**Legacy 13.2**

**Legacy of Decay**

*Decay.*

*It is such a simple word, isn't it?*

*It doesn't sound very dangerous.*

*And yet it is one of the Ruinous Powers, a nightmarish parasite born of ancient sins.*

*Its slaves give it many names, most of them are just too disturbing to be spoken aloud.*

*No matter. It is still Decay.*

*It is the taint which brings dangerous diseases and transforms* *insignificant sneezes into terrible pandemics.*

*It is the disintegration of Order.*

*It is the rot which does its utmost to eat away at the foundations of civilization.*

*It feeds itself on our denials, our insecurities, and of course our fear of death.*

*Some of my advisors and friends once remarked that by that logic, the Orks are perhaps the only species to be immune to its corrupting influence.*

*But is that really the case?*

*The greenskins, for all the murderous danger they represent, have decayed too.*

*The Krorks are gone, and the twin brutes created to shape the sum of knowledge and skills of the warmongering race have decayed as a consequence.*

*Or perhaps you want to speak of the Necrons?*

*Their bodies are built from a metal which resists corrosion and rust very well, I will freely admit that.*

*But the technology supposed to protect what is left of their minds is not so perfect.*

*The Imperial commanders who fought at Mandragora and on the Ymga Monolith acknowledged this point and exploited it mercilessly.*

*Should we speak of the Eldar?*

*The majority of the Craftworlds and the planets they have left are pale shadows of their ancient Empire. During the late thirtieth millennium, the evidence of their ancient civilization was more often than not presented to my eyes in the form of ruins and crumbling psychic archeotech.*

*Excess was the death of the depraved Empire, but Decay made sure the burial was long and agonizing.*

*And of course, there is the Imperium.*

*My creation.*

*My greatest failure.*

*It was supposed to be a magnificent light banishing the darkness.*

*Look at what it has become.*

*It is the rotting carcass of hope. It is the ugly bastard child of necessity, arrogance, and fear.*

*It was never supposed to be like this.*

*I can sense my sons' dismay, no matter how far I am from them.*

*It is unsurprising. In many ways, they never truly faced Decay where it is strongest.*

*Oh, they have fought the Hordes of Pestilence and Plagues.*

*They have seen what happened to the Death Guard.*

*They have seen how resentment and anger can poison you and fester, until you are nothing more than a puppet for the vile parasite waiting at heart of the Garden of Decay.*

*But they have not fought Decay like I have.*

*They have not waged a secret war in the shadows to push for new inventions, to convince human minds that setbacks are not a permanent defeat. Technology and knowledge can be lost temporarily, but our species is curious and tenacious.*

*They have not walked knee-deep in the ashes of the Federation's capital, and wept over the death of trillions, while the laughter of the pestilence parasite echoed across the Warp.*

*This was a terrible defeat humanity suffered. The catastrophic daemonic onslaughts and the rampages of the Lost and the Damned ended with the damnation of uncountable souls.*

*But the most grievous calamity was the rotting of the ideals. The rotting of* my *ideals. The perversion of the dream we could be one day be* free*.*

*It is still no reason to succumb to despair.*

*The damage done by four thousand years of delusion is enormous, but it can be reversed.*

*Chaos can be defeated.*

*And if Slaanesh could be killed, that proves there is a way to kill Nurgle too. I just have to find it.*

*In the meantime, I will just have to settle for listening to its shrieks of fury when it discovers just how badly it underestimated Taylor Hebert.*

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Somewhere in the south of the Dolos Continent**

**Somewhere well below the surface of the planet**

**The Hope Beacon – in construction**

**2.912.312M35**

Thought for the day: I was there the day the Emperor killed Horus.

**Liandra of Caledor**

On the surface, the sight had been less than impressive. There had been a few Moth Domes, some troop barracks, and a few installations to make sure the local soldiers didn't get too bored.

This changed once you used the secret lifts, and they were so well hidden Liandra had missed them at first.

There was no indication how deep the lift had descended into the entrails of the planet, but it couldn't be a small distance; otherwise the psychic emissions would have betrayed them, Moths or not.

Once there, the spectacle was worth the time she had spent waiting for most of two days.

It wasn't the size of a Webway City.

But that wasn't for lack of trying.

Liandra was no poet, except when it came to warfare and duelling; she had no words to describe it in eloquent Aeldari lyrics.

So in blunter words, it was like watching an anthill being built before your eyes.

With the additional point in favour of that being that there had to be millions of ants of all sizes here.

It was likely an understatement.

There were insects arriving and leaving through Titan-sized tunnels every moment, and the construction site was half-hidden by pillars which looked like they had been carved from the bones of the planet by the will of a God.

It was a cavern whose construction had begun very recently, and yet, Liandra was sure that few races would have been able to accomplish a building effort of this magnitude in one or two centuries.

To accomplish that, the construction force was not limited to ants. There were quantities of insects, ranging from the tiny beetles to the most respectable tunnel-diggers the Imperium called 'Ambulls', and then there were more gigantic assets, including the red-gold Titan-Moths regularly purifying the cavern.

Between the clouds and columns of arachnids and other coordinators, there were the metallic humans covered in red robes, but they remained few in number, surrounded by the relentless Swarm.

"I'm impressed, my Empress. I didn't think you would be able to keep something of this magnitude a secret from everyone."

"Oh, there are many souls outside who have been informed," the reply came after two heartbeats, "they may not be aware of certain details, however."

"Preparations to build a new site if there is a problem with this one?"

"Yes, though the fact I had to find a way to transport all the food to feed my Swarm here played a more important role at the beginning. We planted some mega-cacti, but for a project of this size, Catachan Ants and the Ambulls would swiftly starve if they had to subsist on a diet of only cactus juice to maintain their strength."

"Hmm...a good point, my Empress. Logistics, I must admit, were never my area of interest."

For this admission, she received a snort.

"Why I am not surprised? Artemis, we are going to the Resonatum Ring."

"Yes, Webmistress! The Custodes just departed-"

"It's fine. This is more inspection and...preparatory work today."

"As you say, Webmistress! Hestia is on her way...but you already knew that."

If the security measures had been high before, they paled to those waiting for them now. The tunnel they walked into was vast enough to permit the passage of a few human-made giant walkers, and the red-robed auxiliaries had done exactly that, deploying two of their 'Knights', in addition as usual to the tens of thousands of battle-insects obeying the will of Empress Weaver.

Then there were the adamantium doors.

Liandra felt respect for the insects. Bringing those gates here must have been a tremendous chore in and of itself.

There was a long list of protections, most of them conceived to make sure no one among their group, be it Liandra or any of the Space Marines, was an imposter.

And at last they were introduced to the 'Ring'.

The name was appropriate, in a way.

The large tunnel, once 'poked' with a psychic probe, would indeed form a magnificent ring in the depths of the planet once it was complete.

That was not the case now.

Though to be fair to the big golden spider and her large swarm currently occupied shaping, re-shaping, and polishing stone after stone, the precision required was astronomically high.

Without the Empress, all of it would have had to be done by other means, and Liandra knew it would have taken far, far longer to deliver a fraction of the performance.

As for the purpose of the whole project?

It was not that difficult to have a guess the moment she saw the three large Aethergold Pylons already emplaced inside the incomplete 'Ring'.

"You are building an Aetheric Engine."

"Indeed." Her Empress clearly saw no reason to obfuscate the truth.

"Your Empire already has a lighthouse."

"One," the ruler of Nyx agreed, "and it was not built recently. It is a dangerous weakness."

On that point, Liandra nodded.

The pretence was discarded, and the former Blood Muse observed the 'Ring' with determined eyes.

Apparently, not all the Pylons which would end up in this 'Resonatum Ring' were here today. It was likely they would end up with ten or twelve, and that was assuming there weren't more which would be stored as potential spares.

It was hardly surprising, given how recent it had been that the humans had started to recognise the sheer potential of Noctilith use for their grand projects.

No, there was something else-

Ah.

"You need Wraithbone to 'connect' the different Pylons." She didn't even pretend it was a question.

"I do." The golden wings were unfurled and grew larger, and the Pylons seemed to react to it as a consequence.

For anyone else, Liandra would already have told them that this seer's power wasn't meant to be replicated very often. Assuredly, her Empress would be able to build more than one, unlike the Beacon of Pain the Human Emperor was trapped and bounded to.

But it would still be a limited number, and the consequences for building too many of them wouldn't be pleasant. The Warp was more than just the realm of Chaos, in the end. It was a realm where your soul was reflected, and there was only so much light you could use as illumination.

"In that case, there may be a problem." The former High Priestess of Khaine admitted reluctantly.

"I was under the impression the Queen of Blades taught you the art of the Bonesingers."

"She did." Liandra confirmed defensively. "And I can say, without modesty, that I am very good at it."

"What is the problem, then?" At least the Angel of Sacrifice was smirking...

"I am capable of creating high-quality Wraithbone, as I said." The former Apprentice of Aenaria Eldanesh spoke. "But I can't do it quickly. While the 'Ring' is still incomplete, I have a good idea how wide and long it is going to be in the end. If you want a flawless work of ten connections between two Pylons, I think I can do it in twelve to fourteen of your 'Terran years'."

Since there were more than two Pylons to connect by Sacrifice-imbued Wraithbone, clearly, the total time to complete this resonance chamber would be multiplied by ten easily.

The other parts of the Aetheric Engine were clearly less complicated and would largely be ready in time by then.

"That is, naturally, assuming you work alone."

"Yes, my Empress. But you kind of need me if you want Sacrifice-imbued Wraithbone at the end of the process." Liandra was not going to say she knew her Empress perfectly, because it would have been ridiculous and untrue. But the alternative was using the Eldaneshi *children*, for they were protected by Sacrifice, and that she was sure the Queen of the Swarm would never do.

"True. That said, would it possible for you to act as a...relay for different Bonesingers? They would create the Wraithbone to your specifications, and you would coordinate and imbue the Wraithbone. In a way, you would be the equivalent of one of my Adjutant-Spiders, except for threads of Wraithbone, not of silk."

Liandra blinked and considered the matter for several minutes.

"That...that could work, my Empress." She answered at last. "I will need some highly-skilled Bonesingers to perfect the process, however. The average Crafter who has been trained for a hundred cycles won't be enough for this kind of task. I will need some real Wraithbone artists."

It was a silent question which was asked: did the Destroyer of Commorragh want to reveal the existence of this underground facility to more Eldaneshi, given how many obfuscation efforts had been done to keep it a secret?

"Speak with Aurelia Malys, please. Ask her...ask her hypothetically, how much it would cost me to find and hire ten highly-skilled Bonesingers for the better part of a year."

"Yes, my Empress. And if I am forced to give a name?"

"My spiders have started to call it the 'Hope Beacon'. I think you can mention it to the Herald of Atharti...but only to her."

"By your will, it shall be done," Liandra replied earnestly.

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

In the end, Taylor was rather satisfied with her not-so-surprise inspection. True, there were a lot of things that had suffered a delay or would have to be changed in the days to come.

But when you built something as unprecedented as an insect-adapted copy of the Dark Age's Choral Engine, problems were inevitable.

And so far, everything could be solved, provided enough resources and assets were committed to it.

She could only pray that wasn't going to change.

Giving one last glance to the structure where the first Fusion Reactor was being assembled, the Basileia of Nyx turned again to face the blood-haired Muse.

"I have another problem I want to use your expertise for."

"I'm all ears, my Empress."

The words would have been innocent enough for anyone not versed in the Aeldari language. Unfortunately, what would have gone unnoticed by many human eyes, in this case the movement of the ears and the body, Taylor couldn't miss. And the moment she deciphered it was the moment she understood the...carnal nuances.

The Angel of Sacrifice sighed internally.

"I want to know how early in your Empire's history the creation of Planet World Spirits started. The memories I own did not have the answer to that."

"Why would you-" For a short moment, Liandra of Caledor gave her a very human expression of surprise. "No. Forgive me, my Empress. To answer your question...we who obeyed the Phoenix Throne did not create the 'World Spirits'. The Old Ones gave us the knowledge, and depending on the era, Maiden Worlds were seeded all across the galaxy with the potential for many to have a World Spirit."

The next facial expression was definitely smug.

"Did you find one? If so, you are very lucky, my Empress." If the long-ear had not decided to take a suggestive pose here and now, it wouldn't have been so bad...

"Luck has nothing to do with it." Taylor drew a data-slate from her pocket and activated it before handing it to her. Immediately the seemingly benevolent orb of green and blue appeared. "Catachan. A planet where everything wants to kill you, down to the toads, the flowers, and the mushrooms."

The Muse did not take long before her lecture reached the 'interesting' points.

"The agents of the Hungering Maw are there. Lovely."

"Yes." Most of the Generals anywhere near Nyx reacted rather more forcefully when they watched the holo-vids of the Tyranids' presence, but then Liandra wasn't human.

The Shield of the Angels waited for ten seconds, and then continued.

"The first time I was given the knowledge that a Tyranid was hiding somewhere under this planet's surface, I didn't comprehend the significance, of course. There was no pattern to be analysed and understood. But this changed with Operation Stalingrad. We had uncountable witnesses who confirmed Behemoth rose from the oceanic depths of Fenris. Everyone, including the few Traitor prisoners and all Loyalist witnesses, confirmed the krakens were the spawn of this 'hyper-psychic Hive Ship'. And Fenris has a World Spirit."

When you had dismissed the improbable factors, all it remained was the truth, no matter how painful.

"Your guess, my Empress, is that the scout organisms of the Hungering Maw are targeting planets with World Spirits. And then once they have landed, they...contaminate them, making sure the whole fauna and flora are rising to ever-greater levels of evolutionary violence?"

"Yes." Taylor said curtly. "Is it possible?"

The answer came just as swift.

"Yes. It is not only possible, it is highly likely that this is what happened in the case of the two planets you mentioned. In both cases, the invading organisms acted psychically much as a virus would. They infected the World Spirit, and thus transformed the planet with minimum effort. This is really brilliant, actually. One planet with millions or billions of 'Tyranids' would alarm plenty of species, including my own. But by adopting this approach, you obtain a realm of evolution and death where the species are not Tyranids."

And it could have continued like this for thousands of years until the arrival of the first Tyranid fleet.

It was...bloody terrifying.

Minor piece of good news, it explained why 'Nova Fenrisia', according to Guilliman's latest courier ship, was settling into a cold but far less dangerous planet than Fenris had been. The 'infection' of the Tyranids was purged. The World Spirit was free to diminish its levels of aggression. Yes, it was a theory which fit the facts at hand. She would inform the two Primarchs of this as soon as possible.

Of course, all the good news didn't compare to the bad. The Aeldari Empire had been known as the 'Empire of a Billion Moons' for a good reason. And before them, the Old Ones had ruled over a fairly large part of the galaxy too. That was a lot of potential worlds which could host World Spirits, even if some of them had been destroyed across the ages.

"I suppose, my Empress, that the elimination of the infection has been decided?"

"It has." There was no purpose to dance around the problem, after all. "This is the only lead we currently have to eliminate the Tyranid vanguard scouts."

"In that case, I have both bad news and good news."

"Bad news first."

"I don't know if the elimination of the Hungering Maw's infection will change much in the next thousands of cycles," the Aeldari sworn to Sacrifice informed her unflinchingly. "Judging by the results, this infestation began long before the one Behemoth was responsible for. No matter how much you restore a World Spirit, the fauna and flora are what they are. It will take a long time for the environment to look like the paradise it was supposed to be."

"This," Taylor grimaced inwardly, "will not be a problem."

The Guard and other organisations had been very worried that she would damage the supply of Jungle Fighter Regiments. At least now she could honestly reassure these parties nothing of the sort would happen.

"Cold, my Empress."

"And the good news?"

Liandra bared her teeth.

"To exert such an influence over the World Spirit, the Tyranid organism is necessarily close to it, and I mean both psychically and physically."

This time, Taylor returned the smile.

"I think it's a very good thing I sent one of my loyal Adjutants ahead to lay the groundwork for the military operation..."

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**The Stark Redoubt**

**5.913.312M35**

**General** **Vincent Sharp**

Vincent Sharp had seen many men and women trying to pretend they were Adepts of the Adeptus Administratum, but none of them had ever been so ridiculously funny.

"I am Adept Kali, and this is a surprise inspection!"

General Vincent Sharp snorted very loudly.

Once this whole affair was over, he would recount the entire joke to his children.

The idea of a tank-sized spider hired by the Adeptus Administratum was the kind of tale that would be a legend on Catachan for decades.

"There is no need to continue this charade, Adjutant-Captain Kali. We're alone...and your Lady General informed me you were coming."

"Oh," the enormous arachnid for just a moment seemed to lose her composure...before raising an accusatory leg. "In that case, let me assure you, General, that the hospitality of the Catachan warriors is really lacking! I had to kill five Black Vipers on my way here! One of them almost dropped on top of me from an aeration conduit!"

Vincent Sharp grimaced. He really would have to tell his men to stop the usual hazing. It was fine when it was the usual flunkies of the Adeptus Administratum. It was unacceptable when it was the emissary of a Living Saint who had destroyed an entire Legion of Traitor Astartes.

"This is just scandalous!"

"I assure you, the culprits will be found and punished." Sergeant Ripper would benefit from a small adventure outside of the Redoubt anyway. The youngster was getting too arrogant. Maybe a few days evading the Swamp Mambas and the Devils would teach him a lesson or two. Or maybe not, but one could always hope.

Still, better to put an end to the hazing before it grew uncontrollable.

The armoured spider grumbled, and then plunged into another subject that all Catachan Generals tried to avoid.

"I couldn't help but notice, General, that for a population which is supposed to be close to twelve million men, women, and children, your effectives are impressive!"

And that was why in general quite a few Adepts had tragic accidents before they could send back uncomplimentary reports to their superiors.

Vincent Sharp cleared his throat.

"Ah, you noticed, Adjutant-Captain?"

The sound which came out of the metallic voice was particularly disdainful.

"General, I am a servant of the Webmistress! I have the will of Administration burning within my me, praise the Webmistress! In addition to that, I happen to have eight eyes. I can count the twelve major Redoubts of Catachan and the other minor ones which were built in the last millennia! Even by the most conservative estimates, I arrive at a population count of nearly three billion, not twelve million! How should explain this incredible discrepancy in numbers to the Webmistress?"

Somehow, Vincent had a feeling that the old pun of 'we Jungle Fighters are really bad at maths' wasn't going to work this time.

No, it was better to go with the truth.

"It's a defensive measure against the voracious appetite of the Munitorum," the thirty-five-year-old General replied truthfully. "I don't really know when it all began, but according to the cogboys we have working in our ammunition production facilities in orbit, by mid-M32, the Munitorum dictated we were to form our entire population into regiments and send them to the frontlines within ten standard years."

Sharp didn't know if his predecessors had gotten the bureaucrats behind this stupid idea in the end. Though it wouldn't surprise him if they had succeeded. They were from Catachan, and the level of stupidity of the bureaucrats had to be punished, somehow.

"We weren't willing to abandon our home, though. So the Governor sent the message the population levels had regressed to the numbers we had when the Emperor discovered us. Twelve million."

"And the Administratum continues to send you request after request to commit your entire population every ten years?" Kali the spider was aghast listening to his explanation, and Sharp couldn't really blame her. "Are they that stupid?"

"We have done our best to be models when it comes to tithe-delivery," the old joke was as good as it had been one thousand years ago.

"Unbelievable," the Adjutant-Captain shook her enormous head. "Anyway. If the Administratum is willing to be fooled by something so clumsy, they deserve to be tricked. I serve the Webmistress and the Emperor, not the Administratum."

"Indeed," Sharp grinned. He was really beginning to like the arachnid. "The first messages hinted your Lady General Militant requested a large deployment of Jungle Fighters."

"Oh, yes! With the Guard recruitment levels increasing everywhere in the Nyx Sector, the Webmistress has generously been willing to commit a surplus of one hundred fifty thousand men and women, fully equipped. The Swarm spared no effort to train them!"

Knowing General 'Death' Schwarz, Sharp didn't know if he should be proud of the soldiers who faced this training, or pity them. Maybe, he decided after a few seconds, a bit of both.

"So one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, all up to Jungle Fighter standards. Any particular preferences?"

"The Webmistress leaves the choice of the regiments to you," Adjutant-Captain Kali replied quickly. "I will only emphasize that we are facing an enemy which will likely turn fauna and flora alike against your troops and the force the Webmistress commits!"

"Duly noted. I will begin the selection process immediately."

There wouldn't be a shortage of volunteers, it went without saying. There had been no invasion of their home in the last millennium; no one had been *that* stupid, lately. As such, a campaign, and with an ambitious goal like this one, was the dream of every self-respecting Catachan Jungle Fighter.

Oh, no, the problem was going to limit the number of volunteers to something approaching one hundred and fifty thousand warriors.

"I would appreciate, however, that the secrets of Catachan remain...err...rather between you and the Lady General Militant."

"I am willing to transmit these tolerable terms to the Webmistress! As long as you stop placing those dangerous snakes close to me!" Sharp grimaced. "As for the Administratum and the Munitorum, their lack of competence is getting even more irritating day after day! I can't wait for the day the Webmistress orders us to replace the vellum-worshippers!"

Laughing at that moment would be completely unprofessional.

General Vincent Sharp did it anyway.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**High Orbit over Holy Terra**

**Imperial Navy Orbital Station *Triumph of Loyalty***

**0.919.312M35**

**Solar** **Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

In hindsight, the shiver which had gone through his body for no at all reason upon entering the meeting room had not been a good sign.

Not that Nicephorus was a superstitious man, far from it.

But the displeased expression of Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum, recently promoted to the rank of Third Space Lord, had nothing to do with superstition and more with the highly sensitive message Xerxes had commanded him to play messenger for.

Nicephorus really wished his brother stopped giving him such unpleasant duties, and not just because he understood literally nothing about the Imperial Navy and void-related things. The only starship he used regularly was the yacht he was owed due to his exalted rank – the Solar Guardian of Records had to travel across the Sol System often, or so went the reasoning.

"Unacceptable," Goldenbaum uttered, the word being uttered like a poorly-cooked meal had been presented in front of him.

"In which way, Lord Admiral?"

"All of it!" The eyes shone with anger, but the lapse of control disappeared as fast as it had appeared. "I asked for a very specific list of warships! Your brother, the *esteemed* High Lord of the Administratum, clearly thinks he knows better than me, and felt good to replace my list with an entirely different one."

There was nothing complimentary in the way the word 'esteemed' and the others which followed had been spoken, it had be said.

"I'm sure my brother has *excellent* reasons."

"Oh yes," the voice of Rudolf von Goldenbaum could have dried a few mega-cisterns of Holy Terra. "I'm sure the generous concession he is ready to give by building many brand-new Zion-class Battleships is excellent! Why, it is not as if the Zion Sector has the only shipyards which keep building those hulls!"

Damn it, Xerxes.

Nicephorus, as he had said before, didn't know much about the Imperial Navy. But he knew that yes, the Vandire-controlled Sectors controlled the specialised infrastructure required to build up the class of Battleships bearing the name of the Vandire's jewel and primary seat of power.

He also knew – because Xerxes had complained and bickered loudly about it several times when he was within earshot – that the list of orders had abruptly collapsed after Commorragh, and the trend had accelerated after the conclusion of the Black Crusade. If nothing was done, the production lines involved in manufacturing the parts of these great and mighty capital ships were going to have to be closed and maybe dismantled. When no one wanted to buy a starship, you couldn't pay the hundreds of millions of plebeians involved in the military program.

"I won't deny there are modest industrial factors at stake, Lord Admiral," Nicephorus tried diplomatically. "But I assure you that the shipyards we have can indeed build the Zion-class Battleships in great numbers and for a price cheaper than any hull from the *Ring of Iron*!"

Rudolf von Goldenbaum looked at him as if he had thrown mud on his pristine Battlefleet Solar uniform.

"Yes, but you appear to be missing the point. The Martian ships can be deployed on time for the campaign they are assigned to! Something your Zion-class Battleships can hardly boast. Despite our best efforts, the *Saint Hyacinth* is still undergoing repairs, like it has been for the last three years. The First Space Lord had to abandon the idea of deploying the *San Joaquin* and the *Conquistador* to the Cadian Sector because of their recurring mechanical problems!"

The far younger man shook his head.

"I am willing to listen to certain industrial priorities, Lord Vandire. But I am not willing to close my eyes when there are problems with a Battleship class. I want to win void battles with that Battleship. As it stands, I would rather choose to build Kisher's Kombustibles again."

