have gladly accepted to work onto, alas...”

“Alas you have already the Hagia Sanguinala,” finished her student. “And no architect can be in two places at the same time.”

“Indeed,” as a matter of fact, the only reason the grand Architect of Nyx was able to travel here today was because there had been some delays in the shipment of the red marble and a significant percentage of the workforce had to be trained for several high-intensity work which was going to begin in a few months. “Though these last days, I fear it is more a proverb of ‘no architect can be in five or six locations at once’.”

The Battle of Commorragh had generated a multitude of ‘Martyr Monuments’ across the entire Sector, and every Governor who had contributed to the order of battle was in all humility elevating several structures to the victorious heroes...under a ruler’s benevolent gaze and patronage, it went without saying.

“Speaking of this...” Moira bit her lip like she had been a young teenager, “I’m not criticising, but it doesn’t seem there are a lot of big religious projects and monuments outside the Moros Sub-Sector. I know the Gaius Mausoleum is going to cost a lot but...”

“Moira, I’m saying this as a minor confidence, your project isn’t that expensive.” The expression of the younger architect was one filled with incredulity. Cyrene continued before the critics came. “I have a good idea of the sums the Nyxian budget spends on massive shipyards, military and non-military schools, hospitals, rejuvenation clinics, and agriculture or terraformation projects. I’m not saying the Gaius Mausoleum will be cheap; but compared to other plans the Living Saint of Nyx has, your initial budget will not be problematic, especially when a large percentage sees the Ophelian treasury involved.”

“I see. Still, it doesn’t invalidate my points.” Moira insisted respectfully. “Most of the great projects are on the worlds of the Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector.”

“This isn’t a bad point,” Cyrene admitted after a few seconds of reflexion. “But in many cases, it isn’t like there was a choice. The Hagia Sanguinala was ordered at a time when most Governors were sulking in their corners and would have refused to let the Basileia build a house on their soil, never mind a monument. The Arena of Blades other Architects have been commissioned has to be in the Nyx System, given the power of the things which will fight inside it. And Claire 47 was the obvious location to build the Mausoleum.”

The female Perpetual rolled her shoulders.

“I will admit it is a bit concerning for now, but there is the Fountain of Light in distant Pavia, and the order has been given several days ago to make preparations for a Grand Reliquary on the Civilised World of Fay. Her Celestial Highness will certainly have to take it into account when she will select the planet where the Museum of Commorragh will be built.”

“I understand,” Moira nodded before smiling. “At least these news confirm we are not going to be unemployed anytime soon!”

“Not as long the golden-winged God-Emperor’s Chosen who holds the big bank accounts is pleased with you, my dear student...”

**Beyond the Imperial frontier of Segmentum Obscurus**

**Calyx Expanse**

**Laodomida**

**Approximately 9.069.297M35**

**Executrix Primaris Ax’senaea**

“I will bring you to heel soon. You’re a very rebellious part of my psyche, and I will break you.”

Ax’senaea had heard many reactions after speaking this sentence to the miserable things preventing her from attaining complete control over her own mind.

Laughter had never been part of it, especially since she had assimilated the so-called ‘Keeper of Secrets’ inside her body.

Yet this was exactly what the illusion of a woman in front of her did.

“You are not-“

Something invisible struck her in the teeth, and Ax’senaea felt many of them break. She had to expend quite a bit of energy healing them. It was unacceptable.

“Sorry you were saying?”

The ruler of Laodomida cursed loudly and tried to unleash the pink warp-fire which was her favourite weapon to deal with the manifestations acting as her enemies.

But nothing happened. Not a single spark of power appeared at the tip of her fingers or on any part of her body.

“This is the fifth time you’ve been trying this in the last ten minutes. Do you want to try a sixth to please your deceased God?”

The Executrix Primaris abandoned her effort for now. It was obvious that whatever type of metal had been used to create the chains immobilising her, she wouldn’t get free like she wanted. And honestly, the last question deserved an answer.

“I have no God.”

The fragment of intelligence opposing her laughed for several seconds.

“Yes, I suppose it was evident you would say this. And in some way, I suppose it can be considered true. Summoning a Greater Daemon, binding it to your own soul, and draining its essence bit by bit is hardly worship of Slaanesh...though it would have granted you daemonhood in the end, if you had continued on this path.”

“And what if I break these chains, kill you, and decide to do it a second time?”

“An excellent question!” the creature in orange armour and white glyphs said thoughtfully. “What happens when you try to summon a Daemon but the domain it was part of no longer exists? I will have to test it before leaving this planet on a few of my subjects.”

“They still are my subjects!”

The opponent conjured by her psyche chuckled.

“I know you are infamous for your delusion, my dear Ax’senaea, but really, your subjects? The pathetic militia you called an army didn’t last three days before outright surrendering to my warband. And with a certain amount of relief, I might add. For a mysterious reason, they really, really didn’t like the sorcery tantrums you made this last decade. Nobody like being Mastered, even if the one doing it is a distant cousin of a cousin. Or is it especially because they were your cousins?”

The enemy illusion sighed.

“Anyway, your subjects are now my subjects, and I thank you dearly on the behalf of all our warband and almighty **Tzeentch** for the millions of slaves and hired guns you’ve delivered into our hands for a very minimal effort.”

Ax’senaea had perfect control, so she didn’t snarl as the awful mask lowered itself so close to her lips and mocked her again.

“Perhaps in hindsight, you should have learned the basics of military tactics instead of spending your time murdering and puppeteering your subordinates. I’m not complaining mind you. Your arrogance and your vainglorious behaviour made our conquest easier than the invasion of an Imperial Cemetery World.”

Her psyche had truly chosen the worst moment to rebel. But it was a short reversal of fortune. Soon her skills and her will would be back under complete control.

“Now that all resistance on Laodomida has been destroyed or is in hiding, I can deal with you. Your ability to break mentally a Greater Daemon is completely unprecedented, and I want to make good use of it. See, I have an enemy I plan to confront in a few decades, and every insect in her control range obeys her perfectly. Since I don’t want to be devoured by a spider army, I told myself the simplest solution was to use a Master to fight against a Master. And the courts of Change approved my plan, agreeing to provide some help to make you into a proper instrument of war. Provided I could make you submit, of course.”

“I will never submit to you! I am Ax’senaea and I will dominate you like I have dominated every rebellious part of my psyche-world!”

There was no instance of laughter. The golden daemonic mask changed to tighten against the face of its owner, revealing the rather elegant visage of a woman. Not up to her perfection obviously, but pretty enough to be considered juvenile and rather attractive.

“And my chief lieutenants think I’m crazy...” The exhausted expression rapidly vanished to be replaced by a more determined expression. “The hard way it is, then. At least the couple of insane Apothecaries we recruited in the Eye will be in my debt, for the opportunity to vivisect you.”

“You think you’re going to scare me with these feeble threats?”

“Fear isn’t the purpose of this discussion, and this wasn’t a threat, it’s just something which is going to happen in a few hours, Possessed Executrix Primaris.” The daemonic-decorated sceptre longer than three arms and flashing irregularly in black and blue energies was slammed against her floor. “I am Malicia, Herald of Tzeentch, and from now on you’re going to make yourself useful in the Long War.”

Her mind dissolved in the darkness immediately after the last word was uttered.

**Beyond the Imperial frontier of Segmentum Obscurus**

**Calyx Expanse**

**Yu’vath Dark Sovereignty**

**Scin’ti’lla System**

**Approximately 9.078.297M35**

**The Blood Rose**

Before the Battle of Commorragh, Scin’ti’lla, capital world of the Yu’vath Dark Sovereignty, was one of those targets which would have been acknowledged as too defended for any force of Astartes which wasn’t a full Legion.