"Err...weren't those the combustibles...err...the Battleships which exploded after a few shots during the Battle of Commorragh?"

"Yes," Rudolf von Goldenbaum replied brutally. "But at least those ships reached the battlefield in time to do some good. Whereas I am absolutely certain that with Zion-class Battleships, the hulls will be waiting in the docks when the call to arms comes!"

Xerxes was not going to like that at all.

Nicephorus didn't have many certainties in his life, but he was sure of this 'minor fact'. It would be best to make sure he was far away from anything valuable and expensive when he broke the news.

He had to insist. Otherwise the rest of the Clan was going to complain he wasn't defending enough their interests...

"Still, the construction of a few Zion-class Battleships is not going to be too problematic for the Navy-"

"Your brother doesn't want a few," Goldenbaum interrupted very rudely, "he wants forty of them to be built in the next thirty years!"

Forty? Even for Xerxes, that seemed a bit...excessive.

"This alone would already be bad enough, but he also wants two hundred Hammer-class Cruisers!" The Lord Admiral looked at his message again. "Whatever a Hammer-class Cruiser is. I've never heard of the class before today."

"It might be one of the new brand-new innovative designs of the Zion shipyards," Nicephorus guessed, trying not to reveal just how in the dark he was about it.

Rudolf's face was a clear and non-ambiguous indicator that that was not going to convince the Admirals of Solar. Not when the Zion-class Battleships had not earned the most glorious of reputations in the last decade.

"I am *not* going to go to war in an untested class, which, for all we know, might be worse than the combustibles of Von Kisher." Nowhere was the name of Weaver mentioned, but Nicephorus heard it loud and clear. "I am going to again give you a list of the ships I want. This time, High Lord Vandire is going to accept it and release the first payment of Thrones before year's end."

Nicephorus took the message. A rapid reading was enough to confirm it was nearly identical to the first message of Goldenbaum which he had played messenger for several weeks ago.

Yes, playing messenger between those two was really a duty he was beginning to hate.

"I will deliver the message, Lord Admiral."

And he really hopes his expression conveyed accurately how well it was going to be received by Xerxes.

**Holy Terra**

**Merica**

**Mega-Hive Cajun**

**De facto Primary Headquarters of the Adeptus Almitas**

**0.921.312M35**

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

There were days when Joost was very relieved to be alive. Let it not to be said that the Living Saint didn't honour her promises.

Of course, all the invitations for any prestigious conference and other important events suddenly seemed to have mysteriously disappeared.

Joost had not known what he had really expected from Xerxes Vandire, but somehow, this felt incredibly petty of the High Lord of the Administratum.

But there were more important preoccupations.

For while the assassins of Clan Vandire weren't visiting, the Inquisitors on the other hand were becoming more and more a frequent sight in the upper levels of the Mega-Hive.

One always had to see the positive side of the Auramite chip: Joost was still alive.

Since he firmly intended to stay that way for as long as possible, however, this demanded certain sacrifices. He certainly didn't remember working as hard since the official admission ceremony which recognised him as a full-fledged Adept.

"Please explain in concise words why you felt this amended List of Most Wanted Beings must be acknowledged as final."

Joost Harpagon swallowed nervously. He had always thought that black-cloaked individuals were too dramatic, but one had to admit, it was scary and effective when an Inquisitor stood before you.

No name had been given, and Joost hadn't asked for one. But the Rosette and the codes it carried came straight from the Imperial Palace. In situations like this, you complied. The alternative wasn't worth thinking about.

"Obviously, the elimination of so many Traitor Warlords during the Battle of Macragge and before forced the Adeptus Almitas to consult many, many vaults and erase a non-negligible number of enemies of the Imperium. Per the orders of the Holy Ordos and the Adeptus Custodes, no bounty will be assigned if the being can't be killed in a permanent manner with a significant chance of success."

And wasn't that a terrifying thought? There were beings in this galaxy that even the Ten Thousand admitted neither a Living Saint nor Primarchs had good odds of putting down forever.

"Based on the testimony of Her Celestial Highness the Countess of York," Joost continued, "we saw no reason to change the two beings at the top of the list. The Despoiler stays the most wanted being of the Imperium."

Though Joost had to admit he had his doubts if anyone could actually kill that monster. In four thousand years, no one since the Emperor's Champion himself had come close.

"The number two is of course the Traitor Fabricator-General, Kelbor-Hal himself." There was just enough indirect evidence someone with the traitor's name still lived. Joost wouldn't gamble on this thing being a mortal, but duty was duty. "The third of course is the entity calling itself Nagash."

Somehow, the syllabuses felt...uncomfortable. Strange. Alien. It was like you couldn't feel any kind of positive feeling speaking the name.

"Per the will of His Most Holy Majesty and the current Fabricator-General, it has been decided number four will go to the construct called the 'Chaos Android Command Core'. This device, while not seen by any loyal soul, had its existence confirmed by redemption-seeking Astartes and esoteric forms of divination. Its destruction is an absolute priority."

And for good reason, for the moment it was destroyed, the Lord of Iron – the name that was given as the architect of the heretekal machines – would feel the wrath of his own creations.

"Number Five and Number Six stay the same. We don't have the faintest idea what Kel Sidonius, the Alpha Head, has been doing in the last centuries, but no Imperial citizen has ever come forwards to claim his bounty. As for the abominable Primogenitor, his presence on multiple theatres of war is well-attested, alas. But for all the clones which have been eliminated, the prime body, assuming there is one, has never been discovered. The Seventh..."

"The Seventh is Gluthor Skurvithrax the Ferryman, yes."

Joost nodded quickly. Generally speaking, everyone agreed that the Fifth Black Crusade had seen tremendous victories for the Imperium and that the losses endured had been more than compensated by the sheer scale of the gains. Primarchs had returned. A Traitor Legion had been annihilated. Many priceless pieces of archeotech had been recovered. Even the destruction of Fenris, homeworld of the Space Wolves, had been compensated for in the end.

But there had been some defeats too.

And one of them had been delivered by the fleet of Gluthor Skurvithrax.

The Plague Marine had profited from the confused situation around the Eye and the Calyx Hell Stars to launch a raid on a cluster of recently-recognised Civilised Worlds, and the Imperium's reinforcements had arrived too late to stop him.

The seven worlds had not really been that productive, but now they were barren, for the Imperium had to torch them from orbit. Millions of souls had been enslaved and kidnapped by the fiend. The others had been contaminated with such horrible pandemics that the death the Purgation Fleets had given them must have felt like a mercy in the end.

The Herald of Pestilence, the dreaded Traveller, had been removed from the list. But another Plague Marine was ready to take its place.

"As the reports of his demise were apparently largely exaggerated, it has been decided unanimously among the Adeptus Almitas that the infamous Sevatar, also known as the Prince of Crows, will be Number Eight." Joost shivered. He had looked at the ancient holo-vid where the face of the monster was shown, and he wished he hadn't.

"Ah. The Ninth is the Destiny Unwritten, isn't it?"

"Yes, Inquisitor. We had planned to add her rival the 'Cambion of Blood' too, but it was recently confirmed by various sources that permanently removing this abomination may be beyond conventional means. Thus we gave the rival Warlord who was fighting in the Calyx Hell Stars the Number Nine. After that, well, the Queen of Blades had to remain Number Ten."

The rest of the list was significantly less dangerous. And no, the Adept-Primus didn't mean 'not dangerous'. Everything, whether it be a filthy Traitor, a xenos, or something else was extremely dangerous by virtue of being on this list. These were the great enemies of the Imperium, the fiends which could give nightmares to the majority of the Space Marine Chapter Masters and other stalwart defenders of the Imperium.

But there was no denying that when you saw the description of Kossolax the Forsworn and Arch-Heretek Sota-Nul, respectively Number Eleven and Twelve, they were orders of magnitude below the ten great threats.

"Very well," the Inquisitor turned around and began to walk away. "This list is endorsed, Adept-Primus. You have done good work. Make sure it continues."

Well, as far as encouragements went, it was a powerful one!

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**2.932.312M35**

**Regina** **Wei Cao**

"And so I'm not saying my nobles want plenty of Agri-Hives built on Wuhan itself."

Her wife groaned. Loudly.

"But you're implying it very strongly."

The Regina showed her love a smile that, in her humble opinion, should earn her a prize in a contest of pious and innocent expressions.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes. And I suppose you bribed one of my poor Adjutants into looking at the numbers. Just to know if the industrial production numbers supported the idea."

Wei grinned. Taylor knew her *very* well.

"I just hope you didn't offer more honey than necessary. My Adjutants always get over-excited for the next twelve hours, and I really don't want them to forget the proper protocols."

"Oh, no, I know how you feel about that. I offered...something else." Hopefully, her surprise would be very enjoyable tomorrow. The silk dress was going to be incredibly spectacular, if she was to be honest with herself. "And stop changing the subject, please. Yes, I got the numbers. They support my views, you know."

"The industrial production capacity is there," the Basileia of Nyx replied, "but the manpower requirements aren't. We're expanding the pool of trained workers as fast as we can, Wei. In one or two years, yes, Nyx will have trained enough men and women to begin considering the construction of an Agri-Hive in the Wuhan System. Right now, however, the training cadres are simply not there."

"And for the Hive renovations?" She asked, unwilling to abandon her persuasion effort.

"That is a different matter." Her golden-winged angelic wife admitted. "The decaying infrastructure has to be replaced, and there are many spare parts of the Agri-Hives that can be used for non-Agri Hives. And production of brand-new Fusion Reactors has increased nicely."

"And you received a new batch of cogboys from different Forge Worlds in the last several weeks."

She received a mock glare for her words.

"They have agency you know, Wei."

"When it comes to blaming Leet, I suppose they do," the Regina replied cheekily. "Well?"

"You know I can't refuse you anything when it comes to fighting the legacy of the nobility's disastrous policies. I will send twenty thousand Tech-Priests before year's end. The materials shouldn't be too much trouble...I think. We will discuss the budget allocation after the Sanguinala."

The next second, an Adjutant-Spider began to make not so-discreet gestures behind the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

"And I should go, unfortunately," the predictable words arrived a few seconds later. "My duties have come up once again."

"Taylor...should we repeat the sermons once more? You need some sleep, the Sanguinala ceremonies are going to be long and taxing for you. You need to be in your best health."

Her wife shook her head with a grimace on her face.

"I know. But in this case, I really need to go. The Necron Ambassador has requested an audience, and he did not come alone."

Wei raised an eyebrow. Unlike the long-ears of the Eldaneshi Embassy, the Necrons had stayed really discreet so far, taking part in only two meetings where different xenos species were presented to each other. And the encounters had been planned long in advance, with quantities of boring ceremonies before and after it.

"What changed?"

"I suppose the whole point of the audience is to figure that out."

The Regina of Wuhan huffed.

"Fine. But you will owe me a movie evening, oh Basileia."

"Duly noted, oh Regina."

**The Red Strategium**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

The moment she saw who accompanied the Ambassador, Taylor had changed the audience's location from her throne room to the Red Strategium.

When you brought the Stormlord with you, after all, it wasn't likely the subject of the conversation was about to be about flowers.

"The so-called 'Hive Fleet' the Tau faced in their future timeline was a mere vanguard."

And in case she wanted good news, this audience was not going to give them.

"I presume you have enough data to back up the claim," she commented calmly.

And unfortunately, Overlord Imotekh did.

Oh, he did.

The sheer quantity of data was colossal. Without **Administration** to analyse everything, Taylor wasn't ashamed to admit she would have been overwhelmed.

But the insect-mistress had the skills to assimilate everything.

And Imotekh's logic was flawless.

There was of course a great deal of speculation, for the knowledge they didn't have about the Tyranids could fill several planet-sized libraries.

But unfortunately, the speculation was cold, passionless, and unfortunately, most likely optimistic.

"Hive Fleet Gorgon was playing with the Tau. It was playing with them from the very moment it encountered them."

"Yes." The good point about the Stormlord was that he didn't for a single second try to downplay the magnitude of the problem. "And while the information sources about the other Tyranid conflicts is of far lower quality and quantity, the facts support the conclusion each 'Hive Fleet' so far recorded has tested the species it was facing."

"For Gorgon, I understand," Taylor frowned. "But for an hypothetical Hive Fleet sharing Behemoth's traits, what-"

"What is Behemoth's specialty, Lady General?" The Stormlord asked imperiously.

"Overwhelming aggression, be it physical or psychic," the Victor of Ardium answered, before shivering when she realised what she had said.

Overlord Imotekh nodded.

"Correct. Gorgon is specialised for hyper-adaptation in a limited amount of time. Behemoth is the unstoppable ram."

And by simple logic, you arrived at the awful – logical – outcome.

"If there are two Hive Fleets out there, there are more."

"Yes." The being who could have been the Phaeron of the Sautekh Dynasty answered clearly. "This is why I took the liberty of contacting the Ambassador so quickly. Your operation Hell Garden is of far greater significance than I and you assumed beforehand."

Yes, it did. If the Tyranid hiding somewhere on Catachan was able to multiply and fight per the 'doctrine' of its Hive Fleet, they could learn a lot before the great wars truly began.

"And the other hypotheses I formulated and relayed to Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten?"

"That the first scouts of the Tyranids are prioritizing worlds with World Spirits?" Imotekh asked just to confirm, and she nodded. "Yes, the theory is near-certain to be true. It has only advantages for the Hive Fleet. Whatever its specialty, the planet thus transformed represents either a potential citadel or a pantry."

"Assuming it can't be both."

The Tyranids had been acting like a virus for the ecosystems of Fenris and Catachan, but nothing would really stop them from killing the World Spirits if the orders came from more evolved organisms.

And given the intelligence, one had to assume the Tyranids had enough control to devour the species which interested them, assimilate the strengths of the Death World's most redoubtable super-predators, and then move on, using it as a supply base.

"Assuming it can't be both." Imotekh repeated before changing the subject. "Captured specimens would be appreciated."

"In that case, you will have to send one of your ships to Catachan." Taylor winced. "For security reasons, all the Imperial organisations studying the Tyranids have agreed the specimens must not be transported outside of the system where they have been captured. The risks of propagating the Tyranid threat are just too high."

They had, with plenty of good luck, managed to deal with the problem at Macragge; Taylor was not going to ignore the previous lessons and spread a nightmare because she underestimated the organisms of Catachan.

"I will transmit the request of a transport to the Nerushlatset Dynasty." Imotekh assured her. "While I am not a vivisection specialist, I know better than to ignore the information which can be gained from it. You should obtain an answer before your military campaign begins."

The green light coming out of the metallic shell were particularly sinister, but far less so than the news delivered so far.

"I trust you understand the value of the information I delivered to you."

"Yes. Numbers aren't the solution to deal with the Tyranids."

Numbers would never be the solution to deal with the Tyranids.

Taylor had already begun to assume the Great Devourer was going to have more star-faring organisms than the Imperium had starships, even when you added the starships of the Chartist Captains, but if they had really been testing species for so long, they were completely outmatched.

It was entirely possible that even if they did conscript every man, woman, and child of the Imperium, they still wouldn't be able to match the Tyranid numbers.

Blood of Terra, what were they at war against?

**Azkaellon Stadium**

**2.944.312M35**

**Sergeant** **Gavreel Forcas**

His Lady had been more thoughtful than usual during this Sanguinala.

Obviously, it took someone who knew her very well. There had been nothing faked in her smile when she had hugged all the children during the Day of Rebirth and complimented them for their splendid home-made costumes.

But there had been little signs which couldn't fool a Space Marine of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

Take today, for example.

It was the fourth day of the Sanguinala, the Day of Jewels, also often called the Day of Beauty.

Lady Weaver usually did not come to watch the sport competitions in the Azkaellon Stadium before tomorrow, which would celebrate the Day of Valour.

Some part of it may be because there were rumoured to be plenty of exceptional candidates wishing to join the Brothers of the Red.

That definitely held a kernel of truth, but Gavreel didn't think it was the *whole* truth.

"Unlucky," the Basileia remarked when one of the competitors was disqualified from one of the hundred metres qualifiers because he anticipated the orders of the judges and made a false start.

"I didn't study the reward system, but is it possible to compensate for a zero in one of the contests?" the black-armoured Sergeant asked.

"Theoretically you can." The stars-filled eyes seemed to double their radiance as Taylor Hebert watched the different ongoing competitions. "Chapter Master Izaz assured me it was possible a few years ago, I think."

"Which means that while it's theoretically possible, practically is an entirely different story."

The shrug confirmed Gavreel had guessed right.

"To catch back up with the top scorers, you have to get first place two or three times, and show many above-average performances in other trials. I won't say it is impossible, but I have not yet seen anyone doing it in the years before we marched for Macragge."

The way the sentence ended made him unconsciously chuckle.

For all the tragedies and deaths which had occurred, there was still something funny about the isolationism of the Ultramarines breaking like it did.

"The Astartes selection process is truly a gruelling long-distance race."

"Gavreel, if it was so easy to become Astartes, I think there would be far more battle-brothers everywhere in the galaxy...and the candidates would likely be a tad less motivated."

"Probably," the veteran Sergeant conceded.

"The Brothers of the Red and my own interests perfectly coincide with these competitions." The Basileia continued tranquilly. "They can easily recruit superb recruits, but those who are genetically incompatible, a bit unlucky, or unable to perform their best on a given day can exceed the standards of plenty of organisations I won't name here."

"Obviously," the former Dark Angel snorted. "For all the supposed 'weaknesses' of making life easier for the Nyxians, I couldn't help but notice the boys and girls who participate are notably better prepared physically and mentally than those who were present at the start of your rule. I still remember certain candidates had to be given a special diet because they were on the brink of starvation."

"Yes, I am very proud of that," the large smile was a confirmation Gavreel didn't need, but it was welcome nonetheless. "Well, that and the reality the numbers of deaths for each Astartes selection trial was close to zero for the second consecutive year."

Gavreel grunted in agreement. Many Chapters present in the Sector, the Black Templars to name the most famous, had not been convinced by several recruitment theories of his Lady.

But as the years passed, some had definitely proven true. The trials to join each Astartes Chapter could definitely be an ultimate test of skill, strength, cleverness, and every quality a future battle-brother should possess without killing the boys in the process.

That didn't mean there weren't some nasty accidents, and from time to time even Bacta was insufficient when the body was too broken.

Not every candidate who took his chances in the Azkaellon Stadium was physically or mentally ready for the Sanguinala Trials. And the Brothers of the Red could only do so much. They were already very busy making sure there weren't boys trying to win a 'second chance' when they had already failed the first time.

"But enough for now about that. What do you think about Sultan Rachid al-Abbasid?"

His transhuman eyes turned towards the left, where a certain number of large gemstones were waiting. Gavreel had seen quite a few splendid precious things in his life, including the Baal Rubies brought by the Blood Angels – one of them was decorating his Lady's forehead today – but the red and crimson gemstones were clearly of exquisite quality.

And these had been merely presents from the Planetary Governor.

"I think he's...eccentric." Gavreel searched for words, before deciding on bluntness and honesty. "I have to admit I was impressed by the size of his turban, though. I don't know how he managed to climb so many stairs all the while keeping his balance."

The insect-mistress chuckled.

"Before Commorragh, I would have been a bit worried about him being influence by Excess," the black-armoured Astartes admitted frankly. "His entry and his gift of the 'not-elephant' were, shall we say, carrying the seeds of some serious extravagance."

"I assure you he is not. Touched by Excess, I mean. The al-Abbasid is just that outrageously rich, and when he gave me these presents, he was truly honest about his humility."

"And how did his family come to earn such a fortune?"

"They sponsored several Rogue Traders at the end of the thirty-second millennium, except unlike many, they didn't focus on the recovery of lost archeotech, but on the discovery of extremely valuable Mining Worlds. Some time later they exploited the resources themselves, sometimes they sold the resources to the Mechanicus or the Chartist Fleets. And as they did, the al-Abbasid invested in trade and the infrastructure to support it. They aren't the Sector Lords of their star cluster, but their economic power and influence is such that the only thing they called was their name."

"However, they are clearly not from the Samarkand Quadrant." The region in question was way more to the north-east of the Nephilim Sector. And even if the translator had not butchered the Low Gothic and mumbled something about the Bag-thingie Sector, it would have been incredibly obvious from the culture of the delegation.

Gavreel had never heard of any Governor who preferred to call their psykers 'al-Sufis', but the delegation of al-Abbasid clearly did.

It wasn't the only source of 'cultural shock'. Certain nobles of the delegation had spent ridiculous fortunes on some frivolous things, and went by the motto of 'all men are mortals, only the God-Emperor is eternal'.

"This is the Imperium of Mankind, Gavreel. Cultures were already wildly different before they left the Cradle, and thousands of years of separation made very unique variations."

"Yes." Gavreel smiled. "So what did he want?"

"You have such a cynical view on diplomacy and politics, Gavreel."

"Am I wrong?"

"No." Taylor Hebert answered. "Not at all. The rumours are spreading fast. The rediscovery of the Ansible STC has led to a significant amount of attention being directed at Nyx."

"Ah." Gavreel was not interested in politics, but even he could tell how these hyper-advanced devices built first during the Age of Technology would be priceless for a Sultan who had powerful trade interests. "And what did you tell him?"

"Oh, I confirmed I had the STC and we already have a contract which will produce machinery to help Mars restore all Solar Ansibles to their full capabilities." The Basileia began to pet the large feline creature in the basket next to her. "I might have remained vague about some more technical details, however."

"No doubt there are going to be other...openings." He cleared his throat.

"Obviously, he is not a fool. The first audience saw a proposal of tens of thousands of Janissaries being placed under my command, you know."

"Janissaries?"

"The name they give to the members of the Planetary Defence Force who complete a rigorous fifteen years-long training course. Whether they are then sent across the stars to serve as part of the Imperial Guard or at home defending the interests of the Sultan, they retain the Janissary rank to their death. But since they focus on some particular aspects of warfare that are not exactly glamorous, Munitorum propaganda isn't exactly keen to sing their praises."

"Hmm..." his Lady said nothing about the Janissaries' performance, so it had to be more than acceptable. "We could always use some more troops for...certain campaigns."

"What we need for the coming operation is more Space Marines, just in case things go to *Hell*, *again*," the Destroyer of Commorragh remarked sarcastically. "How are things going on that front, Gavreel?"

**Hive Athena**

**The Chapel of Hope**

**2.999.312M35**

**Chapter Master Michael Yarhibol**

The ceremony had been simple, yet beautiful.

The singing voices had been soft, yet sincere.

The melodies had been mournful, yet filled with courage.

And the Chalice had been filled with *His* blood.

It was a promise to never stop fighting for what the Great Angel had believed true.

And they would never stop fighting, not as long as there were battles to be fought.

"Walk with me, Chapter Master."

Michael followed in silence, the only light being provided by the golden wings of the Angel of Sacrifice.

You could feel it.

You could hear the song.

The Chapter Master was thus unsurprised by the next words.

"I have a mission for you, if you're willing."

"We are." He answered automatically this time.

There was, for a single second, the echo of a giggle.

"I know. You have acted admirably during Operation Stalingrad and all the actions which preceded it. But this time, it will be different. I don't think you have participated in jungle-fighting operations lately."

"We haven't." The Lord of the Lamenters replied. "But this problem can be corrected. What is the planet where war awaits us?"

"Catachan."

Most names wouldn't have given him pause. But this one did. When they had still been called the sons of Sanguinius, the battle-brothers of the Blood had fought on dozens of Death Worlds, and emerged victorious.

Several of his Captains had been recruited from Death Worlds too.

They were not souls to be easily impressed.

But the fame of Catachan was known from the xenos quarantine zones of the Ghoul Stars to the spires of Holy Terra.

"I wasn't aware there was a rebellion or anything of a...rebellious nature," Yarhibol said slowly.

"There isn't, Chapter Master. The campaign's chief goal is Tyranid-hunting. I know for sure that at least one organism created by the Great Devourer is the reason why Catachan is such a murderous environment. It is extremely dangerous, but we need to know more about our foe. And Catachan gives us an unprecedented opportunity to gain knowledge which is denied us."

"I see." And he really did. Like many Chapter Masters, Michael Yarhibol had been granted hundreds of hours of hololithic imagery and strategic data from the Battle of Ardium. Yes, he hadn't fought the Tyranids in person, but he had read much about the foe. And both as a Lamenter and a son of Sanguinius, he was determined to annihilate these xenos abominations wherever their ugly heads emerged. "And my answer hasn't changed. I will lead the Lamenters to Catachan."

"Good." Lady Weaver replied, and resumed walking. "You won't be alone, of course."

"The Brothers of the Red?"

"One company, along with elite elements from each Chapter of the Nyx Sector," the Shield of Angels confirmed his guess. "The sons of Corax have also replied positively to my request. One Company of the Raptors should be waiting for you when you will translate out of the Warp."

"Their assistance will markedly increase the odds of victory," Michael voiced out loud. All sons of Corax had gifts for asymmetric warfare and continuing perfect ambushes when other forces would have abandoned them for lack of means and will, but the Raptors had also forged themselves a solid reputation in incredibly lethal biospheres.

On a battleground like Catachan, a Raptor Astartes was easily worth a thousand Guardsmen.

Then before them, large gates which had been nearly invisible opened.

And Michael did his best to not gape, for this was a spectacle which nearly brought tears to his eyes.

For how else could a battle-brother react when looking at one hundred brand-new Power Armours painted in the colours of the Lamenter Chapter?

They had fielded Mark IX before, but never in any group stronger than five or six. And here they were, in Company-strength, with the Volkite Blasters and the Bolters to accomplish the Emperor's will.

Behind them was presented an even stronger concentration of firepower: twelve Rhinos and six Baal Predators. The Lord of the Lamenters could almost smell the fresh red paint which had been applied over the new armour.

"I...I don't know what to say..."

"The terms of your Penance forbid me from giving you fresh Neophytes. But there are loopholes when it comes to equipment. And to fight on Catachan, you will need the best Nyx can give you."

Her eyes burned, and Michael Yarhibol felt his two hearts burn with the power of Hope in answer.

"I am a strong believer in the theory of 'victory investment', Chapter Master."

There was only one answer one could give after such a gift.

"For Sanguinius and the Emperor, my Lady." His right fist struck his ceramite plate in salute. "We are going to kill these Tyranids for you."

**Nyx System**

**Ruby Harvest**

**The Manor of Red Leaves**

**2.005.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Taylor had never used much the Manor of the Red Leaves, whether for professional duties or her private time.

Most of it likely had to do with the fact the old Manor had been used for all sort of perversions by the last Menelaus and his sycophants, and some extensive modifications had been necessary.

When the insect-mistress said 'extensive modifications', she meant that over ninety percent of the ancient infrastructure had been destroyed and replaced. And the remaining ten percent was limited to the gardens.

Gardens which had also been drastically changed once Wei decided to intervene.

Yet Taylor had to be honest, she didn't have much use for the new Manor of Red Leaves.

It was too far away from the main towns of Nyx Quartus, and among all the properties she owned, there always seemed to be better ones to visit.

For the audience of today, though, the isolation worked in its favour.

The courtyard leading to the red marble stairs was empty, and the only witnesses were the Adjutant-Spiders and the Dawnbreaker Guard, and all were staying out of sight.

Their intervention shouldn't be necessary...she hoped.

This optimism really decreased as the sinister black aircar opened and revealed its dark-cloaked passenger.

His method of walking reminded her of the ducks swimming in the small pool behind the Manor.

The aura around him was tight, rigid, cold, and unpleasant.

This was Alvaraeo Huascarif, one of the senior Adepts of the Astra Telepathica in the Samarkand Quadrant.

And she didn't like him.

The Basileia supposed there would be many souls professing their surprise. After all, wasn't Alvaraeo Huascarif one of the psykers soul-bound to the God-Emperor? Weren't their loyalties unquestionable?

The answer to the first question was yes. The answer to the second was definitely a big 'NO'.

Yes, the psykers of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica were soul-bound to the God-Emperor, or at least they should be. Given that the entire process was done in the halls of Terra, a lair of intrigue and ambition, there was not much doubt some psykers were used for unsavoury purposes.

But they were bonded, and that was it. They were given a moderate amount of protection against the threat of the Ruinous Powers and the other dangers of the Warp.

Nothing more, nothing less.

The bonding didn't turn them into better people, and it assuredly didn't transform them into reliable and pleasant conversation partners.

The Adeptus Astra Telepathica was filled with humans, much like other Adeptus of note, except inside this one, the ranks included a super-majority of human psykers.

That was all.

Much like every psyker in existence, they could be seduced by material riches as long as it didn't involve soul corruption. The latter would instantly result in their death.

To be clear, there were many members of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica that Taylor was on excellent terms with.

It went without saying that Adept Alvaraeo Huascarif was not one of them.

"You stand in violation of the Himalayan Accords!"

No greetings, no form of respect, and the impoliteness was just...

Fine. If it was conflict the Adept wanted, Taylor was not going to disappoint.

Her wings unfurled, and for a few seconds, the Angel of Sacrifice revealed a third of her true power.

**Sacrifice** sang.

**Sacrifice** shone.

Alvaraeo Huascarif was prostrated, trying to crawl on the ground, desperately out of breath.

"And here I thought we were here for an audience where we could calmly exchange our points of view."

"The High Lords...will...impose...sanctions..."

Taylor sighed.

"The High Lords already know." Adding 'stupid' was really tempting for a moment. "The Fabricator-General informed them himself."

There were too many men and women who had to know, far too many to keep it a secret.

"This...is...blasphemy! The Ansibles are proscribed technology!" the Adept of the Astra Telepathica barked as she decreased the sheer pressure saturating the air around her.

"The Ansibles are not proscribed technology, otherwise the Mechanicus of Mars wouldn't have several functioning ones in several parts of the Solar System at this very moment."

It wasn't exactly a secret when billions of Imperial citizens – in her opinion a very conservative number – were using them every year.

"In time they will all break apart and stop functioning, as is the destiny of every blasphemous machine!" Alvaraeo Huascarif spat bile in front of her, his eyes filled with fanaticism. "And the same will happen if you dare build new ones! No Astropath will tolerate it!"

"So now you pretend to speak for the entire Adeptus Astra Telepathica in the Samarkand Quadrant?" The Basileia asked, trying her best not to roll her eyes.

"You understand quickly! Now be-"

She raised a finger and summoned **Sacrifice**.

Alvaraeo began to scream. Then she began to intensify the pressure.

And his screams became shriek.

For long seconds, the psyker truly felt agony.

Then Taylor did lower the intensity of the pain.

The soul-bond was forged with a part of *Sacrifice*, yes.

Most of the time, she was very happy to not use it.

There were very few uses for it that didn't fall into the 'torture' category.

"Before this meeting began, I prepared my arguments, you know." Taylor continued conversationally as the Adept tried to crawl away. "I could have informed you that part of what made the Ansibles so efficient were their connections to extremely advanced forms of Abominable Intelligences."

A fact that unfortunately had resulted in the loss of massive numbers of Ansibles the moment the Cybernetic Rebellion began. Between the ones which fell intact into the pincers of the Men of Iron and the ones destroyed outright, the entire communication system of the Federation had been crippled within hours. And for obvious reasons, it had not been rebuilt.

"You...are..."

"Ansibles are not perfect. Their bandwidth, so to speak, is not infinite. Much like Astropaths, they are limits in the number of messages they can send per day. And naturally, they consume a lot of energy."

Taylor had thought for a few days that the main problem would be to build defences around the Ansibles, so as to be sure her enemies wouldn't be able to repeat the victory of the Artificial Intelligences. As it was, it was more about deciding the energy output of the Ansibles, which was directly proportional to the distances the Ansibles could send messages to.

Each Ansible was connected to another Ansible, yes. But if the Fusion Reactor powering the first Ansible wasn't powerful enough, the messages wouldn't reach the other Ansible. And naturally, Imperial Fusion technology wasn't as good as what the Federation considered 'first-class'.

Not that she had any intention of informing Alvaraeo Huascarif of that.

"But it seems that would be wasting my breath." The Angel of Sacrifice spoke. "So hear me, Adept. There is not going to be any sabotage or attack on the Ansibles. If there is one, I will find you, I will kill you, and I will drag your soul in front of the Emperor myself so he can explain to you personally how much you have angered him."

"You-"

"Silence. Your tantrum today is just the final confirmation that you are utterly unfit to be a representative for your fellow Astropaths. You whine, you spit, and you threaten. You deny other psykers the most basic standard of living when you sit in your personal spire and sign their death warrants. You insist the Black Ships' interrogators leave only misery and death behind them. You refuse to act while your petty kingdom is rotting and the Astropaths die every day to do duties you feel too important to participate in."

"You can say everything you want," the psyker croaked. "But I will fight you. And there will be others who will! If you have given the news to Terra, there will be others of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica who will join my cause! We will never stop opposing you, Weaver!"

Taylor watched these dark brown eyes, and there was only bigotry, disgust of technology, and a blind devotion to his own ego. There would be no redemption. There would be no respect for the rules. Alvaraeo Huascarif would try to sabotage the Ansibles, for unlike many Nyxian psykers who had agreed the devices would make their lives easier, the man saw only a threat to his powerbase.

"Then it's a good thing," the Basileia replied softly, "that there will be no 'we'."

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph** **Hediatrix**

Sighing was not something which felt natural to a senior Archmagos of the Adeptus Mechanicus, but Gastaph for a moment really wanted to release one as he in the distance saw the corpse of a certain Adept be dragged away by an Adjutant-Spider.

What an idiot. What did Alvaraeo Huascarif think was going to happen, threatening the Chosen of the Omnissiah like this?

Really, the Voice of Mars wondered if some Adepts of Samarkand had not encouraged the moron to come to Nyx to voice all his grievances so that they could be rid of a rival. It wouldn't be the first time the Astra Telepathica sacrificed someone on the altar of internal politics.

Gastaph remained silent as he took the seat which had been prepared for him by Artemis.

It was only when the stars-filled eyes opened again that he spoke.

"I presume we will have to be on our guard against sabotage, then."

"Yes." The Chosen of the Omnissiah grimaced. "I'm sorry Archmagos, but I lost my temper."

"His actions were treacherous, and would have resulted in more inefficiency."

The 'new' Adeptus Astra Telepathica of Nyx had many psykers who had earned his approval. Several 'old' psykers from across the Quadrant definitely didn't.

"Nonetheless...well, what's done is done. I hope you bring good news on your part."

"The very best," the Archmagos Prime assured her. "The Triplex Phall team worked hard to understand all the technical data of the blessed Ansible template, and they believe it is indeed possible to modify a Ramilies-class Starfort to serve as the protective shell. The energy requirements are significant, but the Fusion Reactors we have are proven technology and can handle it."

"And the distance between the two Ansibles?"

"The Tech-Priests have let the numbers be calculated by different cogitator experts, and they all arrived at a minimal distance of fifteen light-years."

"Really?" Lady Weaver immediately smiled. "That's very good news!"

Gastaph could understand her approval; the 'length' of the Nyx Sector was around one hundred light-years.

"It is." He answered honestly. "Though I have to warn you, the simulations we have calculated so far show numerous problems increasing as we increase the range from this point. Between seventeen and eighteen light-years, the energy output required is getting...complicated. And over twenty light-years, the complexity of some parts is so extreme that the Adeptus Mechanicus Magi do not have the faintest idea how to build them."

The Chosen of the Omnissiah shrugged.

"If we can build a reliable faster-than-light technological communication complex with a fifteen light-years range, that is already splendid. It is better than everything we have, and it could prove a decisive advantage over foes which can block our Astropathic communications."

No names were mentioned, but they weren't needed. Chaos and the Tyranids were too fresh in everyone's mind to be forgotten.

"I agree completely."

"Good." The smile had a twinge of irony behind it now. "I suppose that since we have the beginning of a plan, it is time to speak of the politics and STC negotiations."

"It is." The Voice of Mars among the Nyxian Mechanicus confirmed. "The new Fabricator-General *insists* that the new Questoris Knight Forge-Complex be limited to Alamo when it comes to the Nyx Sector."

"That..." the Chosen of the Omnissiah hesitated, which wasn't particularly common for her. "I wasn't intending to build it in the Nyx System, we don't have the free space for it, really. But in only one location?"

"The investment in resources it will require is not small." Gastaph felt his words carried a considerable percentage of understatement in them. "To respect the schematics of the Questoris Knight building template, the site chosen was bigger than many facilities housing Titans."

"I know, but...I am often reminded of the flawed approach of building something unique. Sabotage can come from a lot of foes, and if they strike us where the loss is irreplaceable, it would require years before any brand-new Knight is given its honourable name."

The argument was not without merits.

But. There were orders, and they came straight from the Fabricator-General himself.

"Mars won't approve a facility as critical as this one being at the full disposal of House O'Hara. This is not negotiable."

"Control?"

"Control. It is bad enough Cawl so often travels across the galaxy and pledges some Martian Houses in exchange of more Radical discoveries. Olympus Mons wants to have the confirmation that the production figures of Nyx are indeed the real ones."

The Chosen of the Omnissiah slightly inclined her head with a faint smile.

"And yes, I know the Adeptus Mechanicus has absolutely no reason to complain when it comes to the industrial production of the Nyx System...and the Nyx Sector. But..."

"There are politics, I understand." An Adjutant-Spider brought refreshments, and the Basileia of Nyx quickly downed half a bottle of water. "The Ansibles?"

"There are several pieces of legislation that are going to be voted on in the Martian Parliament this year. Your support would be appreciated."

"I am willing to read all the legislation in question, of course." This was what the Archmagos Prime had expected to hear, yes. "Any other outstanding requests?"

"Well, you are forbidden to sell the Ansibles to Cawl, of course."

Taylor Hebert, Chosen of the Omnissiah, Basileia of Nyx, Angel of Sacrifice...laughed very loudly.

**Nyx System**

**High Orbit over Blue Anchorage**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.010.313M35**

**Lord** **Admiral Neidhart Müller**

It was not one of the Battlegroups of Operation Stalingrad, but the sight remained extremely impressive.

The Astartes were the first to depart.

The Lamenters' Battle-Barge, the *Daughter of Tempests*, was a flamboyant spear, even from afar, and she was not alone. Six Strike Cruisers and fourteen Gladius-class Frigates escorted her.

Of course, the Lord Admiral thought, the Imperial Navy had made its own commitment as well: eighteen warships in total, including two Venus-class Cruisers, four Warrior and four Hoplite-class Destroyers. And last but not least, the new flagship of Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto, the *Pax Imperium*, millions of tons of weapons and metal, a Mars-class Battlecruiser.

Besides that, there were the ships of the Adeptus Mechanicus, led by the Lunar-class Cruiser *Wyvern*. Though everyone understood the twelve warships weren't the important hulls; this honour belonged to the Star-Forge Galleon *Temple of Ammunition*, the fuel ships, the supply ships, and the mobile 'analysis-quarantine' starships which followed.

And then there were the Scorpion-class Transports, all twelve of them, transporting the ground troops for the vital campaign.

For as everyone had understood from the start, the purpose of this Task Force was not to wage a battle in the void, though any pirate who dared intercept it would be regretting their life-choices in short order.

No, the priority mission he had given in person to Fujiko Yamamoto – along with the news she was considered for a promotion to Vice-Admiral – was to escort all the transports and supply ships to Catachan. Hell Garden promised to be difficult enough as it was, arriving with all the original complement had to be done.

Not that there should be too many difficulties. The *Pax Imperium* had been shown great favour with several Achelieux Navigators and a small Aethergold Pylon.

And many warships of this Task Force were merely one or two years-old, having just been accepted into the Navy after extensive trials and verifications. Ton for ton, they were far more lethal than their predecessor classes.

No, Neidhart Müller wasn't worried about the part he had been happy to oversee. It was the ground part which was honestly terrifying. For all the love of the Emperor, he wouldn't set a foot on Catachan no matter how many Throne Gelts or promotions were offered in exchange.

But this was out of his hands.

And yes, the Catachan Jungle Fighters were mad to live on a world like this. If they had any shred of sanity left, they would try to escape the moment they were able to walk.

'Hell Garden' wasn't sarcasm; it was an absolutely truthful description for this Death World.

"Rejoice, Admiral. I have not changed my mind, you aren't going to have to swim in the rivers of Catachan."

"I am extremely glad to hear it, your Celestial Highness."

"I have no doubt about that. Was there anything else you wanted to ask?"

"Yes," Neidhart answered, "but not about this operation. It is about the naval construction budget. The Navy has a new proposal for you."

The Saint's eyes did not show much emotion. The big spider next to her, however, made a sound which could be one of excitement.

"Let's see it, then."

The old-fashioned folder was handed over, and the Basileia began to study its content.

It didn't last long, but this was normal; this was the basics of the amended requests, not the full document which would be presented before hundreds of senior Tech-Priests and Navy officers.

"Let's see...ten Battleships, six Battlecruisers, ten Heavy Cruisers, forty-eight Cruisers, seventy Light Cruisers, ninety-two Frigates, and the agreed two hundred Destroyers. Then a dozen prototypes to test all the new technology and weapons."

"That is correct. There are some additional specifications for Transport and Supply Ships with the new modular standards."

"Yes. Well, it sounds more coherent than the previous budget attempt." The Basileia frowned. "But as they always say, the problems are often found in the details. And there are some class names I don't recognise. The Ur-Drake class of Battlecruisers for one."

"It is a class which was originally built during the Great Crusade, but was eventually abandoned for several political reasons by the end of the thirty-first millennium."

"But the Salamanders kept the data, and you felt it answered some of your needs," Lady Weaver added, hitting the nail on the head as usual. "The Cruisers are all Venus-class, I don't need more clarification about them save one. How many command-patterns among them?"

"Four," Neidhart replied. "And we have orders to build ten more Venus Cruisers from other Sectors, including two from your friend the Sultan."

He earned a gasp from the Adjutant-Spider that way.

"I don't know if 'friend' is the correct term, Admiral. We share certain ideas when it comes to military and economic policy. The Redoubtable-class Light Cruisers?"

"It is not a very recent class, but Metalica obtained excellent results with them. And we are going to add some new technology to the Nyx-built hulls."

"And the Katana-class Frigates?"

"Those are definitely new: we are going to build them under license from Ryza. It is far cheaper than spending billions in research and development, the Ryza design is extremely advanced and uses plenty of the rediscovered technology of the last decades...and we need a platform to exploit the range and firepower our new torpedoes give us over the Archenemy and other foes."

"Arithmancia Sultan is tenacious, I will give her that." The words were mumbled, so Neidhart could have been mistaken, but it sounded like that. "Artemis?"

"The budget is reasonable, within the margins you layed out several months ago. Of course, the Lord Admiral didn't include the Carriers, but we may not be able to build them here anyway!"

The golden-winged Mistress of the Nyx System stayed silent for long seconds. Many ships of Task Force Hell Garden had disappeared into the darkness of the void when she spoke again.

"Lord Admiral?"

"Your Celestial Highness?"

"This plan meets the requirements I'm willing to pay for. Meet with the other Admirals, the Archmagi, and my Ministers as soon as possible, and write the full proposal. It would be appreciated if it could be on my desk within fifty days."

"Yes, your Celestial Highness," Neidhart kept all triumphalism out of his voice, but he allowed himself to smile. "I will personally deliver it, have no fear."

"I had no doubt about it, Admiral." The Basileia shook her head. "Since we've begun speaking of Navy matters, have you heard about Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal?"

"No, I'm afraid not. But this is unsurprising. Assuming his travel through the Suebi sub-Sector was calm, he should be arriving at his theatre of operations soon."

**Atlantis Sector**

**Uta Sub-Sector**

**Schubert's Grave System**

**Approaches of Mothball Fleet Space 'Sublime Hierophant'**

**Victory-class Battleship *Son of Victory***

**4.013.313M35**

**Admiral** **Oskar von Reuenthal**

As improbable as some situations were, a competent Admiral had to think of them and prepare a counter-strategy if the improbable happened to end up materialising before you.

And Oskar von Reuenthal liked to believe he was competent.

As a consequence, as much as he didn't like the idea in the first place, the black-haired Admiral had planned for the slim eventuality the looters and other pirates would arrive at the stellar system of Schubert's Grave before him.

The likelihood had been assessed as 'low' by some of his peers.

Yes, some authorities of the Atlantis Sector were particularly corrupt, but there was a permanent presence of an Ecclesiarchy Light Cruiser in-system.

As much as there were certain *frictions* between the Imperial Navy and priests who should never have been granted the right to own warships, this was a significant amount of firepower. The average looter-pirate had a Raider, maybe two. In the worst case, they had a Destroyer – though all the ships lost in the region had their fates accounted for.

A Light Cruiser, no matter how incompetent its Bishop-Captain, would eat them for lunch.

Alas, as Oskar discovered right now, that assumed the Light Cruiser was on the side of justice.

"Second confirmation obtained, Admiral. The *Saint Oda* is working with the traitors." His chief of staff grimaced. "*That*," the signature on the auspex was the very opposite of subtle, “is clearly a Plunder-class Raider. And *that*," for of course there was a second signature right next to the first, "is almost certainly an Iconoclast Raider."

"And the Light Cruiser of the Ecclesiarchy is right above them."

That it wasn't fulfilling its duties was kind of clear, and everyone on the bridge of the *Son of Victory* knew it.

"Yes, Admiral." There was a curse, and then, as all good chiefs of staff did, his subordinate tried to be the voice of caution. "It is possible there is another explanation than the one you're thinking about."

"If there is one, I'm dying of impatience to hear it." Oskar wasn't even joking in this case. "Seriously, Hans. The *Saint Oda* is so powerful compared to these two Raiders that unless all its weapons were malfunctioning, there is no way it can lose. And as for a boarding fight leaving it in pirate hands, the crew of a Light Cruiser is easily ten times that of a Raider, peace time conditions or not."

And as all his Task Force was accelerating, Destroyers leaving the formation to engage faster than his flagship could, Oskar wasn't seeing any debris or indication there had been a fight.

No, the ship of the Ecclesiarchy was still active, near the mothballed ships it was supposed to protect.

Unfortunately, as the presence of the Raiders attested, the Bishop-Captain – or whatever title the incompetent Atlantis clergy had chosen to give to its ship officers – was not only corrupt, he was a traitor.

It was difficult not to show the sheer disgust he felt on his face. Millions had died so that the 'Grand Armada' of the Traitors perished during Operation Stalingrad. And yet these cowardly souls had decided to sell old ships to pirates and other factions.

They had decided to backstab them. To spit on the oaths they had sworn to the God-Emperor, and to replace vigilance with treachery.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Hans," he decided to change the subject before his voice shook with rage, "but our mysterious looters don't seem to be interested in the Destroyers and Frigates of the Mothballed Fleet."

"Err...you are correct, Admiral. Both the *Saint Oda* and the two Raiders are too far away from the Destroyers and the other Escorts...it seems they took a practical position next to the mothballed line of the Hierophant Cruisers."

Cruisers. In pirate hands. Or worse.

This day kept getting better and better.

"Do we have any indication they've already managed to steal some capital ships?"

"Unknown, Admiral. We received some data from Lady Weaver, including all the classes that should be kept in this system, but the full numbers weren't given. We know there should be a minimum of fourteen Hierophant-class Cruisers, and they are definitely there. In fact, we count eighteen. But I can't tell you if they're all what Atlantis placed here, or if some were towed away before our arrival."

"Assuming the pirates and other parties didn't have the leisure to reactivate them completely before translating away conventionally with their new prize."

Oskar snorted contemptuously.

"We were too quick to assume the options of the looters were limited because of the Light Cruiser's presence. But it doesn't seem to have been that much of an obstacle, in the end."

"Yes...Admiral, the prize they sought may not have been a Hierophant-class Cruiser."

Why didn't that reassure him?

"Yes?"

"There is an Ostrogoth-class Battlecruiser next to the Cruisers, Admiral. And someone is clearly trying to make it move under its own power."

This was-

"This is really bad," he reacted. "Any Ostrogoth Battlecruiser is a piece of junk that should have never been authorised to join the Navy under normal circumstances, but it is still a Battlecruiser. Give one to a pirate or any sort of Traitor Warlord, and the damage could quickly become terrifying."

Abandoning his former position, Oskar returned to the hololithic displays and carefully analysed the situation. It wasn't optimal, but clearly the traitors and their pirate associates had no idea he was about to arrive today.

"Change formation for Spear Three."

"You want to capture some of them, Admiral?"

"Above all, I want to make sure none escape this system, and this Battlecruiser to not be a pirate ship we will spend years hunting across the Sector." The luck of Lady Weaver was with them today; they had arrived and the unpleasant visitors had been caught with their drives cold. "But yes, it would be better if we could capture a few of these ambitious heads. I have some questions to ask them."