The translated designation many of the slave races Lotara Sarrin had learned from their rare prisoners was ‘Calyx Hell Worlds’. In other circumstances, the Captain of the Conqueror would have laughed at the arrogance, but force was to admit that this time, it was perfectly accurate.

The planet of Scin’ti’lla was the heart of the darkness, the very centre of power where they built their Warp-Energy Constructs and somehow managed to keep them stable in the Materium.

Or rather, it had been the heart of the darkness.

The Yu’vath had been one of the most powerful xenos empires to avoid the wrath of the False Emperor’s servants in the long millennia after the Siege, though it had little do with military prowess and everything to do with the fact the cursed light of the Astronomican wasn’t able to illuminate the Calyx Expanse.

As a consequence, the Yu’vath had grown decadent, and their gluttony of slaves and sorcery to satisfy their debased desires had known no limits. Obviously, it had made them prime candidates to be influenced by Slaanesh.

So when the Battle of Commorragh’s aftershocks had manifested themselves across the galaxy, not only the False Emperor’s powers had reached the Calyx Expanse for the first time in millennia if ever, the Yu’vath had seen all their Slaaneshi cultists die in a few seconds.

Lotara had seen the first consequences on the outer worlds of the Dark Sovereignty, and she saw them again in this very system through the daemonic auspexes of the *Conqueror*. Gigantic space fortresses emptied of their masters, leaving the former slaves of the Yu’vath alone and ready to be recruited in the *Conqueror*’s fleet. Debris of warp-infused machinery which had broken either by contact with the Anathema’s light or the death screams of Excess.

The subjugation of the Calyx Expanse by the Yu’vath had ended with the Battle of Commorragh.

Both planets and space stations where the dark order had reigned were now centres of chaotic expression as slaves rose against the last Yu’vath.

“The perfect hunting ground to increase the size of our fleet,” Lotara said, and she felt the ever-hungry sentience of the ship around her answer with a powerful impulse of satisfaction.

 During the Great Crusade, it would have been unconscionable to use these xenos designs for any purpose which wasn’t a fireship, but it wasn’t the Great Crusade anymore.

“Fourth Company,” the Blood Rose of the World Eaters declared, knowing the *Conqueror* would relay her orders. “Prepare for boarding assaults on the Yu’vath Wasps. I want them intact and able to sail. Do whatever you want with the xenos.”

Of all the berserkers and other Astartes which had rallied her after the Herald of Khorne gave Lotara this mission, they were the more stable, or from another point of view the least insane of the bunch.

That was it for the difficult mission. The rest was just going to be a matter of letting the bloodlust of the Khornate Marines run its course for a while.

“Betrayer,” once upon ago, Lotara would have called him Khârn, but the beast masquerading as a blood-soaked Astartes had no longer any link with the Captain of the Eighth Assault Company save in two things. The first was his incomparable battle-experience. The second was his hatred for Erebus the Vile One and the few bastards who had managed to betray him and escape his gore-axe in the myriad of battles having raged since the Siege of Terra. “Hear my words.”

“**I hear you, Princess of Conquest**.”

If Lotara had needed evidence the Betrayer wasn’t fully human anymore, she had it in this instant. Yet this wasn’t the reason she shivered violently. The title he had given her...no, it was better to not think about it.

“The defences of Scin’ti’lla are already broken. While the Conqueror and the boarding forces take care of their fleet, lead the Assault Companies on the Hell World.”

There were little orders she could give that the World Eaters were going to obey, and her next sentences reflected this.

“Try to avoid killing too any humans, I need them to replenish our crews’ numbers. The Yu’vath and their xenos vassals, exterminate them. These worms defied the Lord of Skulls, and worshipped vanity and vainglory. They deserve only an end in blood and massacre.”

“**In His name, it will be done. BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!**”

“Skulls for the Skull Throne.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Freighter *White Ducat***

**3.090.297M35**

**Chartist Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

The *White Ducat* had left Nyx Quartus behind them three hours ago when the first ship of the Ophelia fleet translated into the system.

“Our Navigators will deserve congratulations for bringing us ahead of the Ministorum envoys,” Marianne said whimsically, knowing the two spies of the Nobilite present on her ship’s bridge would report it to their patrons. The orders of her mother aside, the size of the squadrons emerging from the Warp were sufficiently big to delay every ship coming right behind them for days at best, weeks at worst. “I see there are plenty of Cardinal flagships among them.”

“We have confirmed identifications for fifteen of them,” her Master of Augurs diligently reported. “To these numbers must be added the *Militant Blessing*, flagship of Arch-Cardinal Winston Marlborough.”

The Heiress of the Gutenberg Chartist Fleet smiled and thanked the Master for the information. Inwardly, she was calculating. The preliminary estimates of the Ophelian starships materialising on her personal hololithic console were already thirty percent higher than the estimations she had worked with during the travel. Here again, the unprecedented nature of the times were proving as much a challenge as they raised more difficulties to adapt.

“The possibility of gaining an audience before the good Arch-Cardinal and his impressive escort arrive is low,” the Seneschal assigned to her spoke.

“It is non-existent, you mean,” Marianne pressed a blue rune in front of her, and the three-dimensional images of the Ecclesiarchy ships was replaced by their destination, the Hive World of Nyx Tertius.

It was an incredible vision of unlimited industrial expansion and interstellar trade. There were shipyards and forges in construction everywhere. All the Lagrange points were already occupied by Mechanicus and other industrial space stations, and even the dumbest Administratum Adept couldn’t fail to notice the first of the massive shipyards being assembled around the planet.

And then there were the ships. Nyx wasn’t Terra or any planet of Sol, but the number of hulls leaving and departing was impressive in its own right. There were enough Mechanicus assets to be considered an expeditionary fleet in its own right, and her eyes had noted the ranks of merchant transports protected by layer after layer of lasers and capital ships.

Nyx was far superior to Solingen, though the Mainz Sector should still outpace this nexus of trade and industry, if only by virtue of having more Hive Worlds than the domain of the new Living Saint.

“But I checked, and we are on the ninetieth fraction of the year, barely three days away or so from the Day of the Emperor’s Ascension. For all the traditions which seemed to have changed these last years in the Sector, the celebrations of this holiest of the holy days continue to be celebrated as they are.”

Certainly because no matter the grievances the current Celestial Governor had against her predecessors, the sums they poured into the festivities given to honour the victory of the Light and the Ascension of the God-Emperor on His Golden Throne were not among the flaws worthy of execution.

“It appears that there is a Grand Ball given inside Hive Athena on the one hundred and first fraction,” the first reports of the agents she had given the order to harvest secrets and information proved its worth, “one where Her Celestial Highness the Basileia will be present.”

“I admire your ability to focus on the critical information,” the Seneschal of House Gutenberg assigned to her ship shook his head, “but isn’t it a bit ambitious, even for you? We are still several hours away from being authorised to take position in a parking orbit, and I’m not speaking about setting foot on this Hive World. It will certainly take us from one day and a half to two days to find a proper base inside the Capital Hive, and the Day of the Emperor’s Ascension is in three days. Worse from our House’s perspective, the Ball is undoubtedly going to be one of the events of the year, and you know as well as I do that invitations in these kind of events are decided months in advance.”

“Especially as according to the rumours, the Living Saint is going to travel to the Hive World of Wuhan this year,” decreasing the number of potential audiences and clearly not honouring other holy days of her presence. “But yes, you have described well the obstacles in my way.”

“You won’t reconsider the approach.”