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**2.018.313M35**

**Archmagos** **Dragon Richter**

For once, Dragon was ashamed to admit she was ten minutes late to a meeting.

Yes, yes, shame on her.

It wasn't an excuse, but in many areas, the Nyxians were really parking their bikes in completely preposterous locations.

Something would have to be done. The market centres had not been forbidden to all aircars because they wanted them to be buried under a mountain of bicycles instead.

But this was going to have to wait.

"Apologies, Lady Basileia," she said as she took her seat, "there have been a profusion of minor setbacks this morning."

"We'd just begun debating some tertiary issues," Taylor waved the matter away. "Minister Sidorakis?"

"Your Celestial Highness." The young-looking man made a gesture of reverence. One wasn't to be fooled, however: Alexeis Sidorakis was older than he showed, having recently celebrated his fiftieth birthday. He also dyed his hair a flamboyant red and donned official suits which always had big golden buttons.

And after his immediate superior declared the reforms Taylor demanded of him were impossible to accomplish, he was promoted and became the new Minister of Education.

"In a few words, the problem of the Nyxian education system can be divided into four different parts. The first and most problematic, in many ways, is interference from the Adeptus Administratum. The second is that, while in theory the progression is linear and simple, the School-College-Academia Triarchy has become needlessly complicated, turned hollow by countless previous 'reforms', and sabotaged by internal factors. The third is the inequality of chances offered to each candidate. With specific implants and mnemo-devices being taken granted by our upper classes, the students who have families unable to spend the Throne Gelts on them start with a tremendous disadvantage."

"That indeed sounds...very problematic." Dragon conceded. Of course, she wasn't unaware of some of the problems, but as her job was mostly limited to the education of the Tech-Priests, the true scale of the challenge had not been presented to her in such blunt terms before.

No wonder that in the last ten years, five Ministers of Education had preferred to retire of their own volition.

"Though I was under the impression that the first point was tolerated because of...political reasons."

"Yes." Taylor frowned heavily. "It was tolerated. No more. I had a frank discussion with Tithe-Master Blum yesterday. The interferences of the Administratum are going to cease. A transport is being filled as we speak with all the foreign Adepts who wanted to impose more rules and more 'inspections' to respect the so-called 'sacred education standards of Holy Terra'."

"If their goal was to make us dumber and dumber, they couldn't have tried it in a more blatant way, your Celestial Highness," Alexeis Sidorakis promptly agreed with his superior.

Dragon considered the matter...and shrugged it off.

"For what it's worth, you have my full support." It was going to generate some anger from the highest levels of the Administratum, but they were in a cold war with them already, so screw them. And hopefully, it may encourage some Governors in the Samarkand Quadrant to imitate them and raise their own educational standards. "The second point?"

"In theory, everyone begins by going to this familiar and dangerous place one calls a 'School'," the insect-mistress smirked, and Dragon found herself smirking back. "Alas, we have so many different categories and headmasters doing their own thing that each establishment of knowledge and learning is practically a rule by himself. Theoretically, we are supposed to have only three types: Public, Religious, and Private. Nyx funds the former, the Ecclesiarchy the second, and the latter in most of cases is paid by the nobility."

"I have to say, your Celestial Highness," Alexeis began in a more hesitant tone, "that your willingness to pay for the scholarship of many girls and boys among several Orphanages has certainly contributed to blur the lines."

The Tinker had to admit it took a high amount of courage to point this out.

And the stars-filled eyes certainly glared dangerously for a second or two.

"I know." The Basileia admitted after five seconds of silence. "And for what it's worth, I didn't intend to. Now I am aware of the problem and it must be solved."

"This is going to be...unpopular in some circles. Not so in Hive Athena, but the opposition to it in distant Hives is going to be significant." Sidorakis warned. "And naturally, I am only going to be able to enforce your standards when it comes to the Public Schools, the Public Colleges, and the Public Academia."

"Not anymore," Dragon turned her head, surprised. Wait, had she really-

"I spoke with the Cardinal yesterday, and we agreed the Religious establishments of learning would greatly benefit from this reform too. The daily hour of religious teachings will be left untouched, provided the teachers respect my will."

Some of the edicts the Minister of Industry knew, like expressly forbidding things like flagellation for redemption, engines of torture for punishment, and fanaticism as a doctrinal thought.

It said very disturbing things for the Imperium that yes, those had to be enforced during the first decade after they landed on Nyx.

"That...that should be of immense help, yes, your Celestial Highness." Alexeis Sidorakis answered with gratitude obvious on his face. "The Private Schools, alas, I don't know how to deal with. I almost had a riot of Barons on the doorstep of my Ministry when I dared suggest their children would benefit from the mandatory three hours of sport every two days that are already implemented for the Public Schools."

Why was no one around this table surprised? Oh yes, the Dukes, Counts, and other nobles were defanged when it came to the military and economic fields, but in the domain of culture, they remained a potent force.

"For this year," Taylor didn't look happy at all, "ignore them. We will speak of the matter again in a few standards months when the reforms of the other Schools and Colleges will be, I hope, well-advanced and providing tangible benefits for Nyx and the Nyxians. They represent only a small percentage of students as a whole, correct?"

"Correct, your Celestial Highness, around zero point six percent of all children, teenagers, and young adults currently registered. But as I am sure you are aware, they are very influential."

The sigh after these words proved that yes, Taylor was indeed painfully aware of this.

"And now the last point. Dragon."

The Tinker rolled her eyes.

"If you thought the Mechanicus was going to change its mind because you asked nicely, I am sorry to disappoint you. Implant L-110011 is considered to be a 'blessed cog-gateway on the path of the Quest', and won't be handed to non-Mechanicus personnel."

Needless to say, the 'Chosen of the Omnissiah' wasn't impressed by the stubbornness of certain Magi and Archmagi.

"I was told by Lankovar himself we could easily reconfigure the Implants to block all possibility of students gaining access to the Noosphere. And it would enormously facilitate recruitment for the Mechanicus when students want to join the technology-specialised Colleges."

"Lankovar is a Radical when it comes to Implants. A majority of the Mechanicus Council opposes him on this front." Dragon certainly didn't, but in this case, she had to bow to the inevitable. "They propose psycho-indoctrination as a viable alternative."

The Queen of the Swarm didn't facepalm, but she wasn't far from showing her unhappiness in such a comical way.

"Emperor give me strength," the Ruler of Nyx muttered, "do they realise there are incredibly good reasons why we only give some psycho-indoctrination to the Astartes and some of our elite military units? It imparts knowledge, but not understanding. And the mental damage it can cause if done improperly is-"

The Basileia didn't finish her sentence. It was probably for the better, because given how much she was glaring, a lot of her words would be impressive curses.

"The basic mnemo-techniques are good for a few lessons and some electives, but aren't sufficient by themselves." Dragon pointed out.

"I know!" here, the annoyance was clear. "I know."

Alexeis Sidorakis cleared his throat.

"Implants are an advantage whose importance is difficult to understate. The recent studies I was given access to suggest that in a single year, an Implant like the L-110011 confers the ability to assimilate over one thousand additional hours of teachings compared to someone who doesn't have it. The benefits when it comes to memory increases can't be underestimated either."

"So we need implants." Taylor concluded decisively, before focusing on her again. "I suppose the nobles in Private Schools don't use the L-110011 implant, reluctant as they are to give access to it to anyone outside the Mechanicus."

"They don't." Dragon acknowledged. "I haven't made a survey, but I know certain families like the Brasidas and the Seignelas went for an Implant they call the L-N5."

"Performance?"

"Inferior to the L-110011 by about twenty percent," the Minister of Industry shrugged. "But it's certainly a good implant. It would easily solve a few educational problems for the next decades."

And yes, Dragon knew it was imperfect, the Mechanicus implants were far better. But on the other hand, maybe seeing billions of Nyxians access mid-level lore and not go crazy with it would convince the Archmagi to relax and cancel some of their most ridiculous laws.

"There is only one big problem. Implant L-N5 is produced on what I consider 'artisanal scale'. And it is expensive."

"How expensive are we talking about?"

"The cheaper model is sold at two hundred thousand Throne Gelts," Alexeis Sidorakis replied for her. "And certain Dukes choose custom-made patterns which can go for as much as five million."

It was really fascinating to see the stars-filled eyes stare unflinchingly. Several metres away, the Adjutant-Spiders were tapping frenetically on their machines. The power of Administration was at work, and it wanted an answer.

"Price is a secondary concern when it comes to the Education Reform." The voice was razor-sharp, and the woman who had crushed trillions of xenos had made her decision. "Dragon, I want a plan within ten days of what is necessary to produce the Implants. Minister Sidorakis, you will select the optimal implant. Obviously we aren't going to need the special custom-made Implant of five million Throne Gelts, but we need something which will generate as few complaints as possible, in the name of equality."

"Yes, your Celestial Highness!"

**Training Zone Gamma-Three**

**2.022.313M35**

**Sergeant Igor Vichev**

The youngsters were getting increasingly naive these days, Igor mused.

Poor bastards.

They had thought that because the Basileia came on this fine morning to participate in the training exercise, it was going to be easy.

Obviously, after running ten kilometres – or trying to – with a bag of rocks on their back, their optimism may have faded a bit.

And if not, the competition at the shooting range followed by 'unplanned' tactical exercises, emergency maintenance, and more strenuous activities had certainly done it.

Everyone had sweated, to be clear. Igor felt like he had lost two or three kilos, personally.

But that was why he had remained a Sergeant while everyone from Colonel to Private was eager to grab a new rank.

He had started as Sergeant, he would end his career as a Sergeant. And besides, when Weaver herself told everyone to run, the officers ran with her.

And Igor to his satisfaction could still beat most of them. In fact, he had beaten his old score at the shooting range. The Lasguns of the First Colonel were not his favourite weapon, but they came as a close second. And the targets of the firing range were a mere two hundred metres away. Though the advanced targeting stuff had been deactivated, it wasn't that difficult to earn himself a score of ninety-seven out of one hundred.

It was a good day to be a Sergeant of the Imperial Guard.

He would still love to have a shower.

It shouldn't take too long now. Half of the regiment was looking dead on its feet.

Thus it was a minor surprise when the cogboys began to change the targets, replacing the old-fashioned circles used for the Lasguns with enormous metallic objects. From afar, they could be mistaken as a Space Marine by a three year-old, but they were not. They were just slabs of metal shaped vaguely like something humanoid.

The reason for that change came when the new weapons arrived.

Igor was familiar with every weapon the Fay 20th and the other infantry regiments were given in the last years.

That was why he was sure none of the guns which were presented to them were part of the standard kit they could write a request for.

Before he knew it, he was on the firing range once more.

And the weapon he had transported by with a youngster was heavy, damn it.

"What it is, Sergeant?"

"A Plasma Gun, for sure," Igor replied, "but one I have never seen before."

"I should hope not," an amused voice interjected, "they came straight from Ryza, and the Nyxian Mechanicus only unpacked them yesterday."

Igor instinctively saluted.

"Major," he grunted. Yes, Weaver wasn't a Major anymore, but she would always be *the Major* for him.

"Igor, still a Sergeant I see."

"You know me, Major."

The smile told him she understood. It was all he wanted. Besides, why would he try to get a promotion? With the money he had, it wasn't like he needed the Throne Gelts. Commorragh had made him a very rich guardsman. Leaving the ranks and getting youngsters to call you 'Captain' or 'Major' would only bring more problems upon his head.

And the fun he enjoyed every day would disappear.

"Yes, I do." Weaver nodded before kneeling by the side of the new weapon. "Medium-calibre Rotary Plasma Cannon. Six barrels. And a marked increase in lethality and range. And as you can clearly see, mounted on a tripod with some other tools to stabilise it. Try the basic aiming exercises with it."

Igor tried. He rather liked it.

"Easier to handle than a Lascannon, Major," he said. But then, the big laser weapons had to be towed by a truck most of the time, and using them on the offensive gave you headaches. Most of the time, they were mounted on vehicles or emplaced on defensive positions prepared hours before any possible enemy assault.

This 'Rotary Plasma Cannon' certainly was lighter and could be transported with them in a Chimera or any other transport.

But it was a Plasma Weapon.

"And the overheating problems?"

The Colonel pressed the green button, and instantly the weapon began to feel really, really cold...oh, and started to shine in a very brilliant blue colour.

"Ryza is testing a new coolant with this one. You best take heavy gloves to wield it, though," she added after a shrug.

"They really solved the overheating problem that way?" he didn't bother hiding his frown and doubts.

"Not exactly. You must have noticed there are six barrels. But thanks to this little box," the object on the right side was rectangle-shaped and looking like a metal box where you stored your rations, "only one will fire at any time. Then after one hundred shots from the first barrel, the inbuilt cogitator stops the fire, and forces the wielder to use the second barrel, while the coolant does its job with the first. By the time you've used your one hundred shots from the sixth barrel, the theoretical is that the first one will have had time to be returned to a state where it will able to fire one hundred shots and not overheat."

"And if it is still too hot?" Igor asked warily. The main danger with a Plasma Gun was *always* overheating. The ones they had been given for the Monolith and Ardium were way more reliable than the previous ones, but they remained dangerous. In the thick of the fight, you tended to fire as much as you could, and overheating had killed many, many guardsmen. More Plasma Gunners than the enemy killed, at any rate.

"The red light will shine brightly, and you won't be able to fire until the coolant has done its job." Igor hadn't thought that would be the answer...but yeah, he had to admit, it was better than the gun overheating in your face. "Now give it a test."

"Yes, Major!"

The assembly and arming procedure was rather simple, and was repeated three times until they could do it blindfolded.

He aimed.

"FIRE!"

The ball of superheated plasma was rather small, all told. But it burned like a second sun. And Igor fired a second. A third. There was cold. There was venting. But everything held.

The gun was almost like a hungry beast, and the recoil was light for such a magnificent weapon.

After the tenth time he fired, Igor stopped.

This was because the target, the ugly slab of metal, had an enormous hole in it, having carved through the 'chest'.

"All right," Igor managed to get over his surprise before several of his fellow veterans. Most of them were gaping at the devastation. "Where do I buy one, Major?"

**Nyx System**

***Jaghatai's Celerity* Shipyard**

**Headquarters of the Nyx Compact**

**2.031.313M35**

**Rogue** **Trader Lady Magdalena Orpheus**

They called it a room, but it had enough space to be considered a Palace in its own right. It was generously lavished with precious things, to the point that it could be considered a decent museum by the number of historical objects it displayed.

Yet for all of the splendour, by Rogue Trader standards it remained very modest.

The Basileia had brought soft carpets of red and gold colour, along with a few paintings, a Tyranid skull, and some other curiosities. But the chairs which had made the journey from Nyx to the orbital shipyard were chosen more for their comfort than their decorations. They certainly weren't thrones or the kind of needlessly exalted seats some Lords chose to proclaim their greatness.

Lady Weaver looked at one of her Adjutant-Spiders, and the arachnid theatrically presented her a golden pocket watch.

"It seems no one else intends to come today." The Basileia of Nyx commented with an eyebrow raised. "I have to admit I expected my invitation to be picked up by more Rogue Traders."

To be honest, Magdalena had thought the same. The terms of the Compact the black-haired Saint had explained at Macragge were restrictive, but hardly tyrannical. There were enormous opportunities for profit while remaining perfectly loyal.

Yet today near-all the holders of the Warrant of Trade present were already calling Nyx their homeport. There was Wolfgang Bach, flanked by the two blonde daughters of Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm. On his right, Dennis Peters awaited, in a rather elegant white uniform, the assassin Gabriela Jordan standing behind him like a vigilant shadow. There was Amanda Salvia, Captain of the *Wasp*, she who once had been known as Alyena Sinblade, humbly standing in a modest pilgrim robe of crimson colour.

The only two people who could be called 'newcomers' were the huge black swordsman and his athletic wife, and the two lovebirds – Guts and Casca, were they? – had used the facilities of *Jaghatai's Celerity* since everyone returned from Macragge.

"The return of the Primarchs may have convinced some Rogue Traders to hedge their bets for now," Wolfgang voiced a very plausible guess. "While I've so far not heard that any of them intend to create new Compacts, they certainly have the authority to do so."

"And if they do," Magdalena added, "they will have the prestige...and possibly push forwards documents with fewer guidelines."

"This is not only possible, but very likely," their benefactor answered smoothly, "but I think that if they expect Lord Roboute Guilliman to give them unlimited support in exchange for vague promises, they will be very disappointed."

Magdalena felt herself nodding along with the others. She had met the Primarch of the Ultramarines only twice personally, but the Lord of Ultramar did not feel like a 'Rogue Trader man'. The existence of the Warrants of Trade was perfectly lawful, and Guilliman wouldn't act against them. He would even use some of them for his own purposes. But anyone who thought they would get full support from him with no counterbalance was in for a rude awakening.

And though he hadn't been mentioned, Rogal Dorn was not the type to use Rogue Traders.

Magdalena had no idea if the other Primarchs would consider the use of Compacts, however.

"Any question about the rules for additional signatories for the Nyx Compact?"

"No," Dennis answered in the name of all. "I think you've been very clear. If more want to join, well first they have to pay the modest entrance fee."

And it was a very modest price, really. One million Throne Gelts of the Nyx Sector had to be basically pocket money, considering the costs involved with the maintenance and the operation of a starship. If it was intolerable for your pockets, then you were quite close to being ruined.

"The potential additions must have a Warrant of Trade, of course," 'Lord Clockblocker' continued, "and one of the members of the Nyx Compact must be willing to sponsor them. Then the majority of the Compact must not disapprove, and Nyx mustn't be given a reason to exert its veto right."

And before any partial observer shouted angrily this was an awful way to limit the numbers of future Rogue Trader recruits, these conditions were very reasonable compared to other Compacts.

Magdalena was aware of several which had not accepted any 'reinforcements' since the dawn of the Imperium because they had added a clause that each member had a veto right, and only the Master of Mankind could ignore their objections.

"Good," the golden-winged Angel smiled. "Now for the tasks, as I am sure you are aware, the training cycles have been slightly delayed, but the manpower requirements for each of your expeditions are going to be resolved quickly, or so Archmagos Sultan assures me. Obviously, that still makes the theoretical dates of departure for this year incredibly impractical. I was thinking the Sanguinala of 314 might be a more realistic deployment day."

"Fine with me," the huge black swordsman declared, not even bothering to hide that there hadn't been much thought behind his answer...and getting a nudge from his wife as a consequence.

One by one, they voiced their approval.

After that, the real ceremony could begin.

One by one, the Adjutant-Spiders handed each of them a golden pen filled with red ink.

One by one, they signed the voluminous book, which was bathed in the light of a sizeable Aethergold crystal.

On this day, the Nyx Compact was well and truly born.

**Somewhere in the Nyx System**

**The Umbra Mobile Docks**

**2.049.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The model was ten metres-long and one metre tall.

It was painted black and whoever had done it was a real artist.

It really looked like one of the submarines which had once dived in the oceans of Old Earth.

"This is quite a difference from all the starships the Imperium builds and commissions every day." Taylor commented.

It was no exaggeration. In fact, it was a huge understatement.

There was no adamantium prow. Correction, there was-

"Do you intend to use *any* adamantium to build them, by curiosity?"

The black-hooded figure didn't seem to be offended by the question.

"Some will be used to strengthen the internal structure yes. It will remain a fraction of what is used for capital ships, obviously."

Yes, obviously.

"This is going to be a heavily automated ship. One kilometre-long, but a crew of only six hundred?"

"Our operatives," replied the man who had only given her the designation 'Operative U', "are very resourceful, and the training for the ship crews is...exacting."

The insect-mistress really didn't like hearing that.

The discipline in the Imperial Navy too often made her uncomfortable – some things certain Captains were known to do she would never have tolerated in a Nyxian regiment – but at least the sailors and their officers were very bad at keeping secrets when it came to life aboard a warship.

Not so for the Officio Assassinorum.

"Well, it is your prerogative and your choice." The Basileia placed several data-slates on a nearby table. "You will find the details of the technology transfers there. Mars agreed to release what you wanted. Except the Torpedoes and the other ship-killer weapons, that is. The Fabricator-General and the Shadow Committee want to have full control of them. Stocks will be built at certain Depots, one of them being Nyx."

The Lady of Nyx really didn't blame the High Lord of the Adeptus Mechanicus and his advisors. The 'silent submarines of the void', as they had mentioned in some conversations, would be extremely difficult to track without extremely advanced detection technology.

However, as long as the 'dark not-submarines' had only a limited stock of weapons onboard, the risks were far more manageable.

"I suppose these conditions are not ones Mars want to negotiate on." Operative U said coldly.

"They aren't." Taylor cleared her throat as several of her Beetle-Dreadnoughts arrived, each one carrying a sizeable container that could have been mistaken for a black sarcophagus.

What was inside, however, was far more precious than any mummy.

"The Power Armour prototypes that were agreed upon," she paused. "Per the accords, to be tested in presence of the Raven Guard 1st Company watchmen."

"I see. Specifics?"

"From the outside, an enemy would assume the creations are human-sized diminutive copies of the Mark VI Power Armour that so many Imperial and Traitor eyes have associated with the sons of Corax. This will be the last mistake they ever make. These Power Armours are far more advanced kilogram-for-kilogram, and their furtive technology is one level above the Mark VI entirely."

It went without saying there were some drawbacks. The agility and versatility gained on one side had required some sacrifices on other fields. This 'Assassinorum Power Armour' was without equal for sabotage missions, and its resistance to energy and bladed weapons was higher than the Mark III Carapace Armour currently built in the manufactorum of Nyx. But on a conventional battlefield, the wearer of this black-painted armour would likely be the first to die. The Power Armours of the Silver Rose's Templar Sororitas were far better at keeping their owner alive.

One more proof in this galaxy that sometimes, over-specialisation could kill you if you stepped one toe outside your area of expertise.

"The Grand Mistress will be pleased."

Taylor wished she could say she felt relief, but when Leman Russ, son of the Emperor and honorary Barbarian King, warned you that someone was highly dangerous, you took it seriously.

"I am glad to hear it." She answered seriously. "As far as the other projects are concerned, as I already warned, the Tech-Priests are busy creating more and more designs for them. There is a certain amount of progress, but nothing can be rushed at this stage."

"As was expected, and the Officio is aware they are doing their best." The more he talked, the less certain Taylor was that Operative U had been *born* a man. Or a woman. Or...

Corvus Corax had admitted to her in private that he could generally guess in one minute which Temple had trained which Assassin, but the golden-winged parahuman acknowledged she did not have his talent.

Or Operative U was that good.

"I also bring a warning from the Grand Mistress. Twice in the last year, agents known to be in the service of the Eversor Temple have attended receptions organised by Clan Vandire."

The Angel of Sacrifice grimaced inwardly.

Eversor. The murder machines which thought the definition of 'collateral damage' meant 'kill them all, and let the Emperor sort them out'. Great. Just great.

Yes, that was sarcasm.

"I was under the impression certain backdoors had been permanently closed when the Grand Mistress earned her current position."

"They have. In at least one case, we are sure the Eversor agent requested the invitation, not the reverse."

So there may be a high-ranking member of Eversor who had decided to make an alliance with the High Lord of the Administratum.

"I heed the warning." It wasn't like she could do anything else...for now.

**Approximate location [REDACTED]**

**Date [CLASSIFIED]**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

It took a lot to ensure fifty Inquisitors and Lords or Lady Inquisitors remained silent in a single room.

No matter how seriously the members of the Holy Ordos took their duties, the internal bickering had never stopped since the Inquisition's Founding. It likely never would stop as long as Mankind existed, Odysseus was sure of that, alas.

But an old map of the galaxy? A million-years old map of the galaxy, a galaxy ravaged by Warp Storms and near-unbelievable cosmic disasters? A map where the devastation was so terrible the Immaterium had poured so much into the Materium that a gigantic Warp Rift was to be seen from the Halo Stars to the Eastern Fringe?

Oh yes, for about two minutes, there was complete silence.

"The map was obtained from the local Necrons, wasn't it?" one of the new representatives of the Ordo Xenos inquired.

"It was," Pedro de Moray, now the Lord of the Nyxian Conclave, answered honestly. "Lady Weaver obtained it in our name, as well as several copies. I was given to understand one of them is on its way to the Imperial Palace, as the Watchers of the Throne were very interested in this information."

If there was anyone who was surprised by the revelation, he or she hid it well.