The inconvenient with the Seneschals of the Gutenberg Fleet, it was that they knew her so well.

“I am going to make some contingencies, don’t worry. But I intend firmly to be invited to this Ball.” And in the midst of reports, she had found something which could help her achieve her goals.

“And aside from praying and expecting a miracle, your strategy is?”

“House Achelieux of the Navis Nobilite is present on this world.”

The Seneschal frowned.

“I will grant you they represent a possible key to bypass the vault doors...assuming we didn’t make an enemy of them when they lost their principal contracts on the Throneworld.”

“According to the databases I have available, it isn’t the case,” Marianne spoke. “Evidently, the Navigators of the Magisterial House of Scheherazade did nothing to support the Achelieux as they lost markets and centuries of investments, but they didn’t move with their enemies either.”

And oh dear, as the data-streams flew before her, there were unconfirmed rumours of Belisarius and Ferraci ships having met unpleasant ends before Commorragh became a name synonym with Imperial victory. How...fascinating.

“They won’t be satisfied with mere bribes.”

“No,” Commorragh would have seen to that. The exact magnitude of the assets looted and recovered from the xenos was alas not something she had in her hands, save the most extraordinary which were common knowledge. But as the old proverb said, fortune was found in the tiniest and insignificant details. “Fortunately,” the Heiress of House Gutenberg flexed her hands covered by white silk gloves, “I have plenty of boons and contracts which should interest even a Magisterial House.”

This was going to be expensive, it went beyond saying. What was true of ‘ordinary’ nobles was doubly true where the Navis Nobilite was concerned: you didn’t receive an audience just because you asked nicely. The suddenness of her arrival was going to force her to bargains she might have avoided if there had been more days available before the holiest of the holy day, or if there hadn’t been so many Cardinals a few million kilometres away.

But these were the conditions she had to work with, and Marianne didn’t plan to fail, no matter how many constraints House Gutenberg had to work against.

They were numerous. Assuming House Achelieux consented to gain her an invitation, the daughter of the Representative for the Chartist Captains would be nearly alone and in a court she knew only what she had been able to obtain since her arrival less than a day ago. She had to find a ball dress respecting the trends of fashion currently in vigour on this Hive World, and magnify them subtly to attract the positive attention she wanted.

And they were so little hours remaining...best get to work.

“I hope it is urgent news that can’t wait,” Marianne said as a Captain of the Gutenberg Rifles advanced at a pace so fast it gave the impression he was half-walking, half-running.

“Lady Vicequeen,” the officer saluted. “I’m sorry...the Custodes...they’re gone!”

“Gone?” The Captain of the White Ducat raised an eyebrow. “I thought they had returned to the compartment I graciously placed at their disposal?”

“We thought it too, Lady Vicequeen! But we checked and re-checked every compartment on the upper decks! They are nowhere to be found!”

**Hive Athena’s gene-labs**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Dreadnoughts on parade were impressive. Even when opened and many of their internal components visible, they didn’t lose most of their aura of robustness and indomitability.

The fact that a lot of the components of this one were older than the Hive she was living into didn’t lessen at all the aura of durability, far from the contrary.

“THE PAIN IS LESSENING.”

The Master of Healing watched the complex screens several seconds before nodding to her.

“Permission to inject a second dose of Bacta, Chosen of the Omnissiah?”

“Granted.”

There was no dramatic change anywhere near the sarcophagus for the next minutes, but the amniotic liquids leaving the survival container of Ancient Rylanor appeared to be filled with impurities. It may be just her imagination, however.

Taylor had learnt much about medical science in the last years, but she wasn’t a Biologis specialist.

“BETTER. MUCH BETTER!” the Dreadnought formerly of the Emperor’s Children.

“Pain levels monitored by the neuronal-matrix in constant diminution,” Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies informed the small group watching the experiment. “The Blue Bacta is as expected unable to regenerate limbs, but the regeneration of existing brain cells and other damage inflicted by time and the Traitors is superior by ten percent to our original estimations.”

Several minutes were spent verifying Rylanor was presenting no problematic sign from being exposed to Bacta, and then the last loyalist of Isstvan III was put into a medical slumber, allowing him to rest for the first time in several millennia.

“Regular injections of Bacta every year will most likely be able to restore him to the levels of mental stability observed during the Great Crusade,” the highest-ranked Mechanicus Tech-Priest said. “Assuming the results are identical on the Dreadnoughts of the Iron Drakes volunteering for the procedures, I will make a proposition to train Apothecaries in these Dreadnought-healing procedures.”

“And you will have my support for this.” Leaving aside Dreadnoughts by Pierre who had always been eccentric even when they weren’t in sarcophaguses, the possibility of returning the majority of the centuries-old Astartes veterans to their full strategic and tactical capabilities wasn’t a small thing at all. The additional boon of decreasing the pain they felt from old and new injuries, physical or mental, was not to be disdained too. “I have noted however we need far more doses than the couple necessary to heal a regular battle-brother.”

“We used a volume of fifty doses per injections today,” the Arch-Genetor of Dantris III admitted. “But Ancient Rylanor accrued mental and physical damage which should have killed him. That he is alive and rational is a triumph of his will and a miracle of the Omnissiah.”

“Absolutely,” Taylor whispered. In the last days, every time she had looked at the Contemptor Dreadnought, the female parahuman had tried to put herself in the loyalist of the Third’s place...and failed. Could she wait for a few hours or a few days, wounded, in an underground basement, waiting for reinforcements that might never come? Yes. Could she wait for several millennia? The answer was a resounding no. Taylor wasn’t ready to bet a single Throne Gelt on that. Not if all certainties and beliefs had disappeared like Rylanor’s had in the massacre ordered by the Arch-Heretic.

“Please inform me once you think his recovery is optimal. He and I have much to speak about.”

The priority topic was, obviously, the creation of the new Chapter born from the Emperor’s Children gene-seed. The moment she had received the news from the Isstvan System, and the confirmation from Astartes intelligence sources this was really the equivalent of a Master of Scouts the tech-Priests had found, Taylor had decided to wait and have a proper conversation with the Ancient before the creation of the new Chapter was truly launched. The problems with the genetic compatibility had only increased the necessity of knowing more about the past of the Third legion.

For the moment, it looked like the potential of Rylanor was something justifying the delays. The owner of the Contemptor Dreadnought was sane – or as sane as you could possibly be after having been betrayed, listened to your own brothers dying without being able to do anything to save them, and wait millennia with the knowledge the deeds of a lifetime had been trampled by spiteful bastards sullying your Legion’s colours.

“Do you think he will want to continue with the model of Contemptor, or try another model?” asked Gavreel.

“The Contemptor Pattern is far from obsolete, on the battlefields of the thirty-fifth millennium,” unfortunately for the Imperium, there were few left in active service too. The logistical difficulties in giving maintenance to these living legends of the Great Crusade were enormous for the Chapters, and too often the necessity of deep repairs condemned the Ancient to stay in stasis under a Fortress-Monastery until a Forge World was able to build the required spare parts. “It’s possible he will desire to continue his career inside it. I’m afraid I don’t know enough the Ancient to make a final verdict one way or another.”

“Since you intend to use his memories for duties away from the frontlines,” Gamaliel intervened, “this isn’t a choice he will have to make in a hurry.”

“Yes,” but her answer was distracted, as more than a kilometre away from her current position, one of the Widows guarding several minor tunnels of the underground found itself facing giants which were not supposed to be here. “If my memory doesn’t fail me, there was ship from Holy Terra which arrived in-system yesterday.”

“The *White Ducat*, a ship with ties to the Chartist High Lord,” Sergeant Daegon Belligeris of the Invaders’ Chapter. “I don’t think there was anything of note mentioned by the custom inspectors...”

“No, I think you wouldn’t have forgotten the presence of three Custodes aboard,” Taylor replied as her spiders formed an honour guard and ‘invited’ politely the three transhuman giants to her position.

As always, whether via insects’ senses or by her own eyes, the sheer aura surrounding them was awe-inspiring. A mere glance was enough to let you think that one Watcher of the Throne was largely sufficient to fight an entire army of xenos or any enemy threatening the Golden Throne, and emerge triumphant.

Individually, the golden-winged insect-mistress thought they were all a bit weaker than Anubis Excelsor, but since the standard she was judging them against was their Captain-General, it was a bit unfair.

What was really surprising, on the other hand, was that of the three members of the Adeptus Custodes approaching them, only one wore the gold everyone took for granted when the name was spoken.

The two others wore black, though both armours were different. The shoulder pauldrons of the left one were a dark crimson, as was his cloak, while the Custodes on the right managed to wear gold, black, emerald, and purple on the same armour, and surround himself in an aura of terrifying dread promising nothing but death if you dared blocking his path.

“Lady Taylor Hebert,” the one who appeared to be the leader and was clad in auramite and carried a monstrous lance that surely would be able to slay a Knight or one of her toughest insects if properly wielded. “Per the will of Our Liege, we have come stand vigil by your side.”

“And per the oaths sworn and the accords agreed with the Captain-General, you are welcome,” the young woman had considered making a remark that they could have arrived by more conventional paths, but Custodes were Custodes, and their authority was not something to be challenged lightly.

“I am Shield-Captain Veii Volterrus. I will be the Messenger and the Warden of His Will.”

“I am Murasame Oda of the Dankanatoi,” the purple-black-gold Custodes presented himself, something that judging by the reactions of her Dawnbreaker Guard, left them as much in the dark as she was.

“I am Baldur Vör, Shadowkeeper,” the other black-armoured Custodes revealed his name, and nothing more.

“We have much to speak about,” the Shield-Captain said.

It was good to see that at least, being a Custodes didn’t stop you from voicing understatements.

**Hive Athena**

**Major-General Jack ‘Death’ Schwarz**

Jack had expected this visit of Nyx to be unconventional. He hadn’t been wrong. The moment they had landed on the spaceport, they had been welcomed by a Space Marine, and while the Catachan guardsmen had been led to their barracks, he and his three companions had been told to climb on a gigantic red scorpion like one used an aircar.

It went without saying the living transport was less comfortable than the technological one, though given the crowds in the air and the sky, the scorpion was likely the fastest, given that every pilgrim and spectator immediately removed himself or herself from the roads and the elevators when they came in view.

“We are almost at the agreed meeting point,” the Angel of Death, his armour half bone-colour and half dark brown informed them in a tone which told them he was almost sorry this escapade was arriving to its end. Jack wasn’t sharing the feeling. Mostly because while he loved unconventional rides, it hadn’t escaped him the Space Marine was neither the pilot nor the tamer of this massive armoured predator, and the stinger and the claws of this scorpion looked very lethal if employed against humans.

And then their ‘living transport’ rushed into a vast courtyard, and Jack cursed loudly. Thousands of Catachan ants were waiting for them assembled in an impeccably ordered parade.

The Major-General had left Catachan many, many years ago, but he recognised instantly the insects as the ferocious members of their species’ warrior castes.

That answered one of his questions...and raised thousands of others.

“Are these ants that dangerous?” Surgeon-General Anna Creuss asked him as they dismounted from the scorpion.

“They are from my homeworld,” the owner of the Star of Terra told the Lucifer Black Medicae and his two other companions. Immediately, he saw their expressions get tenser and their bodies took defensive stances.

“And they are under our Lady’s control,” the Space Marine spoke again.

“How the hell is this possible?” Froissart Bureau, logistician expert of the Departmento Munitorum, had drawn a laspistol from somewhere, though he maintained it against his right leg. “The few Rogue Traders who try to ‘acquire’ the Catachan fauna are ending dead!”

“Oh they tried their best to kill me at first,” a swarm of flies and hornets soared over their heads, and the voice accompanying them was the noise of thousands of them somehow manipulated to produce a coherent voice. “But now they’re productive loyal servants, like the rest of the swarm.”

Gates half-hidden by a wall groaned before opening wide, and more Space Marines Jack had ever seen outside a war zone emerged from it.

Jack put back one of the many knives he had drawn, knowing very well by experience that playing intimidation games with Space Marines never ended well for the non-Astartes. These ones didn’t seem to be the exception to the rule. Most had enormous bolters or guns tied to their belts or strapped to their backs, and the long curved blades many of them possessed were a new model of power blade if his eyes weren’t failing him.

And then an angel dropped from the sky, and Jack Schwarz saluted instinctively as a wind of power, determination, and sheer danger washed over him.

“Major-General Schwarz, I presume.”

The voice was softer, less unnatural in person, but there still was this sonority of danger and death coming with it.

And while the golden armour offered to their gazes was really pretty, the Catachan officer could recognise the almost-imperceptible lines where extensive reparations and improvements had been made. This was the elite panoply of war which had served in the Battle of Commorragh.

“Yes, Lady General. About these ants...”

“You have nothing to fear. These five thousand warrior-ants are under the control of five Queens, and I control the Queens.”

“They haven’t tried to board one of your warships and plague the crew with visions of Catachan?”

There had been several really damaging incidents thorough Imperial history of adventurers and aliens placing these murderous insects in stasis and believing themselves out of danger.

Only to realise the error of their way once they met some...how did the Tech-Priests call it?...ah yes, some technical difficulties...

“I fought a mental battle with a few million Catachan Queens twice for the control of the Queen the Mechanicus had spirited away from your homeworld,” the Living Saint admitted, her emotionless expression telling him it had not been an easy contest, “but after it, the Queens and the castes they control have been model of cooperation. A fortunate thing, since it is their species which allow the production of Bacta.”

The Major-General of the Catachan Jungle Fighters drew a deep breath. Of all the things...well, he was still going to need a few hours to really get used to.

“You won’t have to worry much about them,” the black-haired woman generating a large amount of golden light continued as if she was reading his thoughts. “Most of the ants born this year and the next on Nyx are transferred to the moon of Formicarium in orbit around Nyx Secundus the moment I decide they’re sufficiently well-behaved. The ones which are staying there are either in stasis vaults, high-security labs, or serving as my personal bodyguards.”

“Forgive me, Lady General,” Major-General Gwendolyn Harkonnen of the Militarum’s Public Relations – also known by the less flattering moniker of ‘Guard Propaganda’ – found the strength to speak after the initial surprise. “But weren’t the scorpions not enough?”

“Actually,” the Governor of Nyx who also happened to be a Guard officer placed a hand in her black hairs, “these scorpions are a very recent addition and I wanted to test their versatility today. They will be quite useful on open battlefields, but I have my doubts in more urban environments.”

“They will strike more fear and battle-shock than a conventional Battle Tank, I think.” The same Space Marine who had played the role of their guide told Lady Weaver.

“They are Baal Scorpions. Adult, they are far bigger than a Russ or a Khan,” the winged Lady General advanced until placing her hand on the armoured crimson head of the scorpion. “We will have to test them further before our departure.”

Ants and scorpion began to move in direction of the courtyard’s exit in a precise military march.

“I’m afraid I don’t have a lot of time today to make the presentations and give you the full tour of Hive Athena’s strategiums and military infrastructure. For that I apologise.”