"Something puzzles me," a female Inquisitor of the Ordo Astra spoke up. "The damage done by the War in Heaven is clearly consistent with the planets of the Pylon Network Her Celestial Highness knew of. But unlike all the Warp Storms we are familiar with, the Eye of Terror was a region unaffected by the engulfing madness. Why did the Necrons and the fell entities they took command from bother investing in such a difficult project? Not that I am complaining, of course!"

Odysseus knew the answer very well, and he felt he owed it to all his colleagues to answer frankly.

"That's because the purpose of this 'Ring' was not to save the galaxy from the Warp Storms," the old and not-retired Lord Inquisitor spoke. "It was to be the preliminary plan to cut that entire region off from the Warp, as the prelude of the grand assault the C'Tan were about to launch against the Core Worlds of the Eldar Empire."

This time, the reactions were far more noticeable. By Inquisitorial standards, of course. Eyebrows rose. Fingers twitched. Some men and women decided to drink serenely the drinks in front of them after numerous poison checks.

"I was made to believe," an Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos began with a touch of irony, "that the long-ears were *winning* the First and Greatest War. Clearly their information was a bit...*erroneous*."

"Yes," Inquisitor Contessa agreed. "The Eldars' benefactors and masters, the Old Ones, were nearly exterminated by that point. Most of the other races were crippled or on death's door. Only the Eldar, the predecessors of the Orks, and some of the most powerful races like the Hrud were left in sizeable numbers, and they were all cornered. While we don't have an exact timetable, the activation of the Pylon Network was the beginning of the end. If the Necrons had not turned against the C'Tan by the will of the Silent King, the Eldar would have followed their masters into the grave."

There were some whispers in the next seconds. Some of them likely muttered something about how sad it was that the legions of metal had not finished the job.

"I trust everyone understands why the new Edict forbids any organisation to mine the central Pylon Network for its Noctilith?"

"It is understood, Lord Inquisitor," Zoe Zircon of the Ordo Machinum replied for the forty-nine Inquisitors. "Though of course, as I am sure you are aware, it is going to intensify the competition to obtain more Noctilith by other means. Many petty wars are already fought for the Blackstone deposits."

He was aware of it, yes. Some Inquisitors wanted to study the potential of the Noctilith for themselves. Others felt that by grabbing large quantities of it, they would be rewarded by a proportional tonnage of Aethergold by Lady Weaver once the purification process was done.

"This can't be avoided." Pedro de Moray answered for the Nyxian Conclave. "But the conflicts will be monitored. And every Inquisitor who wants to make bargains with Her Celestial Highness or this Conclave will be tested by the radiance of the God-Emperor."

"The Traitors are indeed busy trying to develop their own arsenals of corrupted Noctilith," an Inquisitor which was more metallic prosthetics than flesh agreed, "let's not offer them the opportunity to test their weapons against one of our greatest Chaos counter-measures."

"Indeed," Pedro echoed. "But I did not show you this map just to let you acknowledge the magnitude of the threat our Malleus prevents from coming true year after year."

The silence returned, and it was one where vigilance coexisted with a small amount of confusion.

"While our esteemed colleague pointed out the Eye of Terror did not exist at the time, there is an Empyrean Anomaly which preceded all others already present sixty-five million years before the Age of the Imperium."

"The Maelstrom," Thanathos-Gamma spoke for the first time of this meeting.

And it was correct.

But it was not the small anomaly they were all familiar with.

No, the Maelstrom of the War in Heaven was a gigantic vortex of malice, easily three times the size of the Eye of Terror in the thirty-fifth millennium. It was a wound in reality which had swallowed most of the Galactic Core.

It was the death of everything sane, and Odysseus really didn't want to think about what had happened to all the species of the time which had been too close to it when it opened.

"It is a shadow of what it once was, this map makes it clear!"

"And yet," Odysseus declared, "the Necrons were unable to close it completely."

No one had a defiant retort for that.

And on many faces, there was a distinct lack of emotion.

The old Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus could appreciate it, for he had shown the same not too long ago. Yes, it was easy to repeat the obvious and affirm in public that the 'Fifth Black Crusade' had been the Word Bearers and their damned gene-sire piling up madness on top of madness.

But what if the Chaos Marines had managed to break Cadia, Fenris, and many other planets? What if they had sacrificed trillions upon trillion of souls and inflicted enough cracks to the Pylon Network? The Maelstrom was still there. There were other Warp Storms in the galaxy. And the Ruinous Powers, as unpredictable as they were, could always be counted upon to make a bad situation worse. They would widen the cracks into the fabric of the reality. Enormous quantities of Noctilith would be lost, and Chaos would imbue some to give it to its greatest Champions.

"As long as this old wound exists, it represents an unacceptable risk," one of his Malleus peers agreed. "Unfortunately, as it stands right now, we don't have the tools to correct this problem."

"Yes," Pedro de Moray told him. "And that's why of all you were invited today."

**The Eye of Terror**

**The Plague Planet – Death Guard Homeworld**

**Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Primarch Mortarion**

According to the *Blessings of the Fetid Tide*, Nurgle's ability to forgive was limitless.

Thousands of years ago, the Cult of the Seven Plagues had preached there was only joy and generosity in Decay's embrace.

When the Plague Marines marched, the Great Unclean Ones praised them and told them that it didn't matter if victory or death awaited them on the battlefield, for the Grandfather would eventually win. All the enemies of the Lord of Pandemics would eventually succumb to entropy. It was inevitable. When the brute on his Skull Throne would starve after blood dried on a billion battlefields, and the plots of the Crystal Labyrinth would eventually cause the Architect's Doom, Decay couldn't be stopped.

All of it was a lie.

Lies, more lies, and one could add a mountain of lies on top of that.

Generosity in the essence of Nurgle was like the thin layer of paint of a war engine: it easily disappeared the moment the first guns fired.

Then there was only spite and cruelty.

That was the truth of what Decay was.

Spite, cruelty, and a soup of poison some imbeciles mistook to be a path to admire.

Mortarion had no doubt about it.

Just like he had no doubt the other Primarchs sworn to different Gods of the Chaos Pantheon had been brainwashed into malleable and disgusting parodies of their old selves.

But not him.

Oh no, not him.

Nurgle had figured that since spite already burned in his two hearts when he was still a being of flesh and blood, then this state of affairs must continue.

Mortarion knew he was a master of spite and hatred, but here, there was a being which towered over him.

It was infuriating.

He nursed his grudges, of course.

But there was no victory to be found.

He hated it. He knew Nurgle enjoyed it. The Grandfather was never shy informing him when he read his thoughts before sending him out on an errand.

"**Magnus' sons were wrong**," he grunted. "**All is filth, not dust**."

In past times, he would have used *Silence* to make a point or two.

Now it was impossible.

As he had said before, the Lord of Plagues didn't forget, and he assuredly didn't forgive.

The Second Battle of the Tyrant Star, though it had ended with the defeat of Nagash, had been a catastrophe for the forces of Decay.

Only one in seven of the Plague Marines committed had survived the final assault. The Shard of the Goddess Isha had escaped the grasp of the Rotting Corruptor. More cultists, ships, and assets had been lost when the Imperial Navy ambushed them on their way back to the Eye of Terror. And the Herald, his ungrateful and treacherous son, had of course lost the last fragile ties which kept him mortal. The *Terminus Est* was left behind, lost with all hands, along with many Battleships of the Death Guard, and the new Gore Queen had promptly thrown the hulls into a nearby star.

This was a disaster.

Someone had to pay.

As he was the first to return, being banished before Nagash was vanquished, spite and hatred logically indicated he was to be held responsible for the defeat.

"**I wonder**," the Daemon-Primarch grunted, "**how much of Ahriman's defiant gesture inspired the Grandfather for this latest punishment**."

The answer, he felt, was likely 'a lot'.

Mortarion's essence was concentrated here, on the tallest peak of the Plague Planet, where the Black Manse had once stood. 'Once', for Nurgle had razed it with an army of Nurglings before his eyes.

And they had built him a throne.

It was an insult, of course.

But there had been no escape.

There had only been waiting to be dragged to it, and then the true punishment had begun.

For yes, it was a throne of decay and filth. Uncountable diseases covered it, and entered and left Mortarion's essence so as to provoke more sensations of pain.

But it was more than that.

It was his prison. And as Nurgle's spite was legendary, it was also the solution the God had found to rebuild the numbers of the Death Guard.

"**Did you see it...Emperor**?" At least he could still let his eyes wander over the polluted skies. And no matter how much Nurgle tried to hide it behind gas and pollutants, the light was there. The light of the Astronomican, the dreaded Firetide the Lords of Chaos feared, was burning brighter and brighter. "**Did you know what was going to happen**?"

Unfortunately, no answer came.

Or was it fortunately?

Mortarion didn't even know anymore what he wanted to hear.

Most of what he was survived on spite these days. His own essence and the appearance he had to present to the galaxy disgusted him.

"**As for you, Typhus...you finally got what you deserved**." His relish was evident, and he didn't bother hiding it. "**You always proclaimed that what you did was the will of the Gods. How does it feel when they turn against you**?"

Typhus heard the words, of course.

No matter how far away he was from his throne, in the swamps of the Plague Planet, Typhus would hear him.

But the former Herald couldn't answer.

That was what happened when your essence had been permanently changed to present you with a toad's head, cursed to speak in a language nobody, not even the daemonic, understood.

Mortarion knew what the Grandfather had done.

For his failures, his former First Captain was condemned to speak eternally in the ancient tongue of the former favourite servants of the Old Ones.

And to add insult to the injury, Typhus now more looked like a giant amphibian creature squeezed into a Plague Marine's armour.

It was ingratitude at its finest.

It was a powerful reminder that they were tools to be wielded and discarded by the Gods when they broke.

It didn't matter how well you served Nurgle. What *truly* mattered was that at some point, the God of Decay would lose all interest in you.

Typhus was no longer mortal. Typhus couldn't be the Traveller anymore.

And worst of all, Mortarion was almost certain Nurgle hadn't anticipated it.

The punishment was thus akin to those old myths their genitor had often mentioned.

Typhus was a Daemon Prince, the highest reward a Champion of the Gods could aspire to. He was also a large armoured amphibian condemned to drag a Knight-sized boulder behind him, and the chains biting into his essence had been forged by the smiths of the Forge of Souls; thus every moment was agony. Seven daemons whipped him seven times per cycle of life and death.

Last but not least, no matter the direction Typhus tried to move towards, magnificent fruits grew in front of him. Sumptuous foods smelling divine materialised by the will of Decay. The fetid pools turned into lakes of crystal-clear water.

Only every time Typhus appeared to be seduced by the paradise blossoming before him, or succumb to the food and water he didn't need anymore, there was an army of Nurglings to descend upon it, and returned it to its decaying swamp appearance, devouring the fruits and soiling the waters.

"**And this punishment he will suffer, for a very, very long time**."

Not that time was something Nurgle had scarcity of here, in this pit so close to the Garden.

And not that his own punishment was enjoyable.

The throne which he was shackled to was his prison, yes.

But the reason it was one was because seven large roots had stabbed his essence, and were now biding him to a massive, disgusting tree.

The tree was a creation of the Grandfather, of course.

That much was obvious for anyone unlucky enough to see it.

It was a tall, twisted thing. It had thorns that could kill a mortal with a mere scratch. Its smell was so pungent even an Astartes would die before touching the trunk. And accomplishing this exploit would likely give you fast-spreading necrosis.

"But it bears fruit. And in these fruits, a twisted copy of my gene-seed exists."

By all rights, this should be impossible. Mortarion was a Daemon Primarch. As such, he couldn't give out genetic material to create more Plague Marines, voluntarily or involuntarily.

But Nurgle had clearly found a solution which allowed him to mitigate that problem.

The second part of this plan was the eggs. Once the aspirants ate the rotting fruits, the Legionnaires plunged them into the transparent eggs born of seven deaths and a foul ritual. Once the eggs hatched, there would be a Plague Marine.

Or so was Nurgle's intention, at least.

For now, the subjects who had survived the process – one in seven – were weak and unworthy to be called his sons. They were very much like the Bolter-fodder they had used during the final states of the rebellion and the Siege of Terra.

But, and that Mortarion had not missed it, with the number of potential aspirants Gluthor Skurvithrax had returned with, the God of Decay wasn't going to find itself lacking in resources anytime soon.

Nurgle was creating an impressive number of proto-Astartes.

They wouldn't have the strength or skill of his sons.

But there would be a lot of them.

"Father," one of the newborn things croaked.

Mortarion instinctively hated him. It was something twisted, hungry, amphibian-eyed, and unworthy to call itself human, never mind a Legionnaire Astartes.

"**You are not my son. Begone**."

The servants laughed in the distance.

And then he heard the whispers. The Garden was spreading rot and more epidemics here.

Mortarion heard a name.

"**Malicia**. **I want Malicia to be brought here**."

**Nyx System**

**Nyx Sector**

**Somewhere under the surface of Nyx**

**2.150.313M35**

**Regina Wei Cao**

It had taken a small mountain of documents before they were finally authorised to be escorted blindfolded to this ultra-secret genetic lab.

The first sights were worth the wait, however. Before their eyes, there were Sanguinary Priests of different chapters of the sons of Sanguinius working on advanced cures. There were large quantities of Bacta being checked over and over before they were ready to be transported to the patients who needed them the most – or to Holy Terra itself. Genetors prepared sophisticated machinery that would be eventually tested in the hospitals of Hive Athena. New treatments were imagined for the various allergies which might occur during a rejuvenation injection.

Wei supposed no one would be surprised to hear that the Tech-Priests and the other workers here, be they insect or human, took security very, very seriously. If she, the Consort of the Basileia, had endured a screening process of months, then unlucky Nyxians would never see this lab with their own eyes unless something went very, very wrong. The same was true of Marianne Gutenberg, who as a High Lady's daughter, had access to a disturbing amount of high-level information...and yet this time, it had been of no help.

No step out of the main corridor was tolerated, they had been warned. As there were massive 'Blaster Turrets' ready to fire, this was no idle threat. A Magos had told them that there were cogitators somewhere ordered to analyse their gene-code and prepare the most adequate answer in the databases available. Unsubtly, they had also been reminded that as this lab worked on many cures, they had the poisons available too.

This was just the part which was visible. The sensation the Regina felt as she took each step forwards hinted there was a large artefact made of Aethergold somewhere. And the two 'ceremonial' Dreadnought-beetles were too obvious to not conclude that millions of insects were hidden somewhere. When there were 'air vents' of Athena built for the sole purpose of providing an avenue of attack to the spiders, it wasn't too much of a reach to assume her wife had found other clever methods to protect this vital installation.

Of course, the amusement ended quick as Taylor invited them to a room where there was nothing but a tank filled with golden Bacta and a few chairs facing it.

Sign there was something weird going on, the Adjutant-Spider escorting them didn't enter and closed the door once Marianne was in.

"You've been mysterious in the last days, Taylor." She decided to speak before the silence became annoying. "And you led us into one of your secret lairs. What is happening?"

"I can't get pregnant."

"What?" She wasn't the only one to have it blurted out. Marianne had done too.

The adamantium-clad face, unfortunately, convinced her she had correctly heard.

"Or to be more exact, I can't get pregnant anymore." Her wife offered her a very genuine grimace. "I drank too deep the well of **Sacrifice**, and...well, while the mechanics of my internal body works fine, my body will likely put an end to it after a few months. **Hope** is the only reason a child would manage to survive that long...but it wouldn't end well in the end. I'm sorry."

"That's why you winced every time someone uttered the word Sacrifice in the last days, isn't it?" Marianne recovered faster from the shock than she, to be sure.

"Yes. I thought I knew the full price I would pay, but...there are good reasons why the Custodes, who are not exactly known for their human feelings, look at me with pity. Sacrifice can be the Salvation of Mankind. But it also can be a blade which will make your fingers bleed."

Wei exhaled...and before Taylor could do anything to get out of the way, she hugged her.

"You should have said something sooner." She whispered into her wife's ear.

"But this is my legacy," of course she had to be stubborn about it. "It is-"

"Be quiet," ah good, a Basileia could still listen to the voice of reason. "Yes, it is your legacy. No, it isn't your fault. You didn't ask for this, and so many times you would have died if it wasn't for your phenomenal set of powers! If you had died before today, I'm rather sure that wouldn't be a fine legacy! Or do you disagree?"

"No." Marianne replied for her, placing a finger on Taylor's lips, making sure the question was therefore very rhetorical. The eyes were suddenly lit with cosmic fire, but it didn't last. The shoulders loosened, and her wife admitted defeat.

"Good," Wei said before giving her a second hug. "Now that you finally told us what was bothering you, let us begin again. I suppose you arrived to this conclusion both with your Genetors and your Prognosticator-Diviners?"

The black-haired Saint of Sacrifice nodded.

"Then the solution is easy. We are a couple, Taylor. If you can't be pregnant, then that leaves me...and Marianne, if she feels courageous enough to walk with you to the altar."

The Vicequeen rolled her eyes.

"I told them there was a lot of politics involved, but young brides are so impatient these days..."

For several seconds, they laughed.

The sound was a bit hysterical, but to be fair, it released a lot of the accumulated tension.

"Are you sure?" Taylor asked hesitantly, her confidence not yet returned. "You know we spoke of the risks after a certain irritating red-haired threat invited herself into our baths. This isn't just a medical surgery or a simple rejuvenation treatment, it is part psychic ritual of rebirth, part-"

"I know."

"You won't be able to travel outside of Nyx for many years. While being on the receiving end of *that*, there's no way I will be willing to risk you for a Warp travel, no matter how short it will be."

"You will be-"

"Taylor, I know." Wei decided to grin. The worried face was genuine she knew, but it was honestly adorable how at certain times her wife was unwilling to go ahead with something. She placed her hands in hers. "I have made my decision, and you know the moment is right. You have good subordinates now to do what needs to be done while, as your spiders say, you stay at the core of the web. Your next important military campaign is years away, both your psykers and your Magi Logis are in agreement about this."

"We will be there with you, Taylor. You won't be alone." Marianne hammered the message home. "We will have daughters...and I will choose the names."

This time it was successful: the Lady General Militant was back.

"How kind of you," Taylor snarked, "to decide everything for me..."

"You're very welcome," the Vicequeen answered shamelessly.

"*I* will choose the names and everything else, don't forget that-"

Wei hugged her again.

"This bribery method won't work again," the Regina heard the protest.

And she decided to ignore it.

"Won't it?" the Wuhanese noblewoman smirked. "I'd better step up my game, then."

**Argovon System**

**Imperial Transport *Starry Sight***

**High orbit over Hishrea**

**3.156.313M35**

**Colonel** **Angelos Livopopoulos**

"It is going to be pretty bad, Colonel."

"Come on, Ajax, it can't be worse than Mandragora."

"No, it can't, Colonel. But with all the respect I have for you, it is also going to be a hell lot *colder* than Mandragora ever was."

"A Captain of the Imperial Guard shouldn't bother with all these little details."

The next two words to be uttered would be censored by the Departmento Munitorum propaganda, of that Angelos was sure.

"I know this isn't exactly the kind of planet one dreams to have a holiday on," the commanding officer of the Nyx 875th told his second. "But I was told we would get reinforcements in priority for this mission, and new equipment."

"Well, we certainly got them." Ajax grimaced. "Most of them are still extremely young, Angelos. Half a year isn't enough to change that. They were PDF boys and girls for a couple of years. They aren't ready for a walk on Hishrea. This miserable ball of ice deserves its Death World label, all right."

"All our officers are veterans now." Unfortunately, there were still holes to be filled. There was a reason why Ajax, the most senior Captain of the 875th, was serving as his second and not a far more experienced Major. "I realise it is less than ideal, but we will rotate our new blood with enough veterans to try to fix that. This should be enough. We are only supposed to deploy and assist the Fenrisian refugees for a few weeks. We are only waiting for the convoy to form, and then we return to Nyx."

Angelos was not important enough to know the exact value of that convoy, but everyone down to the lowest-ranked recruit now knew it was a very big shipment of Noctilith, Iridium, and other high-priced items.

Much of it wasn't even mined here, but the higher-ups had decided that with one Convoy, they would decrease the costs and ensure the Imperial Navy squadron protecting it wouldn't need to disperse.

Of course, to make sure no one pilfered the cargos, the Noctilith and the rest were in need of fierce protectors.

Which in turn explained their presence here.

"This can't come soon enough, Colonel. I swear these Fenrisian are all crazy. Would you believe it? They're happy to land on this dreadful planet!"

"Well, they're from the Fenris Sector," the veteran of Mandragora replied reasonably. "Look at the names of the planets. Midgardia, Frostheim, Gnarle Primus...most of their names are so bad they urge you to shiver for hours."

"The more you speak, Colonel, the more tempted I am to knock something heavy against your neck and dump you into an incinerator."

"I'm sure you know that would qualify as mutiny."

"But I would feel much better. Like Colonel Raven always said, it's the present which counts."

Angelos Livopopoulos found in him enough to make a chuckle.

Raven – not because it was his name, but the raven tattoo covering most of his face – had been that kind of Colonel everyone loved. The irony had been that on Mandragora, they had been scouting under the orders of a son of Corax. A true raven.

It had ended in victory, but God-Emperor, they still had nightmares about it today. The Necron fortress had been sabotaged, allowing an entire armoured corps to flank many xenos phalanxes, but the 875th had been slaughtered in return. Three out of four thousand men dead, and there was a reason why Angelos' right arm was Mechanicus-made now.

"As you say, Ajax. Find the light. Find the optimism in you! I know it is sleeping, but make an effort to wake it up!

"So far, the only positive thing I see, Sir, is that there are no Necrons to be found in this warmth-forsaken planet. Sir."

Angelos laughed, and began to walk in direction of their Lander, moving around several refugees of Midgardia, taking care not to trample them. By all rights, a transport of the Imperial Guard should not have refugees onboard; it was simple good sense.

But with a lot of infrastructure like the big 'maritime cruisers' currently incomplete, and the new local Chapter of Space Marines busy chasing away the big super-predators off the projected landing zones, there was no other choice.

All the while the Colonel of the 875th tried to repeat to himself that compared to Mandragora, it was going to be easy.

It didn't work, and it wasn't true.

The descent on Hishrea was this kind of 'joy' you dreamed of never doing again in your life. It was like a nightmare of cold and darkness had seized you, no matter how impossible it sounded because the Lander was supposed to endure near-absolute zero temperatures.

It was awful. It felt like you were the chew toy of something incredibly nasty. You begged for the hurricane of destruction to release your transport. Everyone emptied his or her stomach, and not always into the vomit bags.

Angelos Livopopoulos was not ashamed to say that when it ended, he murmured many prayers of gratitude to the Golden Throne, His Most Holy Majesty, and His Saint for having spared his life.

"Colonel, I don't think I am able to walk after that."

"Well," he answered with difficulty, "we are not in a combat zone. I formally give you permission to wait five minutes so you can recover and-"

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?" The howl-shout was so powerful it instinctively forced him to stand. "AN INVITATION? WELCOME TO HISHREA! GET OUT OF YOUR SHELL AND STAND BEFORE ME!"

"No," a Corporal who looked far younger than his age at the moment reacted, "we haven't signed up for that!"

"Tough luck, son," Angelos grimaced. "You're in the Guard now. And unless I am greatly mistaken...you are about to meet a living legend."

**Hishrea**

**3.160.313M35**

**Captain Ajax Myrmekes**

Ajax would have his revenge if it was the last thing he ever did.

Damn it, the Colonel knew how much he disliked Necron fortresses! Especially if they were underground.

And yet when the time had come to send a company with the Winter Sharks – and this was a ridiculous name, weren't they to be supposed to be Wolves?

They even had their wolfish beasts escorting them!

Right, best to focus on the important thing.

They were in a Necron Tomb.

They were walking in the tunnels of a Necron structure, the 'Canoptek' units which were currently lying lifelessly everywhere was sufficient for there to be any doubt.

Praise the Emperor, nothing was moving.

Thankfully, because if the Necrons woke up, Ajax didn't bet a single Throne Gelt on the lives of his men.

He was not a coward.

He was a Captain of the Imperial Guard.

And the Astartes may be able to survive, with their big heavy Power Armours.

But the men of the 875th would stand no chance.

Mere seconds ago, they had left behind a second crypt filled with thousands of Necron warriors.

"Don't look like a scared hare, little man," one of the Space Marines teased, his amusement incredibly clear. "The Great Wolf sabotaged the energy core of this xenos fortress. Nothing will wake up unless he wills it?"

What?

"And *when* were you going to inform us of this?" He snapped. Damn the Winter Sharks and their Fenrisian humour!

"When watching you squirm stopped being funny," the long-fanged giant answered without a trace of apology in his voice. "Oh, and be careful about the bridges. They may be instable now that we depowered their rails."

"Please tell me that was a bad joke."

The Space Marine bared his teeth, which of course was not reassuring at all!

"I was right and the Colonel was wrong." He grumbled for himself. "This is worse than Mandragora..."

Ajax was sure he wouldn't be permitted to say that in front of the Basileia, unfortunately.

They were in the presence of one of the God-Emperor's sons! Surely this was exciting, right?

Wrong. In fact, even if the Necrons hadn't been there, the Nyxian Captain would have been ill-at-ease. All the propaganda vid-feeds he had seen of Primarchs so far weren't even close the real deal. They really didn't show the danger you felt in presence of one. Wherever Leman Russ walked, you felt his savagery and the threat he represented. You felt like a defenceless grox, ready for the slaughter.

You were in the presence of something way too dangerous, too great to be fought with your Lasgun.

And now the Primarch was leading them into the depths of a Necron Tomb.

Ajax couldn't wait for them to be back in orbit above the ice ball. If they returned to orbit, there were always horror stories about how this kind of mission ended...

The end of the adventure arrived without warning.

Suddenly, there were no more stairs to descend into the sub-levels of the xenos citadel.

There was only a single gate barring the way, and the 'Winter Sharks', obeying their sire's instructions, blew it up with several bags worth of explosive and some witchery manifesting as ice stalagmites.

Despite everything inside him screaming it was a bad idea, they went through the opening the Lord of Wolves had just made.

Ajax didn't really know what he had expected to find. There were sons of Russ with them, so maybe a big treasure? Or relic-weapons the perfidious Necrons had stolen from Mankind? Or maps which told them were the Necrons slept across the galaxy?

Once his helmet's sensors adapted to the complete lack of light, it was revealed to be none of that.

There was a miniature pyramid, which was completely dark...and that was all.

The hall was easily tall enough to house a few Titans...but there was nothing.

It was an entire vault of emptiness.

"Captain, what exactly are we supposed to be searching for?"

"I don't know..."

The Primarch, though, appeared to know what he was looking for. He slammed his huge axe onto a specific part of the pyramid, and instantly, glyphs began to appear on the walls. The vault also began to feel bigger, as if that wasn't big enough.

And for the first time, Leman Russ didn't seem to be so...savage.

If anything, his stride was hesitant as he approached the wall.

Ajax Myrmekes followed, and froze when he saw some of the descriptions.

At first, they had seemed incomprehensible, but now there was a scene every loyal soldier of the Imperium recognised.

How could they fail to comprehend a colossus of malevolent darkness challenging a crowned figure of Light, as an Angel was dying in a pool of blood?

"This is...this is the final duel of the Heresy, Lord." What in the name of the Spiders was it doing here?

"Yes," Leman Russ grunted. "It is...it is that. When my father...when my father was forced to kill his favourite son, who had betrayed us all. But before-"

The glyphs changed, and a single figure stood in front of the Arch-Traitor's darkness, as the Emperor desperately tried to move, to recover as his death approached. It was a white wolf, and yet it was also a Space Marine. It was-

"Gavriel Loken," Russ murmured. "You saved him in the end. The son remained true, when the father did not. For this sacrifice, you will never be forgotten."

The claw of darkness struck, and the white figure fell.

But the Arch-Traitor, the Lord of Evil, had waited for too long.

By striking down its opponent, it had created an opening.

The Sword of Light sang and impaled the monster.

"It should have been me." The Great Wolf spoke as all fell, all lied dead on the ground, the Emperor, the Arch-Traitor, and the Angel. "But I was too stubborn, I could have wounded him like Sanguinius did and-"

The regret had the weight of millennia behind it.

It was sorrow, and it felt like the bite of the ice.

They walked through the hall, and the glyphs changed. There were more scenes of battle. There were many wars. A lot of them looked to be about the greenskins, though Chaos Marines were also present in great numbers.

But for most of them, Ajax didn't have any kind of reference.

Until it changed.

Until familiar glyphs of spiders and beetles appeared, the regiments of the Imperium charging to meet the Dark Eldar of Commorragh. Ajax watched as a greater abomination died. The Emperor's Light burned brighter once more, and then the Fifth Black Crusade was shown.

The Necrons of the Ymga Monolith were defeated. The Primarchs returned. The armies of the Imperium battled the Tyranids. Lady Weaver destroyed the greatest of them, fragment of a greater monster-horror.

The glyphs began to vanish one by one. Whatever the purpose of this vault, it clearly had fulfilled it.

Yet a glyph remained, while everything disappeared.

It was something...disturbing.

It was a Necron symbol.

It was a combination of complete and incomplete circles, shining in eerie blue light.

"What does it mean, Father?" one of the Space Marines asked.

"In the language of wolves and men, my son, it best translates as 'Terror'." Leman Russ scowled. "I have to contact Terra and Nyx immediately."

**Claire 47 System**

**Claire 47**

**Gaius Mausoleum**

**2.164.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Today, Taylor had decided to be selfish.

For two hours this morning, the Gaius Mausoleum was closed to anyone who didn't come with her, and her escort was limited to Artemis, the Dawnbreaker Guard, and one very arrogant Eldar.

It felt selfish, and yet this time, Taylor had known she wouldn't have the strength to face all the graves again without crying.

Not because she had remorse about Commorragh and the deaths which could have been avoided.

No, the Lady General Militant had mourned the souls lost under her command, and she would continue to mourn them until she died.

But now these dead men and women were only a minority of the deaths which had occurred during her military career.

The Ymga Monolith, Mandragora, Tau, Macragge, Ardium.

That it could have been definitely worse was only a meagre consolation.

Perhaps she had tried to forget it all these months, pushing away the thoughts.

But she was the Angel of Sacrifice.

She couldn't forget.

"I will build another Marvel so that no one will forget what you did. How you saved the galaxy...again."

There was no one there who would hear her voice faltering.

The souls didn't answer.

They were gone from this world for good, and Mankind could only hope there was a better place waiting for them after their demises.

The Mausoleum of white marble was a memorial; it was not a gateway to the afterlife.

But it was peaceful.

It was an ideal of beauty, and she hoped it would remain that way for a long, long time.

Then in the distance, the bells tolled.

The two hours she had given herself were over.

Taylor wiped the red tears which hadn't dried up, and turned away.

On her way down, Diamantis was waiting for her, silent sentinel that felt really out place, given that he was the only trace of yellow paint to be found in a radius of several kilometres.

"This better not be a request to build another 'little fort' near the Spaceport, Huscarl." The Lady of Nyx let her lips twitch.

"Would I dare so soon after the last one, my Lady?" It was better for the peace of all involved that Taylor didn't answer that, really. "There has been word from the Argovon System, my Lady. A high-level Vermillion-level message from Leman Russ himself. He found another Necron Tomb on Hishrea."

"Again?" Taylor groaned. "I know we placed a Space Marine Chapter there right because of this very danger, but this is getting really ridiculous. How many has it been in the last month, five?"

"Actually, this is the sixth one. Though this time, they managed to pulverise the reawakening protocols before a single Necron marched for war."

"That's good news," several other times they hadn't been that lucky. Although the presence of Leman Russ meant that in all cases, the collateral damage had been extremely limited. Then she blinked. "But if that's the case, why is the message Vermillion-coded?"

"Do you remember when Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten informed you of these 'Chambers of Past Mistakes and Eternal Memories', my Lady?"

Oh she didn't like where this was going. At all.

"I do," the Basileia of Nyx replied immediately. "I also know you butchered the translation we were given, and that it was agreed it would be improbable to find one, since they were supposed to be incredibly rare." She paused for a moment. "I suppose the Primarch found one and couldn't resist entering it?"

Diamantis' expression was answer by itself.

"All right. This is noteworthy, but it's not that big of a problem. I will have to inform Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten, obviously, who will probably insist to send a few of her Crypteks to examine the Chamber."

"There is another problem. Apparently, Leman Russ was able to see many past events of the Imperium's history, down to the Black Crusade and the Tyranid onslaught."

"Yes?" It was after all what a Chamber like that was supposed to do.

"There was a last glyph which burned at the end. One the Wolf King said felt like...*Terror*, in his own words. Your Astropaths drew it while you were meditating...and we compared it to the list of Dynasties the Necrons warned us about. There is a match."

The blue sigil was complicated, and as always, most of the reasons why any Necron would choose it went way over her head. It had to do something with astrology, ego, and some other factors.

Taylor didn't really care, to be honest.

The name Diamantis had written below it, however...

"This is a warning. About the Maynarkh Dynasty."

Come on, they had just negated the threat the Sautekh Dynasty represented, couldn't they have a break?

"Yes." The battle-brother of the Imperial Fists told her. "Of course, we don't know when it will be relevant. There were thousands of years of history..."

Taylor sighed and gave him a dry look. When had they been that lucky?

"Well, this is a problem. I'm really going to need a courier ship to send all the information to the Nerushlatset Dynasty. And unfortunately, I think it is going to stop there."

"My Lady? Why not try a decapitating strike against these...these Maynarkh? Surely they don't have a Monolith like the Dynasty of the Silent King has!"

"No, they have something stronger, Diamantis...total secrecy. No one among the Necrons we have interrogated so far have any clue where the Tomb Worlds of these bogeymen of the Necron species have been hidden."

"Ah. Yes, I see why it could be a problem, my Lady."

"Understatement of the year, Huscarl, understatement of the year..."

**Kolskov System**

**Kolskov**

**3.192.313M35**

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

Before stepping a foot on Kolskov, Jeremiah had known Lady Weaver wasn't going to be happy.

The scowl and the aura of wrath she harboured upon her return were just the validations of his warnings, it had to be said.

"The new Governor is a cretin."

Yes, the meeting had gone as well as could be hoped.

"What did you expect, my Lady? He hated his father's guts. Obviously, the moment he became the new Governor, he was going to undo everything he blamed his father for."

"I...I suppose I wanted to stay optimistic. Let us be thankful for small favours: the food production of Kolskov is part of tithe and trade agreements that can't be really changed by any Governor."

"You could decrease the price you're willing to give for every ton of food," since her consort was the ruler of Wuhan, and Lady Weaver herself had total control of Nyx economy, maybe-

"No, Chapter Master." The use of his rank was a small warning, but one he heeded. "I am not going to punish the farmers for the stupidity of their Governor. Especially as you and I very well know any economic warfare would end up punishing them, not the Governor."

On that point, the Lady of Nyx was most likely right. The previous Governor wouldn't have accepted that, but the previous Governor was dead, and his dedication to managing his Gubernatorial affairs had been so high that he had more or less left his sons be educated by their respective mothers.

Unsurprisingly, the scions of the ruling line of Kolskov were strangers to each other. Equally unsurprisingly when it comes to strangers and the quest for political power, they didn't consider each other family, much like their father had been considered an obstacle on their way to the throne.

"Do you want me to watch?"

"No," Lady Weaver replied after several seconds. "I am going to trade a favour or two with the new representative of the new Ordo the Inquisition is busy working on. This new Governor is not just a cretin, I think he's greedy as hell too."

A loud, genuine sigh arrived to his ears.

"It's not like I think removing him would be a miraculous solution, you understand."

"Yes. His brothers may not be as bad as him, but they aren't what one could call competent."

"True."

They stayed here on top of the hills for several minutes, the wind striking them with its full strength, letting their cloaks fly in the wind.

"There are times where I am tempted to pour a large set of democratic measures into certain societies."

"They certainly couldn't do a worse job than certain inbred Governors, my Lady. The problem is that once they begin to gather things like 'Council of the People' or 'National Committee of Salvation', in my long experience, the secessions are never far away."

"And until they have a threat bearing down on them, some societies appear to make cuts in the military budget at the first opportunity, yes."

Jeremiah grunted in agreement. Really, he didn't understand why so many loudmouths were against funding the military – and yes, there were some of them in Nyx, fortunately very far away from any important position. The very purpose of a human government in this galaxy was to protect their citizens from the xenos and all the other horrors that could invade their homeworld.

This wasn't a novel notion; it was why the Emperor had launched the Great Crusade in the first place.

Against the Orks and several other threats like the Tyranids, there was only military might standing between you and oblivion. A general disarmament was synonymous with standing naked and trying to convince the predator that no, you weren't particularly delicious.

"But enough about my problems with the Governors of the Nyx Sector."

They walked in direction of the lake.

Before they could reach its shore, there was a large splash, and instantly, there were ten blue-skinned Eldar prostrating themselves before the Angel of Nyx.

"My Empress," the oldest and most powerful xenos of the group spoke...in an incredibly smug tone.

"Remove that smug expression from your face, Lox'ena of the Unsounded Depths." Yes, the Queen of the Swarm had arrived at the same conclusion as he did.

"Yes, my Empress," well, at least she obeyed...

"The Governor wants you as far away from his planet immediately. Fortunately for you, it is because he does not have any brains, not because you have caused trouble. You are also very lucky I still have aquarium-ships and that I am building new water habitat-modules for the Arena of Blades."

"We would prefer our own planet, my Empress," the musical tone put him on edge; the veteran Astartes in him knew how deadly their voice could be when they used their psyker abilities. It didn't matter that the bipedal-transformed Sirens were near-naked with only a shells and lake decorations affixed to their bodies, Jeremiah Isley acknowledged them for the threats they were.

The reply of Lady Weaver was blunt and to the point.

"So far, you have done nothing to justify such a privilege."

It was the turn of the 'Ocean-Mistress' to show a frown on her face, with her long ears twitching a lot.

"We are willing to do many things to swim in fresh oceans of wild water, my Empress."

For what felt like an eternity, the eyes of the stars stared at the Siren.

"One of my Adjutants will oversee your travel on the Aquarium-ship, along with an Inquisitor. Tell her everything you are ready to offer, and I will listen to your proposals."

"Yes, my Empress."

The Destroyer of Commorragh was about to turn away, but at the last moment stopped.

"Oh, and before I forget...listen attentively to my Adjutant when she gives you all the security rules. I don't expect the Queen of Blades to return anytime soon, but I have been surprised before. As such, follow the rules. I won't lift a single finger if you anger Aenaria Eldanesh."

They said the Sirens didn't shiver, but most of those prostrated on the stones delimiting the lake did a convincing imitation of it.

"We will obey. We do not want to have our tails cut off and be exhibited like vulgar net-prizes in *her* Arena, Empress."

Jeremiah blinked. The choice of words was oddly specific...and knowing what he knew about Eldar life-forms, completely deliberate. There was an interesting tale to learn here, no doubt.

**Ouralia System**

**T'au**

**City of Fio'ala**

**3.214.313M35**

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

Desmerius could see the Tau was bewildered.

But like every good engineer, the blue-skinned alien had the good sense not to question too much when a golden opportunity was to be seized.

"One hundred ZFR Horizon Accelerator Engines? Yes, Lady Weaver, provided we have enough resources, we can build them within two of your years."

"Good. And yes, the resources will be provided, of course. Archmagos Lankovar here will transmit your requests and I will deliver them to you as quickly as my Mining Industry can."

Of course, the Tau – who apparently answered to the name of Fio'el No'dachi – was curious. Or maybe he was just astonished they were willing to buy their inferior creations when Mankind had invented the Warp Drive millennia ago.

"But you are surely aware that, in order to advance-"

"Technocratic Engineer, I assure you I am well aware that an Accelerator Engine is capable of reaching, at best, one-fifth the speed of a Warp Drive. I don't expect your line of production to suddenly produce engines which will double the speed of Imperial spaceships."

Lady Weaver looked at him, and Lankovar gave a curt nod. The knowledge would spread soon enough, and it wasn't like the Tau workers were going to spread the knowledge outside this system, since they would spend all their life here.

"Your Accelerator Engines do not require a Gellar Field to function, since they don't plunge their crews into the hellish dimension we call the Warp, Technocratic Engineer. In a void battle, this is clearly a death sentence. But for long travels, your ZFR Horizon creation is a mature technology which won't get lost in the Warp like so many ships were. This offers opportunities to the Imperium."

Fio'el No'dachi made a complicated gesture of reverence immediately, seeming...contrite?

"I apologise, Queen of Arachen, I was-"

"You were curious and intrigued," the Chosen of the Omnissiah interrupted. "This is understandable, and in this circumstance, it is not problematic. But let's make something very clear here and now: I won't always be willing or capable of giving you a straight answer. Sometimes, the stakes of the military operations are too important to be entrusted to the Engineers who will build the technology of tomorrow."

The next minutes were spent on logistical minutiae and some points about how the Tau workforce was recruited now. There were some intriguing practises, though Lankovar was realistic enough: proposing a few to some Archmagi of Mars would be sufficient to give them aneurysms. Unless their brains melted first. That possibility couldn't be entirely disregarded.

"I have also arrived at a decision regarding a certain project." And this time, it was Lankovar's curiosity which spiked. "The Technocratic Council will be formally placed in charge of the production lines of the 'Moth Guardian' aircraft, and the Manta Missile Destroyer, albeit under Mechanicus oversight. An order for one thousand of the former and two thousand of the latter will arrive on Tau before the end of the year 313."

"A thousand blessings upon your House, Lady Weaver," Fio'el No'dachi repeated his gesture of deep reverence, "we will do our utmost to ensure you will not regret your decision."

Desmerius, personally, was incredibly satisfied too. The Chosen of the Omnissiah had followed his recommendations. In fact, in some cases, she had exceeded them! He had only called for one thousand 'Moth Guardians' and one thousand of the pre-Macragge 'Mantas' to be built, in order to not only bolster their aerial power, but also to preserve the industrial knowledge of the blue-skinned Tau.

"Regarding the other points of contention...I am undecided." The Archmagos born on Stygies VIII had been afraid of that. There had been a lot of conservatives pushing back lately. As numerous wonders were shaped by metallic hands once more, many among the Nyxian Mechanicus and outside of it had begun to whisper that the blessings of the Omnissiah shouldn't be spread out so swiftly and without more rigorous plans. "And I also want to visit your city, Technocratic Engineer. I was given reports, but I prefer observing the answers with my own eyes."

"Of course, Queen of Arachen, we understand perfectly." Fio'el No'dachi assured her with an alien smile. It went without saying that the Engineer was very relieved to have obtained so much in a single hour. "If you find it to your taste, there is a visit of the gardens prepared where you will meet former Ethereal Aun'shi. If it pleases you, the last true warriors of the Flames will accompany you to a new 'terraformation laboratory' that your tech-assistants helped us to build before a short meal. After that..."

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The Tau equivalent of Imperial production lines was very impressive. Not only were the large facilities more efficient on a one-on-one comparison than the most advanced stuff Dragon had built over the years, they had elegance and a style that was very pleasant to the eye.

They also developed prototypes and other personal creations on their own 'free time'; Taylor didn't need Lankovar to tell her that for now, that was outright impossible to achieve with the Mechanicus.

Of course, Nyx had still a large advantage: for every industrial facility present on Tau or in orbit of it, Nyx had one hundred and more. It was a stark reminder that while quality was important, quantity couldn't be neglected, otherwise you were just going to be overwhelmed by numbers.

That said, as impressive than the various Battlesuits, Pulse Carbines, and various Tau inventions were, the schools where the Tau learned the knowledge of their forebears were perhaps more impressive.

"I couldn't help but notice," Taylor kept her voice low as they walked through a colourful corridor of white, blue, and green, "that the other wings of this school are under renovation."

"Your eyes are sharp," Fio'el No'dachi complimented her. "These were the schools where the other children of Fio'ala were taught before the Cataclysm."

The sorrow in his voice was genuine, and the insect-mistress winced inside.

"I thought," she cleared her throat ill-at-ease, "that while the majority of the other Castes were stolen by the Ruinous Powers, there would be other births, at least at first."

"There weren't." The blue-skinned alien replied grimly. "Children of the Tau'va had their caste determined at birth, and in the majority of cases, determined by their parent."

"In the majority of cases?"

"The Ethereals tried to keep us in the dark, but there were always lone exceptions which simply didn't fit in the caste of their birth. The measures enforced were...unpleasant. And few were aware of what their full extent was. But it is not the case anymore. I believe many of my friends are studying the phenomenon as we speak...but the results are not in doubt. The Caste division has been abolished at school already because as far as the Technocratic Council is aware, there has not been a single Tau born of another Caste but Earth after our homeworld was grav-propelled in this very system."

That was...unpleasant to contemplate.

Of course, it was more of a final confirmation she didn't like.

Still...

The Four had not 'merely' stolen the Fire Warriors, the Air Caste Pilots, and the Water diplomats during their baleful intervention. By their outrageous 'claims', they had removed the capacity of the remaining Tau to ever sire more of them, and thus in time be able to change this state of affairs.

How could you break the status quo when no one on your side could speak for the other Castes?

The abominations of Chaos were not just sore losers, they were right bastards too.

On the plus side, by burning their bridges so thoroughly, any of their attempts to corrupt what was formerly the 'Earth Caste' would be increasingly more difficult as time passed.

"I suppose you are remodelling the currently empty wings so in time they can welcome other students again?" She asked.

"We are." Fio'el No'dachi agreed. "Some Fire training rooms will be kept open, for our future bright minds need to spend some time being prepared for their future duties in the 'militia reserves', but other structures are completely repurposed. This will be needed for the new students."

"You expect this school will be able to welcome that many students so soon?"

"Maybe not in the next Imperial standard year or the one after that," the Tau gave her the alien equivalent of a shrug, "but due to the rapid social changes our society is currently in the middle of, I would not be particularly surprised if in twenty years, all the classrooms are going to be reopened. Many of the Planners are wondering what it will meant for the Engineers. Ah, here we are."

Fio'el No'dachi drew a remote, and the wall in front of them transformed to become the modern equivalent of a one-way mirror.

On the other side, there was a classroom filled with young Tau, and it was a...surprising experience.

Though it was not a 'classroom' as many in the Imperium would understand it.

It was...yes, a room where the young Tau were taught, but it was also more than that. It had a small mechanical atelier where a dozen or so young children were trying to assemble parts that had to be some kind of basic drone.

In what could vaguely be called the 'centre', there was a first-rate hololith projector with the teacher using the three-dimensional images as support for his lesson. Sign of the difference between human and Tau schooling, only three children were around him to listen to his words.

There was a sort of musical thrill and-

Ah, the children moved. Now those who had been working in the mini-atelier went to listen to the teacher. Others were taking a seat and watching something that reminded her of old-fashioned computers. Amusingly, plenty of digital screens were shiny blue.

Right, focus. The classroom.

If this lesson was the norm, then the Tau were really mixing practical and theoretical from a very young age.

And they poured a lot of technological investment into their education.

Some noble schools of Nyx had hololithic devices right now, but even for them, it was a very recent thing. By Dragon's estimates, they were years away from generalising their use in civilian society.

"It is...a novelty, but a pleasant one." The Basileia spoke after several seconds. "Is this class the norm among your establishment, or are there different ones?"

"This class is one of five...I believe humans call them 'sub-types', is it?" The Tau continued after she nodded. "This is an Engineering sa'alik, the first step of Apprenticeship. The first periods of teaching are common for every child: Engineering, Agriculture, Industry, Construction, and Energy."

"And as such every...saalik," the word was difficult to pronounce, "ends up as the specialisation of your young, in the end?"

"Sa'alik, and yes, though not always." Fio'el No'dachi answered. "Before the Cataclysm, it was encouraged by the Planners to choose what some of your Tech-Priests have called 'primary specialisation' and 'secondary specialisation'. Some very gifted students, future Engineers destined for great things, were sometimes authorised to study a third, but it was rare. And, ah..."

"A limited life-span meant there always were better uses of your time, yes?" Taylor knew the Engineer in front of her was one of the many Tau who had received the new 'Tau rejuvenation treatment'.

"Yes, this is exactly that. Planners are already in deep discussion how it will change our approach to learning as a whole."

"Some, I suspect, will still choose one specialisation and take from other subjects only the minimum required," the Basileia mused. "It is after all what plenty of Tech-Priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus do."

"Some Planners think like you do," Fio'el No'dachi replied diplomatically. "Do you want to see the Agriculture specialisation classes?"

"Yes, please." It was going to create some delays for the rest of the schedule, but it wasn't every day she visited a Tau school...