“You don’t have to make apologies,” Froissart Bureau assured her, “we understand how much...politics and influence struggles are happening today.”

“I hope you will keep saying the same things once you will have taken note of my working methods, Logistician,” the black-eyed, golden-armoured woman let a half-smile arrive on her lips. “But today is your lucky day, there is only one trial ahead of you to complete the formalities recognising you as part of my General Staff.”

“And this trial is?” Major-General Gwendolyn Harkonnen of the Jupiter Storms inquired.

“Don the ceremony uniforms prepared for you and follow me to the Ball this evening, of course.”

Froissart and Gwendolyn acknowledged stoically the news. Anna Creuss and himself, not being by any stretch political animals, grimaced heavily.

“In the spirit of competition animating every guardsman of His Most Holy Majesty,” the Catachan holder of the Star of Terra asked to the woman who had beat him on number and quality of military medals, “could I instead spar with a few thousand of your ants instead?”

**Arch-Cardinal Winston Marlborough**

On the bad days, being an Arch-Cardinal could be summed-up in the words of exhausting boredom and nightmarish vellum bureaucracy. Sometimes Winston was consternated that the very Adeptus he was belonging to had more points in common with the Administratum than any other Imperial organisation.

It was sad to say, but after several millennia, a lot of Cardinals were really behaving like the tithe-masters of the Adeptus Terra. The notable difference was that the religious demands were labelled ‘donations’ instead of tithes.

Today, fortunately, was one of the good days, since his rank allowed him to be invited to a grand ball inside a Living Saint’s halls without making more than a couple of hundred queries and giving away some fifty favours.

It was satisfying, because as he watched the spectacle offered to all the invitees, the Arch-Cardinal of Ultima Segmentum would have been seriously distraught at the idea of seeing it via servo-skull recording. Or servo-owl, as it seemed Nyx was using a lot of the tech-birds, courtesy of Her Celestial Highness having discovered the template.

The dancing halls and the entire palace had been entirely rebuilt recently, that much the member of the Ecclesiarchy Conclave didn’t need to be an architect to be sure of. And the result was astounding. Winston had never seen so far a large scene being decorated in the theme of Salamanders Space Marines, but he had a feeling certain nobles and Cardinals would imitate it in the future.

The floor had been prepared with green and red marble, showing numerous Angels of Death standing vigil over humanity, slaying beasts, and lighting torches of gold to help the God-Emperor stand against the darkness. There were fountains of fake flames, but the red and green stones were so realistically sculpted one could almost believe in it if one wasn’t extremely close. A massive statue of the Primarch Vulkan swearing his allegiance to the God-Emperor was dominating the room, and a full orchestra was playing near it.

Tens of thousands of great green butterflies were everywhere, providing a soft illumination when the light pulsed at different levels of intensity with its songs.

And of course there was the Living Saint.

At the heart of everything, she was there, golden light and golden wings protecting them all.

In return, many Space Marines, young women of the new Templar Sororitas, and guardsmen of the Fay 20th were forming a flexible security cordon, stopping in the cradle a possible mob rush in her direction.

As a consequence, approaching Her Celestial Highness was both a dance and a game of intrigue. Be they Guildmasters of Nyx, Chartists Captains and Head of Merchant Houses, Heads of Cartels, Cardinals of his delegation, or military officers, everyone had quickly noticed how often staying attentive to the figures executed by the tens of thousands of insects present and the nature of the conversation tended to give a man or a woman the conversation they had prayed for the last weeks or months.

Evidently, there were always some people unable to understand the importance of politeness and etiquette, despite the fact that the ‘new Nyxian code’, as several Dukes and Counts he had nicknamed it, was fundamentally quite simple and forward. Those bad sires were not lasting long, and there were always soldiers shining with medals or ladies in red robes telling the impertinent his presence was not desired anymore tonight. The worst troublemakers had outright been bitten by a few hornets, and it didn’t take a lot of intelligence to recognise it for the death sentence in politics it was.

“Have you thought about the first edicts you will propose to Her Celestial Highness the Basileia?” Winston smiled as the not-so-original query of Director Elbert Rhine. That said, the Arch-Cardinal knew the man had worked hard and diligently in his Saintly Governor’s service, and had received important industrial contracts from the Capital Hive to Nyx Sextus.

“I have a lot of ideas,” Winston Marlborough admitted with a detached air. “Alas I have barely settled foot on this Hive World, leaving me with little idea what the religious priorities are, beyond of course the obvious. Like His Holiness the Ecclesiarch, I have contemplated advising Her Celestial Highness to add two new holy days to celebrate the grand victory won in the tenebrous realms of Commorragh.”

“Two?”

The senior figure of the Adeptus Ministorum smiled indulgently.

“I wished it could be ten or twenty, but if we add that many holy days to the Nyxian calendar, I have a feeling several Adeptuses are going to protest.” The Cartel head chuckled, and inclined the crystal glass to concede his point. “One of the many possibilities was to officialise a Day of Commorragh’s Destruction and a Day of Ovation, though as always, I remain willing to listen to advice.”

A new rhythm of music and a different choreography of several thousands of fireflies ended the short exchange. From Director Elbert Winston found himself dancing a waltz with an old Countess – that he was sure all the amasec in the world wouldn’t be enough to convince him to accept her not-so-subtle advances – and then as he abandoned the large space reserved to dancers, an interesting debate with the ageing Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx. The two of them compared in good humour the benefits and the problems of their respective commands, commiserated on the levels of vellum and bureaucracy depriving them of their true vocations, and the arrogance of youth who didn’t respect their elders.

All in all, Winston was in a rather good mood when the songs and the rhythm wanted by Her Celestial Highness engulfed him again and led his feet directly in front of an amazing-looking young woman. The Arch-Cardinal’s circle of advisors had been rather insistent the chances were low the Gutenberg’s Heiress would be there, but he had not trusted their opinions, and sure enough, his guts of former Frateris Templar had been right.

“Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg,” the senior envoy of Ophelia VII murmured, offering a curt nod which was immediately returned. “I was not expecting to see you there.”

“Why not, your High Eminence?”

Winston didn’t share most of the prejudices the Ecclesiarch and his strongest supporters felt towards the power-breakers of Holy Terra – who weren’t always the High Lords, it had to be remarked upon.

But looking at the Heiress of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains, he knew the core of the fears the Ecclesiarchy felt towards the politicians of the Throneworld were more than justified.

Marianne Gutenberg was dressed like a beautiful flower, and like all those predators, underneath the veneer of a sublime disguise there were ten thousand poisons waiting for you.

Unlike so many nobles and non-nobles dancing and exchanging their opinions around them, the Arch-Cardinal was confident the young woman had not abused of rejuvenation and bio-sculpting to attain her current looks.

No, everything was perfectly natural, the result of centuries, if not millennia of gene-selection programs and carefully-selected marriages where cutthroat families united their scions for blood, wealth, and power.

The final result in the body in front of him was a Chartist Captain with fair blonde hair a couple of shades paler than gold, blue eyes so pure the water they were drinking this evening could die in shame, and curves most of the courtesans would kill a hundred of their rivals to own. She was physically trained to kill, with discreet but battle-ready muscles. Her visage breathed out elegance and authority, but retained its full humanity and a terrifying charisma. The chests, the legs, the hips, the pace, the gestures, the stance; everything had been rehearsed and worked hard and long to arrive to a result which would scream ‘superiority’ to the rest of humanity.

The dress was the final weapon. It achieved the feat of being relatively daring and conservative, a sleeveless ensemble which left her arms covered in long and thin red gloves, and the body was enveloped by a cloth of red and silver. The red looked like scales and was akin a circling Salamander; the silver was feather-like and angelic, but presented all the characteristics of silk. The sum of its part was like a feminine variant of the union of Holy Terra and Mars, the beauty and the strength, the faith and the emotionless logic. A thin necklace containing a middle-sized sapphire was visible above the modest cleavage.

There was no mistake like using gold without the Living Saint’s blessing, or upsetting the codes of the Nyxian audience. Golden Throne, maybe it was she who was going to make the trend for the next balls, and wasn’t that a worrying thought!

“I didn’t see you on the first list of invitees, your Excellency.” Not that he had been allowed to contemplate it, given how late their arrival had been for the Feast of the Emperor’s Ascension, and how much he currently lacked influence at the court of the Living Saint.

“You shouldn’t believe these underhive rumours, your High Eminence,” the Arch-Cardinal almost expected for the Chartist representative to turn back the same sentence, and the next seconds saw him unpleasantly surprised. “Like I don’t give any credence to those mentioning you would be stupid enough to bring Arco-flagellants and Death Cultists to a system where Her Celestial Highness has forbidden them.”

In several occasions, Winston had turned his impetuosity and his improvisation into his strengths. He had a feeling it was not going to be one of these opportunities here. Rather, it sounded more and more like the lack of information due to his Warp-travel and non-existent local network were biting him in an unmentionable body part.

“Point taken,” the religious leader answered politely, staying the very image of calm and composed, despite knowing the woman was laughing behind her smile at the point she had scored. Obviously Winston wasn’t a supporter of these...questionable practises where capital punishment was rendered, but he had been attached several hundreds of penitent congregations, and there were many who had Arco-flagellants and Death Cultists. Now he had to hope his subordinates had been wise enough to not let them be seen, or there was going to be hell to pay, literally. “Your Navigators must have been very competent to let you arrive mere hours before me.”

“Yes, they deserved every coin from their princely income. Oh, it seems our steps are destined to walk together for a few more minutes.”

And as new insects arrived and a festive music replaced the waltz, Winston saw it was not an evasive tactic. The Vicequeen of the Gutenberg Chartist Fleet and himself were summoned by Her Celestial Highness. Together.

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“Jealous?” Taylor found herself murmuring when Wei kissed her on the cheek.

“Maybe a little,” her Seneschal-Consort admitted. “It’s not often I meet someone who is more beautiful than me.”

“I suppose it depends how much one enjoys blonde-haired, blue-eyed princesses,” The Basileia told her Wuhanese lover.

“You don’t think she’s beautiful, then?” Wei was teasing her again, and was anything but subtle.

“I think she’s very beautiful,” denying it would be a lie, and not exactly a subtle one. “I also think she’s very dangerous. The Speaker for the Chartist Captains didn’t send her Heiress here because she was another Nostradamus Vandire in-being.”

The insect-mistress had constantly kept several dozen insects around her to hear what Marianne Gutenberg was saying since this ball had begun, and some of the very technical debates she had spoken with Cartel Heads and even one of the few Archmagi present had confirmed the Gutenberg emissary was very, very clever.

And physically, she wasn’t harmless either. Taylor was nearly sure two of the rings on her fingers were particularly clever disguised weapons, hidden enough to fool the numerous security checks every invitee had to go through. The Heracles Wardens were going to have fun after tonight, no doubt.

“Well, we couldn’t delay meeting them anyway,” Wei said lightly, though the tensing in her shoulders indicated her Consort was not comfortable meeting these kind of representatives with so little preparation. “Do you want me by your side?”

“Of course,” the golden-winged parahuman held her right hand in hers, “after the time you spent for our robes to be complementary, it would be a shame to not grandstand in front of an Arch-Cardinal and the envoy of a High Lord.”

The two dresses were the colours of Auramite and Argentamite fused together to create an impressive visual effect, and between the ten precious stones and the spider silk which had been required, they were truly the Queens of Nyx tonight...though the woman advancing to meet them was superior in looks alone.

“Your Celestial Highness, your Excellency” the Arch-Cardinal and the woman accompanying him saluted Wei and herself, their unsynchronised reverence and words making clear they were not in any way or form allied to each other.

“Your High Eminence, your Excellency,” Taylor replied. “I bid you welcome to Nyx. I hope the ball has been enjoyable so far for you tonight.”

“It is remarkably pleasant,” Winston Marlborough declared, promptly imitated by the Chartist representative. Despite his famous name and several physical traces of a military career, the Arch-Cardinal really didn’t look at all like a certain M2 British politician. His nose was long, a few centimetres longer and it would have been comical. His skin was deeply tanned, though it remained light enough to be called ‘chocolate’ and not ‘black’ or ‘obsidian’. He was tall, a good head taller than she was. And his hair was a rich brown, with no trace of baldness.

“I understand I have you to thank for the arrival of a Custodes force,” the insect-mistress spoke to the blonde-haired woman in her extremely elaborate red-silver ball dress.

“So they contacted you,” dark pink lips smiled, and Taylor could almost feel the pressure of the calculating gaze of her two interlocutors. “They vanished not far after the inspections on Nyx Sextus and I for one have no idea how they did it.”

“For all their size and very threatening appearance, the Watchers of His Most Holy Majesty have impressive skills where infiltration of Imperial and non-Imperial strongholds is concerned.”

The female parahuman had not forgotten who had given her most of the information and the ‘keys’ to launch an attack on Commorragh, and judging by the hatred the Drukhari felt for any species which didn’t belong to their society, the information must have been gained firsthand, in the depths of the Webway.

“I won’t deny this...is tonight one more evidence of their skills?”

“No,” Taylor answered curtly, “the Custodes won’t be with us tonight. Today is a day which holds a far different meaning for them.”

For an overwhelming majority of the Imperium, the Day of Ascension were the twenty-four standard hours the Emperor had been interned on the Golden Throne and ascended to become the God-Emperor of Mankind. For the Custodes, it was the Day of Failure; the very moment where their blades and superhuman aptitudes had utterly failed to uphold the only oath they had ever devoted their lives to.

“A pity,” her religious invitee told very seriously. “Having not had the privilege to travel to Holy Terra, I never saw His Custodes save in pict-casts and statues.”

“I assure you, they are more impressive in flesh than in the representations Imperial artists have made of them,” the presence and the lethality of the Watchers of the Throne was a thing of legend, far stronger to the transhuman performances of the Astartes, and since she was empowered by the Emperor, Taylor was partially immune to them. “I think the Lady Vicequeen will not correct me on this point.”

“Not at all,” the blue eyes were the very picture of innocence, and the small inclination of the bust and the seducing smile could have been immortalised as the appearance of temptation. Taylor ignored it. She had already a lover and a partner in the person of Wei, and everything was working fine on that aspect of her life. The Basileia of Nyx wasn’t going to introduce an unforeseen ‘variable’, not when this complicating factor was as dangerous as Marianne Gutenberg. “They met me in the Jovian shipyards while I was about to return to my ship for the journey to Nyx, and I still don’t know how they were able to find my orbit-schedule and my House’s intentions.”

“They are the Watchers of the Throne, the God-Emperor reveals to them many secrets through his immortal radiance,” Winston Marlborough said piously.

“Absolutely,” the woman nodded with such celerity Taylor could almost see the ‘but’ coming right behind it. “Or they have their own operatives and monitoring programs in the depths of the Sol Ansibles, listening to every ‘secure’ communication important Adepts make in broad daylight.”