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan II**

**Hive Asao**

**3.296.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Even in the Nyx Sector, Taylor knew that there were many Governors and nobles who said that Wuhan was ruled as a poor copy of Nyx.

Well, they tried to say it when they thought she wasn't able to hear them.

They were ridiculously wrong.

Yes, Taylor had some authority here, but Wei was perfectly capable of making her own choices, and in plenty of instances, the choices she had made as a Basileia weren't followed by her wife.

A notable point in particular?

Nyx had no Prime Minister.

It had not been an easy decision, the female parahuman remembered that well, but in the end, she had decided to not place any Minister above the other members of her government.

Wei had decided otherwise...for a multitude of other reasons.

Of course, the title wasn't called 'Prime Minister'. In a variant of an ancient language that may have been Chinese, the Wuhanese had called this important position 'Xunfu' – Wei was certainly not the first Governor to instate it.

In Low Gothic, it was best translated as 'Grand Secretary.'

Once again, several Governors preferred to not acknowledge his existence in the first place, or when they did, it was to describe him as a mere puppet that her Adjutant-Spiders routinely ignored or gave marching orders to.

As always, their assessment of the Wuhanese political situation was hilariously wrong, though given that many of the critics came from Atlas, Taylor couldn't say she was particularly surprised.

But no, Guo Lin, Grand Secretary of Wuhan Secundus, was no one's puppet.

When he greeted her, he was in azure robes with only a small amount of golden jewellery.

And once the courtesies were done, with the proper congratulations for the splendid appearance of the parade guards, the tone was respectful but strong.

"I am particularly happy to see you, your Celestial Highness," Guo Lin's long black hair, she noted, had not been cut since her last visit, a moderately audacious style of hairdressing on Wuhan, "though of course I would have been *delighted* to see you accompanied by the Lady Regina."

Taylor felt the urge to roll her eyes, but really, she supposed she deserved that.

"There are matters I am not at the liberty to discuss here," she answered. The insect-mistress had no intention to admit she couldn't give birth to a child in public, for a lot of reasons. "But your Regina negotiated hard, knowing her absence would grieve you."

Artemis gave him the data-slate while she admired the new Jade-coloured decorations which had been created as Operation Stalingrad was fought victoriously.

"Two Agri-Hives?" Guo Lin made a sound of appreciation. "And plenty of restoration efforts to reclaim Wuhan from pollution, I see."

"It is not going to be a slow process, it goes without saying," the Lady of Nyx thought the warning deserved to be mentioned here, "and as the Tech-Priests told me, we are likely going to use other types of flora. Mega-cacti aren't going to be the best option for Wuhanese soil, for some very technical reasons I'm not sure I fully understand."

But in many ways, the principles were the same of what had been done to Nyx...though the methods were going to differ.

Yes, plenty of heavy industries, chemical manufactorums, and other very polluting facilities were going to be transferred into orbit, with millions of tons of toxic waste collected and sent into nearby stars every year.

But unlike Nyx, Wuhan didn't have an ocean left – assuming it had even had one and not several smaller seas in the first place, Wuhan was ancient and maps from its original period of colonisation were not exactly dazzling anyone with their accuracy.

"Of course," Guo Lin noted, "I know a few Cartels who hoped for *three* Agri-Hives."

See? If the man was a puppet, he certainly wasn't hers.

Fortunately, you got used to it. And this wasn't the first time she would have to negotiate.

"Nyx is going to cover half of the costs associated with training your personnel," she reminded him. "And I seem to remember investing a respectable sum of Throne Gelts to rebuild this Hive."

By the way, the result was totally worth it. You would never think this Hive had been the scene of a full-scale battle between two rival factions of the Inquisition.

And yeah, some years ago the Inquisitorial headquarters had confirmed for good that the men in question were real Inquisitors, not fakes as many had suspected.

Bah, it wasn't like they were great losses...or losses at all.

And honestly, Taylor wasn't going to waste her time begging Trazyn to give them back. The thief had been so happy with his 'acquisitions'...

"If you say so, your Celestial Highness," the Grand Secretary bowed.

Several alarms immediately blared inside her head.

The Wuhanese Minister – technically his status said he wasn't, but he was giving orders to the Ten Ministers in practice – never conceded defeat so quickly.

"We both know you won't be satisfied so easily. Speak."

"Rumours about Ansibles have reached the Ministers' ears," of course they had. It was perhaps one of the worst-kept secrets of the Nyx Sector right now.

"And you wonder if, when we manage to create new Ansibles and make a system of them work, Wuhan will be earmarked to receive them. The answer is yes."

The first prototype of appreciable scale had yet to be completed, and it already completely changed how they saw the galaxy.

To make the shortest travel possible between the two Hive Worlds of the Sector, merchants and other travellers used the Nyx-Claire-Kolskov-Fay-Wuhan Warp lane. The other option was the Nyx-Smilodon-Andes-Wuhan lane. The latter was a bit shorter by some hours, but you couldn't use it to buy food and water and sell them on the Wuhanese markets.

"That is a good reason to rejoice, obviously, your Celestial Highness, but in the name of the Regina, I would appreciate a written commitment..."

See? The new generation of Wuhanese politicians was perfectly capable of defending her wife's interests...and those of Wuhan, of course.

**High Orbit above Wuhan II**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**3.300.313M35**

**Captain** **Setak Mo'ruyo**

Setak Mo'ruyo had not thought he would get an audience with Lady Weaver so quickly. That was the good news.

Unfortunately, the expression she gave him when he finished his report was worse than anger in several ways. Frustration was an expression way too easy to recognise, and at the moment he could read it.

"So Atlas has decided to play one of their stupid games for some reason only their inbred nobility understands," the Lady of the Dawnbreaker summarized after a grimace. "I wish I could say I am surprised, but their 'we will not interfere with anyone's patrols but in fact, we are doing it' has happened at least twenty-five times since my coronation as Basileia."

"The Magma Spiders are ready to-"

The golden wings' brilliance became almost painful.

"Do you think you are the first to suggest some retaliation move, Captain? I assure you, you are not. The Brothers of the Red, the Heracles Wardens, and the Iron Drakes to name just three have insisted the behaviour of the three Atlasian Governors is insulting and disgusting. I happen to agree. Most of their custom fees are utter robbery, their lack of cooperation is galling, and if they were Nyxian nobles, I would have most likely already sent them to join a Penal Legion."

The young-looking woman sighed loudly.

"Until they do something stupid like declaring secession from the Imperium, though, there is no excuse for an intervention. It is a black mark on their record, but they have so many of them by this point...and the headquarters of the Administratum don't really care as long as they pay their tithes. And the Atlas System does give Terra its due."

A small spider arrived to take a lot of bureaucratic documents, and ran away.

Lady Weaver picked up a red pen.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I don't think I can offer a miracle to solve the Atlasian problem."

This was not a dismissal, but Setak Mo'ruyo, Master of the Watch of the Magma Spiders, could hear it coming all too clearly.

"Lady Weaver, with all due my respect...that is not good enough! The Emperor built the Imperium for Mankind to be free! Free from the shackles of the Old Night! Yes, many worlds still fell short of His ideals, but we were trying to be better! To build something better! The Legions broke the slavery of the xenos, it wasn't to replace it with a human tyranny! It wasn't to see entire generations of loyal men and women be exploited from dawn to dusk until there's no practical difference with slavery! What they're doing on Atlas is slavery in all but name!"

For several seconds, the starry eyes watched him emotionlessly, and the Space Marine Captain feared he had gone too far. There were rumours about how Kratos had been punished-

Then a sad smile blossomed on her lips.

"You were one of the *Flamewrought*'s survivors, weren't you, Captain?"

"Yes, my Lady."

There was a nod.

"You are not the first Space Marine of that era to tell me how the Imperium of today falls short of the ideals the ancestors of this generation aspired to for humanity." The ruler of the Sector grimaced. "Though if you will forgive me the remark, the Emperor built a system which is at the root of the problem. When the Great Crusade conquered the stars, too many of the first Governors were allowed to establish hereditary rule without a care for skill and competence."

"That is not completely true!" Setak protested. "His Majesty put in place many safeguards!"

And before Lady Weaver could answer, the son of Vulkan realised how hypocritical it sounded. Clearly, given the current situation, the safeguards had not withstood the ravages of time...assuming the successors of Malcador had not decided to ignore them outright.

"I doubt they apply to this era, Captain." The Destroyer of Commorragh shook her head. "If they did, a man like Xerxes Vandire would have declared them illegal after he became a High Lord, fearing someone might use it against him. And for the sake of my curiosity, what were these safeguards?"

"If I remember correctly," the Master of the Watch answered using memories of a lifetime ago, "the Governors, if they wanted their scions to inherit, had to make sure a certain number of their descendants worked as productive members of Imperial society. During the Great Crusade, it meant more often than not enlisting in the Imperial Army or several forces supporting the military effort. And upon the death of a Governor, verifications were made. If the Governor had performed in an unsatisfactory manner, the Imperium could and in several instances did buy the entire planet at a set price determined by its tithes, before installing a Governor who would take the job seriously. Of course, as the military leadership knew it was a possibility, most Governors behaved well. At least this was the system which was agreed between the Emperor and our father for one hundred worlds close to Nocturne."

"But between the Horus Heresy and the Emperor being interned on the Golden Throne, the system utterly fell apart."The angelic-looking woman was suddenly more thoughtful. "Yes, it makes sense. Good intentions led to...to this mess."

There was another nod, and this one looked more combative.

"Very well, Captain. You're in luck, I currently have an expert of Terran law about to arrive aboard my ship. I will tell her to investigate these laws." Both eyebrows were raised thereafter. "But don't get your hopes up too high. Many Governors are depraved, corrupt, and never worked a single day in their lives. But they aren't completely stupid. If they thought they had reason to fear these laws, they would have acted in very different ways..."

**Saturnine-class 'Freighter'** ***White Ducat***

**3.304.313M35**

**Vicequeen** **Marianne Gutenberg**

"The law exists, yes. Your Space Marine Captain is correct."

Marianne didn't even bother searching for additional documentation; besides, the Mainz Cat on her legs wouldn't have tolerated her petting to be interrupted.

"Really?" the surprise of Taylor was obvious. Then again, it was logical; the law wasn't exactly well-known. "I would have thought..."

"That it was repealed?" Marianne chuckled, though the subject wasn't exactly funny. "Don't forget that it was a law directly made by the Emperor. Since He rules us all, changing His laws without His consent is treason."

The Basileia wasn't impressed, for good reason.

"I'm already hearing the 'but' ringing in my ears."

The meowing resonated beneath the white fur, and the petting had to resume.

"The law still exists, but was stripped of most of its power, so to speak." The Vicequeen spoke. "And the only reason why the architects of that particular 'reform' didn't do any worse...well, the Administratum frequently needs to buy Archive Worlds for its enormous inefficient bureaucratic system. And in general, each time a Crusade conquers some territory, the military commanders tend to 'forget' men like Vandire. Oh yes, they offer ore-rich systems to the Mechanicus, splendid lands to the Ecclesiarchy, many holdings to their lieutenants...but they tend to be blind when it comes to the needs of the Adepts of the Administratum. Their gains tend to be...poor."

The Mistress of Spider snorted.

"I would almost feel sorry them if I didn't know how rapacious certain Adepts of Clan Vandire have proven. There are plenty of rumours Xerxes sucked an entire Sector dry to get the High Lord's seat."

"Indeed." Much like plenty of other men and women, the Vandires were all about short-term gains, thinking nothing of what awaited them in the future. There was a reason the Zion Sector was not seen as something worth gambling on these days. "Returning back to the main topic, yes, the law exists. The 'duty to the Emperor' requirements are gone, but someone 'speaking in the Emperor's name' can buy back a planet if they feel they have sufficient justification to deprive an entire line of their ruling privileges."

The Vicequeen immediately stopped the petting and re-focused immediately on the stars-filled eyes once she realised what she had said.

"Taylor, no."

"No?" Oh, she didn't like the ironic drawl.

"It takes a vote of the Senatorum Imperialis when the Administratum wants to buy an Archive World for themselves." The daughter of House Gutenberg said quickly. "A few times they've done it by a vote of the High Twelve when they want to avoid all the squabbles of the Senate, but it still requires a formal vote."

"But that isn't what the law says, is it?" The grin was way too big to be innocent. "For all they tried to empty the law, it means 'speaking in the Emperor's name'...like being in contact with the Emperor...or being granted the privileges of a Peer of Terra."

Sometimes one had to wonder how big the sense of humour of His Most Holy Majesty of Terra truly was.

Marianne hesitated, before licking her lips to give herself some time.

"Taylor, it isn't going to work."

"Why? Because the Administratum isn't going to like it?"

Yes, that too, but the blonde-haired tradeswoman knew that was an incentive for Taylor to go ahead with it, not an obstacle.

"I would rather say because you don't have the money, oh Lady Countess of York, Peer of Terra. I know you have not yet spent everything you got from the Adeptus Almitas, so maybe you have enough to buy one planet the old-fashioned way. But this law is not made to make the planets cheap. There's no way you can buy the three planets of the System on your own. Maybe if Atlas didn't pay its tithes...but they do. And one planet won't solve the problem. The two other Governors will hate your guts for a millennium, and if you think they were obstructive before, I fear this would be a mere warm-up of their 'malicious compliance'."

"I have some ideas how to resolve that." Her lover said sweetly. "But please, continue."

"The second big problem is that you can't become the Governor of any world, since you already rule Nyx. And of course you will have to find an Adeptus to place this planet under its political shield."

Something that was non-trivial, to say the least, because the Administratum could be counted upon to raise hell on Holy Terra and scream murder at every door they could find. Marianne had faith about the Lady General Militant's influence, but she was extremely skeptical the Imperial Guard's upper command would allow itself to be plunged into a political feud of such fury.

"And third...third this law only applies when a Planetary Governor dies. And last time I checked all those incompetent wastrels of Atlas are in good health. The oldest is about one hundred years old, and with the rejuvenation treatments available to the wealthy in the Sector these days, that barely counts as middle-aged. I don't think any are going to do you the favour of dropping dead at an opportune time."

It would be comical to watch all the attempts to look innocent, if the matter wasn't so serious.

"The Assassinorum isn't going to do you a favour."

The smile she was given back was far more dangerous.

"Marianne, when I want someone dead in a non-suspicious way, believe me, I am not going to use the Assassinorum." There was two seconds of silence. "I have Pierre for that."

How could a bloody *Dreadnought* kill in a non-suspicious way?

Marianne dreaded to know the answer to that question...

"Still, Taylor, my advice is not to do it. No matter how much these imbeciles annoyed you-"

"Marianne. This isn't about just annoying me." The voice was of adamantium, and the eyes were burning with the flames of stars again. "I deal with annoyances every day. The problem, and I can't believe that a Magma Spider had to remind me of it, is that we are ruling because we want to make the Imperium *better*."

"You are making the Imperium better, love. Think of all you've accomplished, the technology, the Bacta-"

"Then why," the tone was almost suffering made human, "can't I help the billions of men, women, and children who are treated like bags of meat a few light-years away from Nyx? Why are there souls that can expect no better than some thirty years of harsh life, screaming and begging for release under the lash of their so-called 'Dukes'? We were horrified by the torture pens of Commorragh, but the serfs of Atlas are exploited to their last breath by humans! Why do they live like that, Marianne?"

There was...the Vicequeen shivered, and at that moment, she truly acknowledged how the **Sacrifice** of the God-Emperor could truly burn everything in its path.

"Captain Setak Mo'ruyo was right to be horrified. Look at what they made of the Emperor's dream, Marianne. It was supposed to be a dream of hope and reason. Instead it's a rotting carcass of fear, incompetence, and jealousy. If three Governors have to burn to remove part of this hateful *Decay*, then burn they shall."

Was this what the Emperor wanted? Why he had given his power of **Sacrifice** to Weaver?

The answer was all too obvious, once you listened to the sons of Sanguinius.

Yes.

A thousand times yes.

The Imperium was meant to bring Light and Hope, to banish the darkness of Old Night.

It wasn't meant to be replaced by the oppression and the tyranny which was the norm on Atlas.

"I am with you." Marianne answered. "How do you want to proceed?"

**Harbin System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**3.317.313M35**

**Forgefather** **Vulkan N'Varr**

"YES. I CAN DO IT."

"Really," Kratos snickered, proving that as painful the punishment was – when he wasn't smacked around by an overwhelming powerful xenos, that is – there were some things that never changed. "I seem to remember that-"

"I CAN DO IT." Pierre repeated. "BUT I NEED THE GOVERNORS TO BE CLOSE TO EACH OTHER AND SOME KNOWLEDGE FROM THE LOCALS, MY LADY. MANY IMPORTANT DEATHS IN A FEW HOURS ALWAYS CAUSE SUSPICIONS AND ACCUSATIONS OF FOUL PLAY."

"A fair point," their Lady answered. "Obviously, a lot of people will be aware I am behind it and the entire thing is too convenient from my point of view. As a consequence, a certain level of deniability is important."

"LIKE WHEN THAT ADEPT OF THE ADEPTUS ASTRA TELEPATHICA HAD A HEART ATTACK AT AN UNFORTUNATE MOMENT?"

Eyes rolled, and Lady Weaver smirked.

"It is better if you make sure the deniability levels in that particularly affair are significantly higher than that."

"I WILL DO WHAT I CAN. CAN I USE AN ADJUTANT-SPIDER TO GET ACCESS TO THE DATA?"

"Yes." The Basileia replied, before adding a limit, which was always good when you involved a former Alpha Legion operative. "But she will give you access to only the Atlasian reports."

"I WILL BEGIN THE BACKGROUND WORK IMMEDIATELY, THEN."

And a certain Dreadnought sneaked away as fast as a machine of his weight and size could afford to.

"Is this a good idea?" Sigenandus asked.

Vulkan immediately intervened. In his humble opinion, this was something that needed to be resolved, because the so-called 'feudal totalitarianism' was an insult which would make their father grieve when he became aware of it!

"The Atlasian nobles do not serve any ideal save the enrichment of their families, which are already swimming in wealth to begin with. All the while they oppress and they terrorise the very men and women they're supposed to protect!"

"Oh, err..." the Black Templar cleared his throat. "No, I have no objection to this particular problem. My objection was more about whether it was a good idea to let Pierre do it? I am far from an expert in infiltration and assassination operations, but I'm reasonably sure the Atlasian population has never seen a Dreadnought before. No matter how hard he tries, he's going to attract a lot of attention."

Several pair of Astartes eyes turned towards Kalyan Gowtham.

The Raven Guard shrugged in an unconcerned manner.

"Pierre managed to intercept a Traitor Primarch before said betrayer completely desecrated the Shrine of Guilliman. I think he will do fine here. Obviously, a lot depends on the circumstances...and this way the problem will be handled afterwards."

"It still requires a lot of support we are not certain to obtain," this time, Gamaliel had clearly decided to be the voice of caution.

Lady Taylor Hebert, Lady General Militant and Living Saint, gave her Blood Angel a very ironic smile.

"I realise the Primarchs are not symbolically sworn to oppose a Ruinous Power in particular, my Herald, but do you really think someone like the Avenging Son is going to be pleased by the very 'Feudal Totalitarianism' which is the norm on every world of Atlas?"

"When you ask it like that, no. But he's not the only one you have to convince, my Lady."

"True." There was a wince. "But as Pierre correctly pointed out, while we can take advantage of certain events, we assuredly can't engineer the circumstances themselves. And unless I have a sudden trouble with the dates of the Imperial Calendar," and she didn't, of that the Dawnbreaker Guard members were sure, "plenty of holy days of this year have already been celebrated. I don't think they will meet each other for months, and maybe not this year. And as much I want this system to end, yes, I want to do it right. Breaking the hold the Dukes of Atlas have over their people is good, but replacing decay with anarchy is not my intention. Therefore yes, I won't give the final order to Pierre until I am sure the plan is going to unfold like a well-oiled military operation."

Then the starry eyes turned to T'klis Rubix, Firedrake of the Magma Spiders.

"Now that we have agreed on this...I think First Duke Mocenigo needs to learn some humility. His arrogance has never ceased to grow, and though I *officially* can't touch him, some of the smugglers he uses are enjoying no protection whatsoever from the Lex Imperialis."

"Fitting," his fellow son of Vulkan replied. "We will release some of the information from our patrols to the Imperial Navy."

"In a splendid display of cooperation between two organisations of His Majesty's Imperium, dutifully making sure that the trade lanes of the Nyx Sector are safe and transporting only legally-approved goods."

"You have a way with words, my Lady."

"Thank you, Uriyangkhadai, I had excellent teachers..."

**Manchester System**

**Battle-Barge *Libethra***

**3.332.313M35**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

"Impressive," Taylor acknowledged. "I would almost pity your enemies, if I didn't know they were bloodthirsty greenskins."

She had, to be sure, seen plenty of Astartes standing at attention, but the eighty-six Space Marines of the Angels Revenant's 1st Company were a wall of Bolters and Ceramite ready to slaughter the enemies of the Imperium by the thousands.

As per the Codex Astartes, the Tactical Dreadnought Armour – best known as Terminator – was fielded in mass. The Angels Revenant clearly could field sixty-two of them today, three of them had been recently refurbished.

That and some typically Macraggian equipment hinted a detour eastwards had been made in the last months.

"Konor pattern?"

"You have a good eye, Lady Weaver," First Captain Suetonius Garda complimented her. "What gave it away?"

"The Heavy Bolters installed on the Thunderhawks behind your battle-brothers," the insect-mistress replied honestly. "When I left, Lord Guilliman had arranged an inspection of some models which had been removed from the stasis-vaults of the Forge World of Konor. Has the Primarch managed to...correct some of the production problems?"

It was a diplomatic way to wonder if the Avenging Son had kicked some incompetent Tech-Priests where they really deserved it, yes.

"Somewhat," Suetonius replied with an expression carved from solid marble, proving that he shared her opinion on the subject. "I was told production bottlenecks were being dealt with when we were welcomed at the Fortress of Hera. That was about six months ago."

"Lord Guilliman?"

"Our Father can't wait to be cleared to get out of his medical-purposed Power Armour."

Taylor snorted. That was the least surprising thing that was uttered in the last year or so. If there was something that could be said of all the Primarchs, it was that they were horribly impatient and not used to being on the receiving end of medical treatments.

At least the Apothecaries had to deal with Roboute Guilliman. The Lady General Militant preferred not to think of what would have happened if they had to play Healers for Leman Russ.

Something told her it would have ended in a lot of tears.

For the next minutes, the conversation was on hiatus. The two thousand men of the 'Revenant Auxilia' deserved her full attention, and there were plenty of details to assimilate, hands to shake, and even a few medals to give out.

Finally, the improvised presentation of the 1st Company was over, and the metallic gates closed behind them.

"The Tech-Priests are going to transfer twenty-five Mark IX Power Armours aboard the *Libethra*."

"We will make good use of them." The First Captain swore. "There have been many rumours about the Mark X, of course."

"The testing teams are working hard to stress-test it in the most realistic conditions possible." Which meant, naturally, that the opposition when it came to field testing consisted of other Space Marines present in the Nyx Sector. These days, Chapter Master Dupleix had volunteered close to thirty Astartes of his Reserve Companies, a serious commitment if there ever was one. "The results are promising. Very promising. But given the importance of the matter, here the Mechanicus, the sons of Vulkan, and I are in perfect agreement: the Mark X must have all its pre-production flaws, no matter how minor, completely eradicated. If it is to become the standard of the Astartes Power Armours for the 35th millennium, the outcome must be a first-rate Power Armour."

The Mark IX was still delivered to the Chapters at the moment, but this was because a Mark IX was better than no Power Armour. Once the Mark X began to be delivered in the thousands, Dragon was confident she would repurpose the Mark IX production line for the Mark X.

"Excellent," Suetonius said sincerely before changing the subject. "My Lord has thought of your latest proposal." By which he meant the Chapter Master of the Angels Revenant, not Lord Guilliman, else he would have used the 'Father' title.

The gene-sire of the Ultramarines had been informed of the basics too, of course. Unlike some politicians, the Astartes could keep their mouths shut.

"And?"

"We would feel better if we knew the percentage of gene-compatibility, of course."

Taylor grimaced inwardly.

"I tested the Guard regiments I have at my disposal. Gene-seed compatibility was on average at eighty-five percent. Since each potential recruitment world has a population of more than three billion people, I am of the opinion lack of good candidates is not what you would lack. And unfortunately, before the matter is resolved, I can't exactly organise gene-testing for all."

"My Lord understands." The second-in-command of the entire Angels Revenant Chapter answered. "And we are not blind to the...disgusting ruling methods you have been forced to tolerate. There is still the problem of debt...particularly of honour. These worlds are great prizes."

"And I think I already told your Chapter Master I'm not doing it for the money." The Basileia replied absolutely honestly. And it was absolutely not an exaggeration. For all the provocations, the taunting and more problems caused by the stupidity of a few nobles, the Nyx Sector could very well thrive while ignoring a problem or two.

Except if she did it, Taylor knew she would regret it very deeply one day, both as the Basileia of Nyx and as the Angel of Sacrifice.

Atlas was in the process of rotting from the inside whereas the entire Nyx Sector was on its way to rebuild itself into something approaching the levels of prosperity of the Great Crusade.

"We know," Suetonius Garda assured bluntly. "Otherwise this conversation wouldn't take place."

It was sometimes...refreshing to talk business matters with officers of the Adeptus Astartes.

Especially when they came from different gene-lines than the ones she was used to meeting and speaking with every day.

And it was very reassuring for her moral compass that the First Captain of a well-respected Chapter of the Eighth Founding agreed that the situation reeked of decay and repugnant stagnation.

"We are ready to accept the compromise where the Magma Spiders will be granted oversight of the patrol routes of the Sub-Sector." Suetonius continued. "Most of our doctrine is to leave void warfare to the Imperial Navy except when the fighting comes close to a planet anyway. But my Lord would feel more comfortable if past a certain point, the approach is...honourable."

"You want a certain amount of oversight in the matter?" Taylor asked, and the silent reply was positive. "I don't see why not. Although I will point out that you told me yourself the 1st Company is on its way to fight the Orks."

"I haven't forgotten the greenskins." Suetonius smiled carnivorously, before giving her a thoughtful look. "I could spare some squads from a Reserve Company once the crushing of a rebellion on the frontier is settled satisfactorily. Can you afford to wait until then?"

"I don't see why not." Pierre had not even given a single report, and the same was true of Ilmarina, who had taken up the duty of liaison for this one. "As long as ending said rebellion does not last decades, of course."

"Please, Lady Weaver," the son of Guilliman scoffed with false cheerfulness, "we don't play with our prey, unlike some of our wolfish cousins."

Was it seriously surprising that the Angels Revenant had a grudge against the Space Wolves too?

No.

**The Eye of Terror**

**Harmony**

**Ruins of Canticle City**

**Space-Temporal Anomaly – Imperial System impossible to calculate**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

"Warlord?"

"Yes, Boros?"

"I don't think we are going to find anything of use here."

"You may very well be right." The parahuman sorceress agreed. "One can say a lot of things about Abaddon, but I have to admit he thrashed this place very thoroughly."

Here had stood one of the greatest fortresses of the Emperor's Children during the Legion Wars: the Canticle City.

It had been a lair of horrors and sanity-breaking decadence.

Inside its halls, daemons and Excess-seduced Astartes had tormented billions of souls when they weren't busy doing worse.

All of the Third Legion's activities had ended when Ezekyle Abaddon returned with the *Vengeful Spirit* and dropped a freaking *Cruiser* upon the Canticle City.

It had been the vengeance of the future Warmaster of the Black Legion for the crimes of the sons of Fulgrim, who had dared steal the corpse of the fallen Horus Lupercal, the First Son, the First Warmaster...and according to some, the One Who Should Have Been Emperor.

Daemon and Astartes interrogations had not revealed what had happened during the battle. Had Abaddon burned his gene-sire's body to ensure further desecration was impossible? Or had he used it for his own goals? The corpse of a Primarch was a limited resource of genetic materials, unlike a living one. But it was still possible to extract some blood and other things, and the Black Legion had increased in size spectacularly. At the root of it may be gene-seed from Horus' corpse.

Or the rumours were true, and the other Legions had an enormous percentage of deserters, far more than they were ready to admit in public.

This was the Eye of Terror.

Truth was difficult to obtain at the best of times, and when the topic had a shred of importance, knowledge was worth its weight in adamantium.

"Why did we come here, Warlord?"

"I freely admit I was curious about what happened on Harmony during the Legion Wars," the blonde-haired sorceress replied.

"**You have come**," a voice that had never managed to stay silent for very long added, "**because you are afraid**."

"Shut up, Antwyr. You of all beings should not speak so derisively of fear. The monster in yellow neutralised you like you were a cheap artefact built by a novice sorcerer."

"**And whose fault was that?"**

"Yours." She certainly wasn't going to admit her flaws here, when the ruins still was infested with various entities listening to her every word.

The Destiny Unwritten turned back towards Boros Kurn and the other Astartes.

"I freely admit I chose Harmony because it is hardly an important system anymore. The Death Guard fleet that is busy hunting us should not think this place is one of our most probable destinations."

"I can't help but thinking," her lieutenant stated, "that we would be in a far better situation if your God told you of where the planets of the Malfi Warp Crown have been hidden."

"I think the same." Malicia replied with all the calm she could muster and none of the annoyance she really felt. "But it is what it is."

It was infuriating and proved once more that Tzeentch's designs where she was concerned had an outcome which clashed with her plans.

"The fleet can hold its own for a few more campaigns, of course."

"**As long as you keep avoiding the fleet of the Ferryman**," Antwyr told her in this remarkably irritating tone that gave you the urge to test if it was possible to strangle a daemonic sword with your bare hands.

"Gluthor Skurvithrax will not catch me," Malicia gritted her teeth.

She didn't know who he was taking orders from, Mortarion, Typhus, or even Nurgle, but Malicia was going to do her utmost so that the Plague Marines never took her alive...and that they didn't capture her soul either.

There were a lot of unpleasant fates one wanted to avoid at all costs, and being dragged in chains to the Plague Planet ranked near the top of the list, if it wasn't number one to begin with.

"Any idea why someone like the Ferryman was sent to hunt us down, Warlord? I'm pretty sure we didn't betray them during the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star."

"Your guess is as good as mine," Malicia admitted. "I suppose the Grandfather of Decay wants a new weapon to wield against the worshippers of the Corpse-Emperor, now that his former Herald screwed up and the Simurgh engineered his mortal downfall. It could be the Fifteenth Primarch wants to study how to replicate the creation of parahumans from my corpse...or by vivisecting me alive."

"Not because you stole some artefacts from the Death Guard?"

"I would love for that to be true, it would make their hunt make some sense." The Destiny Unwritten shook her head in rejection. "But I'm afraid that if I stole something that was once the property of the sons of the Reaper, my memory of it was erased afterwards. I don't remember pillaging through their ships or their hidden caches."

Ahriman and the Thousands, yes, she had looted from them...for all the good it did in the end.

But the Death Guard?

When everything was disease and contagion, anything you stole had to be decontaminated for years, assuming it was even possible to purify it. And that had been before the Jaderot Noctilith was unleashed in the first place.

"We should-"

There was a magical alarm, and a sorcerous alert flashed on her right. It was followed a second later by spells conjuring very powerful flames, which created some nice fireworks. The local daemons born of the ruin of Harmony shrieked in great numbers.

"The Q'Sal scouting force has found something."

**Outer edge of the Harmony System**

**Plague Battleship *Virulent Blight***

**Warlord** **Gluthor Skurvithrax, the Ferryman**

"You thought coming to Harmony would allow you to evade my pursuit. You were wrong, Destiny Unwritten."

"We outnumber her five-to-one, Great Lord, and most of her ships have not been repaired since the Battle of the Tyrant Star! The blasphemous child is cornered and soon will be taken captive!"

Gluthor spat out the plague slugs he was chewing, such was his discontent.

There was a gesture.

The foolish thing which had been part of the *Virulent Blight's* crew was squelched into something that could be best described as 'shapeless slime'.

"This kind of remark wouldn't have been uttered on the *Everbleed*," he remarked to the other Plague Marines present on his bridge.

But the Grandfather had rewarded him of his victories with the Battleship *Virulent Blight*, and for all the gifts of Blessed Decay, the crew of a Strike Cruiser was completely insufficient to crew his new flagship.

All of the recruits had been told to convert via the Ritual of the Seven Epidemics, yes. Alas, as every intelligent servant of the Lord of Plagues knew, faithfulness was not always synonymous with cleverness.

"We have found Malicia's fleet, yes." The Ferryman told his fiercest Venomariners, they who were the elite of the 6th Plague Company, and who might become something more in due time. "But I will only consider victory assured once we have tied her to the Black Altar of the Plague Planet. We are not going to assume victory will be ours simply because we have a firepower advantage. That kind of arrogance is exactly what led Typhus to fail. Understood?"

"Yes, Warlord!" Venomariners and Nurglings chorused at once.

No one showed any sign of fear. Good.

If anything, they were more determined than ever. That too was good.

"The rituals we cast have made sure our arrival was indeed unnoticed." Gluthor had tried to think of several scenarios why the battered Calyx fleet would behave like it did if they were aware of his presence, but there were none. "The *Natural Selection* is in high orbit of Harmony, with two Iron Warriors capital ships playing the role of close-quarters Escort. Thoughts?"

"They certainly are trying to discover if there is something they can recover from the ruins of Harmony, Lord," one of his Plague Lieutenants replied. "I don't see what good it will do to them, however. Harmony is just waiting to be claimed by the Grandfather. And Bile abandoned it when the *Vengeful Spirit* kicked him out."

"Maybe," Gluthor Skurvithrax affirmed with the patience of a long-lived predator, "but I have not become the Ferryman because I liked to gamble my victories on games of luck. The moment the battle begins, the appropriate countermeasures will be deployed. I want seven Miasmic Malignifiers to begin their holy work on the surface of Harmony."

"Your orders will be fulfilled to the letter, Great Ferryman."

"Good!" Typhus had failed, and Gluthor had no intention to follow in his footsteps. "Now let's return to the ambush itself. We have-"

Alarms shrieked.

The machines blessed by Decay flickered and then showed a torrent of black dots materialising into reality.

The Warlord of the Death Guard watched in incomprehension. If this was an ambush, it was one which had abysmally failed. This new fleet had translated out almost on the other side of the system, meaning they would take several days before coming close enough to begin engaging his squadrons.

What was the purpose of this stupidity? Had Malicia become aware of his presence and summoned reinforcements?

"Warlord...they...they are hailing us!"

This was-

This should not be possible. At this distance, the new fleet shouldn't even be able to perceive his warships' presence, even if they were able to pierce the veil of-

This might be a trick.

If he answered and they didn't have a good idea of his exact position, he would reveal his location like a fresh novice in his first war game.

But if he didn't and they already knew he was there...

"I suppose our unanticipated 'guests' have transmitted something allowing us to identify them?"

"Yes, Great Ferryman, they are-"

**Harmony**

**The Tunnels under Canticle City**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

When the Q'Sal Magister had found the first tunnel, Malicia had known instinctively it was some creation born of the Warp.

Tunnels couldn't have survived under Canticle City.

Even by the standards of the Eye of Terror, it was impossible. The citadel had been utterly wiped off the map. Most of the 'ruins' were in reality ruins from the rest of the planet which had been assembled by the whims of the Gods.

Some hollowed structures stood at the edge of where Canticle City had been, but the gigantic crater told you in a clear and painful manner that between the fortress and a warship crashing upon it, it wasn't the former which survived.

Yet the phenomenon had intrigued her.

It was something borne of the Immaterium, like many things were in the Eye of Terror, but it was not burning with the power of War, Anarchy, Decay, or Change.

It simply was.

Thus Malicia had dismissed the majority of her followers, keeping only her last two Golems by her side.

It was risky, but at the time, there was nothing better to do.

Besides, she didn't know where to go after Harmony.

The tunnels may yield answers or they may not; this was a gamble that was hers and hers alone to make.

The female parahuman really didn't know how long she marched in this maze where traps were in abundance and shadowy demons seemed to delight ambushing her at every opportunity, with only the taunts of Antwyr to keep her company.

Still, it was the Sword of Calamity which warned her she had reached her destination.

"**He is here! He is here, the one who thought he could forge new Demigods! Kill him**!"

The place she arrived at had clearly been a genetic lab of some sort millennia ago. There was enough broken medical equipment to reach that conclusion in two seconds.

Of course, you didn't need two more seconds to think that the majority of these once-priceless devices were not going to be of any use to her warband.

There were armaglass shards everywhere. Daemons had clearly played with a lot of broken tools, and entropy had done the rest.

The entire atmosphere as such reeked of abandon and disrepair. For once, Nurgle hadn't dug its claws into this place, but the moment he became aware of it, this would surely change.

There was one exception, though.

Where once there had been an alley filled with huge amniotic tanks where clones had undoubtedly been created, one remained standing more or less intact.

And in front of it, stood the former owner of the lab.

Malicia had never met him before, of course. But the descriptions she had been given fit him to a disturbing degree. He was a crouched figure, and the infamous arachnid-like device of the *Surgeon* was strapped to his back. His white mane was sickly, and his face seemed to be the epitome of what a mad scientist should look like.

Which was all the more surprising, because rumours across the Eye hinted the madman could heal himself now.

Maybe a clone created before the death of Slaanesh?

"Lord Primogenitor," she saluted him.

She had not been particularly discreet, but it took something like five seconds before the survivor of the Emperor's Children Legion deigned turning his head in her direction. It went without saying that the sorceress stayed ten metres away and on her guard.

"Well, well, well...if it isn't the Prodigal Child Herself, She who could have ruled the Calyx Hell Stars." The eyes and the expression of Fabius Bile – or one of his many, many clones – were filled with the essence of mockery itself.

Malicia would have loved returning the insult, but the old monster had a reputation of never being as weak and vulnerable as he looked to be.

"I came here to seek answers, Lord Primogenitor. I wasn't expecting to be honoured with your presence."

"You came here because you are hunted and the parasite you serve wants you to kneel and make another foolish bargain." Bile bluntly corrected with a chuckle. "You would be the beginning of another cycle. Oh yes, I've seen this dance of mistakes happen a lot of times. First Magnus, then his sons. Except great bird-brain has lost control of the Thousand Sons, and as long as Ahriman resists, plunging the deceived Legionnaires into his labyrinths is the only thing he can do to delay the inevitable."

"**I'm actually beginning to like him**." Antwyr said evilly.

Bile gave a disdainful glance to the Black Sword.

"Great. Another one of those things."

"You have the *Rod of Torment*, Lord Primogenitor."

"I have enslaved the *Rod of Torment*, girl." The ancient Space Marine corrected. "I am its Master, and I can banish the parasite when I desire it. This thing...you don't have any control over it. Throwing it into the nearest black hole is in my opinion the correct course of action."

"**I'm beginning to think I don't like him at all**," Antwyr hastily corrected.

Bile ignored Antwyr, much like he ignored her...and then his device sprayed some kind of liquid against the intact tank.

Instantly, all the moisture and the things which had stood in the way dissolved, revealing what was inside.

Malicia had expected some kind of misshapen mutant or perhaps an over-muscled Space Marine.

But nothing was further from the truth.

This was a child, a perfect child. But his appearance was so sublime, the hair was of silver, and the body was androgynously beautiful.

If this was a child, it was perfection-

"It is a clone of your gene-sire," Malicia gaped. "You cloned *Fulgrim*."

"I cloned every Primarch, girl," the Chief Apothecary of the Emperor's Children corrected her arrogantly. "Some attempts were more successful than others, admittedly. The Horus one was splendid. Unfortunately, Ezekyle killed him along with plenty of others."

"You..." By the Gods, was that why the madman had stolen Horus Lupercal's corpse? Because he wanted to create a copy of the First Warmaster?

Suddenly, it was not that surprising that the Architect of Fate had tried to convince the Primogenitor to bend the knee.

His megalomaniacal ambition was truly something...

"This...this couldn't work. You can clone the flesh of a Primarch, but in the end-"

"The soul, or the absence of it, will ensure disastrous madness or worse seizes them, yes," the mad scientist replied impatiently. "I studied the mysteries of gene-seed before you crawled out of your mud hole, girl. I have forgotten more about genetic science than you will ever learn."

The insult was clear, and the dismissal which followed even more so.

Malicia felt like she had been metaphorically slapped. That or she was in front of a teacher in detention, and suddenly the 'instructor' had just told her all her answers were wrong.

What could Bile want from a clone of his Primarch?

According to the rumours spreading across the Eye, Bile could always use more gene-seed resources, but he had already plenty. The Clonelord had worked with most of the Legions at one point or another since the end of the Siege of Terra.

As for creating more Primarchs, truly, save the clone this facility offered nothing. Unless the Primogenitor had a fleet stashed somewhere in-system with everything to rebuild, Harmony wasn't going to help his ambitions.

And the words just spoken hinted the Fulgrim clone wouldn't be used as a method to try to rebuild the Legion of the Emperor's Children so why-

Her eyes widened.

"You don't want to create new Primarch clones. You want to create something entirely new. Based upon their template."

Fabius Bile turned his decrepit head again in her direction, and this time, Malicia was sure the decaying flesh was just a shell and the real Fabius Bile was far away.

"Well, well, well...perhaps you are not the simpleton I thought you to be at first."

"Thanks?"

"Of course, you are still uninteresting compared to Weaver." The Tzeentchian sorceress had to control herself, because suddenly the urge she felt to murder Bile had nothing to do with Antwyr.

"You..." the blonde parahuman swallowed the myriad of insults she had on her tongue. It was...hellishly difficult, before a horrible realisation settled in her. "You are going to give her the clone of Fulgrim once you have no other use for it."

"If she plays a little game of mine to my satisfaction," the Primogenitor said smugly.

Any other Space Marine telling her this, she would have sniffed out the lie a kilometre away.

But this was Fabius Bile.

Insanity was his middle name, and deranged experiments were the norm. Ridiculous schemes like this one were his trademark. And the Chief Apothecary had never been reluctant about working incognito for Imperial authorities, though his 'partners' always ended up regretting the 'bargains' he offered.

"I...you want me for something. You waited for my arrival here."

The more she thought about it, the more she felt the entire meeting couldn't be a coincidence. Bile hadn't come alone, and no doubt his mutants had to be waiting somewhere in the tunnels nearby for his commands.

"Perceptive," Bile answered. "The galaxy is at last changing in a manner which pleases me. Mankind is changing, getting ready to shed the old and embrace the new. The Nephilim Queens are wonderful creations, and if I didn't rise to meet the challenge, I wouldn't be Fabius Bile."

"I..." how did she try to voice it politely? "I don't trust you, Primogenitor."

"That goes without saying," the ancient Space Marine told her in an almost amicable tone which ultimately resonated more threateningly than a thousand actual threats ever could have. "But without my support, I think your ambitions will soon be as ruined as Canticle City was."

No.

How did the bastard find them so easily?

"The Ferryman and his fleet are already here."

"Oh yes. And they're not the only ones."

The scenario had been prepared beforehand, for this was the moment a tall figure hidden behind a grey cloak walked out from one of the other tunnels.

The fabric of the cloth was clearly enchanted to repel sorcery, and Malicia couldn't see anything beneath it. Maybe if she could-

The cloak fell, and Malicia immediately regretted her curiosity.

The newcomer was a giant clad in ornate black and gold armour. And much like Bile, both his weapons and his face were known to every warlord of importance in the Eye of Terror.

"Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten," Abaddon the Despoiler spoke, and his voice was the doom of armadas and worlds. "I believe it is time we talk."

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.500.313M35**

**Rear-Admiral** **Fujiko Yamamoto**

If she was to be honest, Fujiko was a bit bemused that she had been able to convince an Adjutant-Spider of Her Celestial Highness to participate in a proper tea ceremony.

Bemused, but pleased.

Adjutant-Colonel Bellona was very eager to learn proper courtesies, for in her own words 'the Swarm had to be the definition of courtesy, unless they fought filthy heretics'.

"I learned most of the transports and other elements we have been waiting for in the last three days have left the Warp," the young Rear-Admiral sipped her tea.

"Yes, and thank you for the rapid update," the golden spider answered once three smaller spiders lowered her personal cup of tea. "We are a bit early, the Webmistress gave me a very lax schedule for the beginning of the operation, due to the vagaries of the Warp. But I think it will be better to begin as soon as possible. My grand-niece, Adjutant-Captain Kali, is I fear developing a terrible case of ophidiophobia.

"Fear of...reptiles?"

"Fear of snakes, Rear-Admiral," Bellona corrected.

"Snakes," of all things she had expected to come from one of the Adjutant-Spiders, this certainly wasn't it.

"Yes, snakes." Her tea companion said with some dose of exasperation. "It seems this Death World is filled with dangerous snake species."

"True," Fujiko raised a finger for her butler to bring another teapot. "But I would have thought that, given your armours and your great abilities, dealing with snakes would be rather easy."

"Kali assumed that too," Bellona made a sound which could have been a groan. "Unfortunately, she was wrong. The more you kill, the more come to replace these perfidious ophidians! And most of them are quite cunning, to boot! You wouldn't believe the kind of tactics the Flying Swamp Mamba is capable of! And the Coiling Death Cobra really deserves its name!"

"This is Catachan," she added after finishing her current cup of tea. "Based on what you told me, are you sure your troops are ready for what is waiting for them below?"

"No one can really be ready for Catachan, or so General Jack 'Death' Schwarz assured me," the Adjutant-Colonel answered very seriously. "But if the intention of these bloody snakes is to discourage the Swarm, I can assure you it will not work. The Webmistress has given me an order to hunt the Tyranid threat, and no matter how many of them there are and how well they hid, I will succeed."

This would have been a preposterous affirmation from any 'normal' officer of the Imperial Guard to make.

For Bellona, though?

The Adjutant-Spider seemed really resourceful. And she could find 'allies' among the fauna and flora of Catachan. However, they clearly wouldn't involve snakes.

"I firmly intend to not underestimate the enemy," the tank-sized arachnid continued. "This is why I have published and began to spread my theories and knowledge across all the ships of this Task Force. The *Imperial Uplifting Project for a Comprehension of the Tyranid Threat* is my first book, you know. And the Webmistress completely approved my dedication."

"I heard of it." Fujiko declared prudently. She preferred to not inform her tea companion that the majority of the troops preferred to call the book *Codex Tyranid*.

"But knowledge is one thing, and the means to implement it another. This is very important since you're going to begin a campaign in one of the most dangerous worlds this galaxy can boast of."

"I know," Bellona admitted. "But the Webmistress gave me several 'special weapons', which I can use under the supervision of the commanding officers of the Adeptus Astartes. And the Tech-Priests of Nyx worked hard too! Thanks to them, I have plenty of contingencies ready."

"Hmm..."

A second later, the Adjutant-Spider had lowered the volume of her 'voice' device.

"No, snakes aren't that much of a big concern. But what the Prognosticators had to say was. The Silver Skulls agreed to commit them for the Webmistress you know."

"I wasn't aware of it, no." Though the ships of the Adeptus Astartes asked permission to be part of her force, the Navy's requests for more information stayed...incomplete. Most of the time, the Lamenters and the Brothers of the Red were playing diplomats for the rest of the Chapters. "And what did the Prognosticators have to say?"

"They are saying the colour of the armoured shell of our enemy is constantly changing." Damn, this wasn't reassuring at all. "If they are right, the Tyranid in command here is receiving updates, and *something* is telling it to wait until it is able to commit to a specific style of fighting."

"I don't think you wrote this in your book."

"No," Bellona looked at her tea cup in a very contrite expression. "I don't think it would be good for morale."

"But."

For the preparations had accelerated in the last twenty hours, and Fujiko could recognise an imminent planetary assault when she saw one.

"But I have studied the fangs of the enemy, and I serve the Webmistress. Operation Hell Garden is going to end in victory, and we will teach the Tyranids to fear the Swarm!" The Adjutant-Spider let her younger 'cousins' raise her cup of tea again. "Otherwise I will have to learn how to resurrect the Vile One as penance so that the Webmistress can kill this monster over and over!"

**Author's note**:

The Legacy Arc will continue next chapter, with *Legacy Interlude Hell Garden* (provisional title). Yes, for once, the Interlude is in the middle of the Arc, not at the end of it.

There is over a million reasons why nobody invades Catachan these days, and most of them have nothing to do with Tyranids. Bellona and the Lamenters are going to discover them the hard way, though they have plenty of local help.

And on another note, it is no sin to kill Erebus the Vile One. Kill him as many times as it is possible to slay him, and more besides. The Emperor knows the bastard deserves it.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

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Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

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