Taylor had to remind herself twice she couldn’t trust this woman in the next seconds, because even with her own skills and ability to think emotionlessly, the daughter of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains was charm and good help incarnate...at least this was what the facade in red-silver would make you believe.

The Arch-Cardinal, on the other hand, was very much annoyed, as expected.

Taylor knew the senior upper-Cardinal of the Ecclesiarchy and the Chartist Captain were going to be in competition for as long as they remained in the Sector...

**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**Eastern Fringe**

**Approximately thirty million kilometres away from ‘Scrapzard Moardakka’**

**Deathwatch Strike Cruiser *Silent Slayer***

**8.109.297M35**

**Deathwatch Captain Draak Terrek**

“We can’t get through *that*.”

Before having his armour painted black, Captain Draak Terrek of the Iron Hands would have treated this statement as defeatist and the proof flesh was truly weak compared to the machine.

Fortunately, *Deathwatch Captain* Draak Terrek was far more experienced and had worked for decades with battle-brothers of different Chapters, and gained in wisdom and maturity. When your Sergeant told you it couldn’t be done, even if his opinion was not based on any simulations, algorithmic sequences, or deep data-analyses, it was best to listen to him.

“I realise the odds are daunting,” the commander of the ten Space Marines and two Dreadnoughts present aboard the Silent Slayer. “It is probably, no, it is certainly a suicide mission.”

“Captain,” the face of Deathwatch Sergeant Jeremiah Scipio, formerly of the White Consuls, was grimness incarnate. “I am ready to give my life against the xenos. The oaths were sworn, and the Emperor will smile upon us if we stop this problem before reaching the frontiers of the Imperium.”

“But you don’t believe it can be done.”

“No,” the black-clad son of Guilliman recognised. “There are so many greenskins’ warships that even with the advanced stealth technology of the *Silent Slayer*, our chances aren’t that good to arrive at optimal torpedoes’ range of this insult to Imperial shipyards.”

“Let’s assume we can do it. Theoretical, I believe your cousins call it.”

Jeremiah Scipio huffed before smiling.

“All right, Captain. Theoretical: in the unlikely hypothesis we evade the four hundred-plus starships armed to the teeth our prey has refitted for its WAAGH, the numerous scrap-mines, the reinforcements the Warp is spitting randomly here, and of course the racing bombers and starfighters plaguing the approaches of the ‘scrap-yards’, we would still have to divide our forces in two. A heretekal xenos shield is protecting the biggest part of the Ork scrap-yards, and Librarian Lamael had confirmed the heavily fortified sections are where Arrgard is making his war reparations. We destroy the power sources keeping this shield active, or the mission will not achieve any important objective.”

And as more and more data from the Silent Slayer’s cogitators was analysed by his brain, Draak knew this mission would kill most of the Space Marines under his command. If these damned xenos shields hadn’t been there...but there were, and such theoretical wishes were unworthy both of an Iron Hands and a Deathwatch Captain.

“Your honest opinion, Sergeant. Do you believe the Fortress of Indomitus Point has enough battle-brothers for an operation like this one?

“I don’t know,” the former White Consul admitted. “But we may not be alone in this fight. Plenty of the greenskins missing there have gone to Tigrus, and the Mechanicus won’t forget that. And then there’s all these strange communications made by the xenos fleet and the scrap-yards.”

“You refer to the bellowing and the screaming proclaiming war is near against ‘Da Swarm Bringa’?”

“Yes. I think something we have no idea of has happened in the galaxy, and the xenos are reacting to it. One way or another, we need more guns, intelligence, and likely more assistance from non-Deathwatch military forces.”

“Except every day we don’t strike is a day more Orks gather here.”

“We can’t do much but monitor them,” The Deathwatch Sergeant fixed the section of space crawling with the dangerous xenos with determination and hatred. “Kill Arrgard and the Orks will be broken. But as long as this beast survives, the greenskins will rebuild here and wage new blasphemous wars.”

Draak Terrek nodded.

“True. We are going to take a few more million kilometres to be safe, and then an astropathic communication will be sent to Indomitus Point.”

But as the size of the infestation continued to defile before his eyes, the Deathwatch Captain didn’t believe there was enough battle-brothers available to be the knife in the darkness the Imperium required. Certainly the black-clad Astartes had turned many battles where the odds were worse than this...but this unimportant location had still millions of bellicose greenskins.

And killing them all was going to take a very, very long time.

**Craftworld Malan’tai**

**8.109.297M35**

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

There were many unpleasant manners to wake up.

Being slapped and thrown from the top of one of her home’s cascades by an Harlequin was perhaps not the worst that could happen to an Asuryani, but on impact Maea swore she was killing the entire Masque of clowns laughing at her from afar if it was the last thing she ever did.

And no, the fact Yvraine had been subjected to the same ‘treatment’ wasn’t brightening her mood.

“Choose well your last words, Harlequin,” the young Seer growled. An ethereal wind was summoned by her mind, and many blades of water soared from the lake she had fallen into, ready to impale the giggling clowns.

And then the beginning of her attack disappeared like it had never existed. Not far from her, Yvraine slammed into an invisible wall, and there had been no forewarning a psychic defence had been erected.

The lights of Malan’tai flickered, and suddenly the Harlequins disappeared one by one until there was a lone figure remaining. Despite all her training and her courage, Maea shuddered. The figure was a Solitaire, the servants of the Laughing God playing the role of fallen Slaanesh when they performed.

Yet this one was very different than everything she had seen before.

To begin with, it looked far less...otherwordly and sworn to the Primordial Annihilator.

In fact, it was more like someone had tried to sculpt the stone representation of an Asuryani female...and screwed up the artwork, by making it too perfect.

“Commorragh was just the beginning,” were the first melodious words which made the young Seer tremble and not from the cold. “The Dark City’s legacy can’t be one of hope. The song can shines, but the Primordial Annihilator will scream its hate. And at the end of the path, Oblivion awaits. Oh yes, Oblivion will darken the night.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Yvraine complained.

“The five Crone Swords must be found and wielded by Asuryani Champions on Oblivion’s threshold, with the old and young Queens bearing the mantle. Or Oblivion will be eternal.”

For a single second, Maea was consumed by the vision of a Craftworld dying and the screams of millions of Asuryani devoured by the predators of the Sea of Souls.

The Solitaire looked at Yvraine, and the exiled warrior of Biel-Tan stared defiantly back.

“Find Kha-vir, the Sword of Sorrows,” the order came, imperious and inflexible, “it was stolen by the escaped prisoners of the greatest of the dark prisons, pursuing in their ignorance the stone-rampart and the lightning-hunter.”

“For it to result in a greater disaster than the Second Fall!” Yvraine scoffed. “No, thank you. We have meddled enough with the threads of the future, I think. And what good will it do to me? No one can wield the Crone Swords without immediately having one’s life-essence drained!”

The Malan’tai Seer agreed with her friend. Yes, the Crone Swords were prestigious weapons, and having one or several lost to them would be awful, but it wasn’t like they had seen much use these last cycles. The little problem of their wielder dying by their fault tended not to attract many volunteers, unlike the Swords of Vaul. But then the God-Smith’s creation didn’t tear you apart physically and mentally.

“There is no future for the Asuryani if at the precise moment, Kha-vir is not there wielded by worthy hands.” The Harlequin spoke in a tone utterly devoid of emotions, frozen like its immobile face, before turning towards her.

“You, Seer of Malan’tai, needs to recover Asu-var, the Sword of Silent Screams.”

Maea shook her head.

“Out of the question. It was secure in one of the safest temples of Biel-Tan. If it isn’t there anymore, it’s because the humans have grabbed it. I won’t move against them, thanks. I have no wish to be the reason the Angel of Death’s unleashes her armies and fleets against this Craftworld.”

“But the Sword of Silent Screams wasn’t stolen by the servants of the Queen of the Swarm, Seer.” The Solitaire was prompt to tell her of her erroneous words. “It had been taken by the agents of the greatest thief to have plagued the Ancient Empire’s existence.”

Maea didn’t like the sound of that.

“The name of the thief is Trazyn of the Necrons, self-proclaimed Infinite Collector. You will find Asu-var in the galleries of Solemnace.”

The light flickered, and the Harlequin was gone.

“If that was the joke, I think we will hate when they will arrive with bad news...” Yvraine commented before beginning a litany of insults which would have impressed even a servant of the Primordial Annihilator.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx III**

**Lisa’s Dome**

**3.110.297M35**

**Seneschal-Consort Wei Cao**

There were many artefacts, piles of rare metals, gems, and weapons Taylor had immediately sold after Commorragh. Some because they weren’t that useful, others because it was better than to let them accumulate dust on them in an underground vault or warehouse centre.

There were relics and machines which had been sold to the Adeptus Mechanicus, and other ‘gifts’ sent to various power-makers of the Sector to thank them for the military support they had provided.

And there were plenty of dangerous and forbidden things which had vanished in the Holy Inquisition’s custody.

The Seneschal-Consort had expected the ‘Diamond-Crystal’ – also known as ‘Core Crystal’ – would be among the possessions her love would be sure to deliver to the Inquisitors present at Pavia, this xenos psychic jewel would be at the top of the long list. It had killed plenty of Space Marines from an ineluctable psychic drain, including one member of the Dawnbreaker Guard, and it wasn’t exactly like the Imperium had every original part to rebuild an identical Core Gate, or the resources to build new ones.

But Taylor had disagreed, and here she was, speaking with the Eldar artefact again, protected by the numerous psychically-gifted Astartes of her Honour Guard.

The Diamond-Crystal levitated in the shadow of Lisa, for the cache which protected the xenos creation was kept in an underground bunker under Lisa’s Dome, guarded by numerous lethal defensive systems, which didn’t include the protection provided by the guardsmen and Skitarii outside the Biodome, or the Moth herself.

Finally, the Diamond-Crystal stopped shining and descended back to be encased in the decorated box used to contain it when it wasn’t in use. Seconds later, servitors under the vigilant eyes of several Space Marines lifted the object and went to return it to the highly-secure vault where it would wait for another session.

And it would probably not be anytime soon. Aside from the fact they were all leaving soon for Nyx, even Wei could see one or two Librarians looked deeply exhausted by the mere minutes spent in proximity of the Diamond-Crystal of the xenos.

Truly, it was an extremely dangerous artefact to empty the Angels of Death of their energy with such facility.

“Did you find the information you were looking for?” The Wuhanese-born woman asked as Lisa landed several metres away and the Emperor’s Champion of the Black Templars threw her several fruits in close succession to earn her forgiveness.

“I think the answer is a mix of yes and no,” her golden-winged paramour said tiredly. “It seems the Ancient Aeldari never truly tried to really send mining explorations into the unknown or synthesize Noctilith. Incidentally, they don’t call it Noctilith, of course. They call it ‘Destinystone’.”

“Much as I don’t like the long-ears, I can’t really say they were wrong this time,” Wei smiled.

“Even a broken clock can right twice a day,” Taylor agreed, kissing her on the cheek and placing her hands on her shoulders before they walked away, the son of the titan-moth resonating everywhere.

“Since they didn’t mine or really make any effort to uncover the secrets of Noctilith, how did they manage to create the Blackstone Fortresses?”

“They stole what they needed from Necron stocks, of course,” the Basileia of Nyx told her in a tone which for all its amusement, had a foundation of viciousness. “After that it seems they relied on their ‘Gods’ and some elite Artisans to forge them. I wasn’t really surprised when the Core Crystal told me a lot of the Fortresses’ secrets were lost long before the fall of their intergalactic Empire. And obviously, most of their last Noctilith possessions were lost with the creation of the Eye of Terror.”

“So even if the Eldar were willing to help us,” not that Wei or anyone would consider seriously that, not after Commorragh and the destruction of Biel-Tan, “they are on the same level we are where Noctilith is at stake.”

“Oh no,” Taylor laughed. “They are worse. Their psychically-attuned Noctilith – I haven’t really understood the name the Aeldari found for it – has some of the properties of Aethergold, but it’s far from instable and far less useful. There’s a reason Lisa could turn the Blackstone Fortress’ core into a Warp-purifying crystal, after all. But the Crystal had some interesting information to give.”

“What sort of information?”

This time Taylor raised her voice, addressing not only her, but also the Space Marines and the lone back-armoured Custodes escorting them.

“In the last stages of the War in Heaven, as the divide between Materium and Immaterium was almost totally broken, the Eldar spies found out that vast quantities of Noctilith were concentrated in a single location on the galactic east. The transports and the warships transporting the priceless cargoes had the markings of the Silent King’s own dynasty.”

The insect-mistress paused, as the shadow of Lisa came back over them. Evidently, the gigantic insect had been satiated by the fruits provided.

“The Crystal does not think much in terms of logistics, but the effort the Necrons must have agreed upon to divert these kinds of resources must have been colossal. Minimally, we’re speaking of billions of tons of Noctilith here.”

Wei felt her eyes widen. Even not being accredited for everything Taylor had access to, the Seneschal-Consort knew the consequences of acquiring so much of the priceless material would be galaxy-shattering. It would provide an incredible advantage to the Imperium, and solve all the headaches and the current shortage in one go.

“Where it is located?” the Custodes was not one to beat around the issue for long.

“While I will need to compile the data with the cartographers, the location given by the Core Crystal is directly south of the Attila System and north-east of Tigrus. The Eldar called it the Heart of All Evils and the Dark Throne of the C’Tan.”

“That sounds like the Eldar tried to attack this thing and got their forces severely defeated,” Kratos the Flesh Tearer joked.

“You shouldn’t make fun of it,” the black Watcher of the God-Emperor said darkly. “The Imperium wasn’t more successful than they when we tried our chance against it.”

“Err...I wasn’t aware the Imperium had engaged in a long conflict against a Necron Dynasty,” Taylor said prudently, her expression far more attentive and serious than it had been mere seconds ago.

“Conflict is certainly a misnomer,” the Custodes was prompt to crush any hope in the cradle. “The Imperium suffered a one-sided humiliation, and for reasons you have not the clearance to know, all traces of this defeat were erased from his history.”

Wei froze, and she was sure she wasn’t the only one. What the tall giant talked about was *Damnatio Memoriae*, the dreaded Edict of Obliteration. And thanks to sharing the life of a Heroine and a Lady General, she knew how rare these terrible laws were voted by the High Lords or the God-Emperor they acted as the voice of.

“The entire zone was quarantined by His will,” the Watcher of the Golden Throne continued, “until sufficient forces could be gathered under His authority and go back to these coordinates. The Heresy broke the theoretical plans at a very early stage.”

The last words were, maybe not afraid, but filled with the next best thing to it.

“We didn’t know this location belonged to the Necrons.” As the Custodes had removed his helmet, his expression was visible, and it could be described as ‘sinister’. “But it would have probably made no difference if the knowledge had been given to us beforehand. We called the structures and the system hosting them the Ymga Monolith. It is the lair of monsters beyond human nightmares.”

**Author’s note**: And on this revelation, another chapter ends. Hope everyone will have enjoyed the 40k+ words...

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption