**Black Crusade 10.1**

**The Last Dawn**

*I know you are there, Corax.*

*The shadows hide you, but I feel your hatred and my sons told me of the raven feathers you left behind after your massacres.*

*This is pathetic, brother.*

*Are you unable to remember the black sands of Isstvan V?*

*You very nearly killed me there, I won't deny it, but by the fault of Curze, you failed.*

*It's ironic, isn't it? The Primarch who believed destiny was impossible to change saved my life and altered the outcome of the war. One death must be paid with another; if Ferrus and I had died in the battle of the Drop Site Massacre, the bargain I made with the Gods would have been sealed and the doom of our arrogant sire assured. Instead the Night Haunter intervened, all the while pretending he was the weapon the Emperor wanted him to be. Truly Konrad lived his life and went to his death blind, ignorant, and stupid.*

*But for all his failures, the Lord of the Night acted.*

*And you have failed.*

*You failed again when you followed me and my Legion into the Eye. By breaking your chains and releasing your true self, you were finally able to gain skills which would allow you to stand as my equal. One might almost say it was your second chance.*

*But your attempt on my life was not successful, and now my moment of vulnerability has passed.*

*Twice the Pantheon was surprised by your resourcefulness. I hope you enjoyed this luck; you won't get a third chance.*

*Now we are going to play by my rules. The most devoted and powerful of my sons have completed the ritual of Holy Sacrament. Eight Dark Apostles and eight thousand eight hundred eighty-eight Astartes used their daemonancy skills and lore to create a ritual barrier which will prevent you from stepping into my presence. And you can't move against my Apostles before removing the Legionnaires, who have all been dispersed and rendered unremarkable to your raven senses.*

*You can't kill an entire Legion, Corax. You are more powerful than you were several millennia ago, but your power is not that great, and there are rules you must respect as long as you continue to stay loyal to that decaying corpse on the Golden Throne of Terra.*

*You could have made a formidable Champion of the Pantheon, but you refuse their blessings and patronage, even as your Legion is mutilated and pathetically weak.*

*Like the rest of our deluded brothers, you fail to understand that Mankind's survival demands we bow to the will of the Gods.*

*Only by embracing the Primordial Truth can we thrive and reconquer an Imperium where all believers will be able to rule under Their eyes.*

*You won't stop me.*

*I am going to break the armies and fleets assembled at Cadia, burn this empire of lies and falsehoods, and take the Noctilith of the Ymga Monolith to transform it into Octarite.*

*The rats of Anarchy are going to pay for their disruptions* *with their lives and souls. Weaver will be cast down, deprived of her light, and tortured by the Pantheon for the rest of eternity. Your legacy and that of our eight blind brothers will be destroyed and forgotten, dust under our armoured boots.*

*I am going to open the Cicatrix Maledictum and extinguish the light. I am going to free Excess from Khorne's Prison, kill that pathetic horned shard, and usher in the era of Chaos Undivided.*

*I am Lorgar, the Word Bearer. So I have promised, so it shall be.*

*Let the Galaxy Burn.*

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"*It is certainly a guarantee that today, at the end of your first year, the first question on your exam crystal-slate will be when the Noctilith Wars began. If you don't want to receive a zero and fail your history class – and likely be expelled for clearly having learned nothing of importance during twelve standard months – you will answer 188.310M35, as Operation Stalingrad and the 5th Black Crusade began, separated by an entire galaxy. Should the question of 'how' be asked, it is of course going to take longer for you to reply, I'm afraid. And no, 'because all heretics hate Her Celestial Highness' isn't going to amuse your teachers. If you stay coherent and logical, your first point must be to write of the martyrdom of the* Will of Eternity *at Commorragh, and how the creation of Aethergold strengthened the foundations of the Imperium in those difficult times. Don't forget the decade preceding Operation Stalingrad however; the actions of the Imperial Guard and many other successes can't be understood without relying on proper logistical preparation and rigorous training for war...*" Attributed to Star Marshal Alexander Macharius, 669M41.

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**13th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KOR PHAERON**

'**THE DARK CARDINAL'**

'**THE BLACK CARDINAL'**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**AUGMENTED TRANSHUMAN**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

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

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

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

**REWARD: 1 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'PURIFIER OF CALTH' AWARDED, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, NUMEROUS LAND HOLDINGS IN THE REALM OF ULTRAMAR, 5 DEFENCE STATIONS, ETC...**

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"*Great undertakings demand faith, determination, and sacrifice. Never forget that*." These words are attributed to the Primarch Lorgar of the Word Bearers, Great Crusade-era.

"*Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt*." Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

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

**High Orbit over Sicarus**

**Abyss-class Super-Battleship *Trisagion***

Thought for the day: Know your destination before you set out.

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Paristur was speaking with Kor Phaeron about the latest failures to obtain more Octarite for blessed purposes when the rats decided to strike.

His pacts only gave him a single second's warning before the daemonic communication devices allowing them to communicate with the major command centres across Sicarus all began to scream at once.

Once the first series of shrieks and shouts was over, what replaced them was perhaps worse.

"The Basilica is overrun! Masters! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS NOW!"

"They have gotten inside! They have gotten inside! Repel them, by the Pantheon!"

"How did the rats manage to breach the gates? ARRGH!"

"This-this station has been claimed by great-mighty servants of Malal! Praise Anarchy brute-things!"

Kor Phaeron uttered one word and the device which had relayed those heretical words was immediately destroyed in a blast of sorcery.

Unfortunately, more and more voices resonated, all spreading tales of disaster and defeat.

"They have taken the Blood Dome! They have taken the redoubt! By the truth of the Great Architect! This is an infestation!"

"We do not have enough ammunition to repel them! I need more cannons, or failing that, orbital lances fired on the Bloodied Plains!"

"My slaves are dying of a bubonic plague! Presence of plague-rats confirmed!"

"The bells are tolling and my mortal troops are unable to stand their maddening effects! Request a Host deployment immediately!"

Past the initial moment of stupefaction, the Word Bearers rushed to their sections and began to coordinate the efforts of the armies on the ground to eradicate this onslaught of heresy and rats.

But as the lieutenants of Kor Phaeron updated the hololithic-daemonic maps, Paristur could only grimace.

The situation was absolutely awful.

"Angra Mainyu is going to be overwhelmed in short order if we don't land one of the Great Hosts on Sicarus." This admission brought him little joy, but the first massive summonings had only bought a few minutes for the –too few – Word Bearers and millions of mortals ordered to protect the sacred temples.

"Yes. Of course, Angra believed *Erebus* had dealt with the rodent problem."

The name was uttered with undisguised hatred, but Paristur didn't comment on it. It was very justified in this case.

The Keeper of the Faith of the Seventeenth Legion snorted after speaking.

"If this is what his total victory is like, I don't want to see what his next 'exploit' will be."

"It's obvious Erebus screwed up," Paristur didn't add 'again', but he was sure Kor Phaeron heard it nonetheless. "The rats weren't vanquished; they merely waited for our vigilance to falter and our forces to be redeployed for the Black Crusade before striking."

The reports of routs and utter destruction visited upon Nurglite churches arrived mere seconds later, informing the two members of the Dark Council that the rodents had somehow built thousands of tunnelling machines, some as imposing and destructive as conventional Ordinatuses.

"I'm willing to bet the great 'Hand of Destiny' didn't even bother sending his lackeys deep into the under-temples the moment he had crushed the vermin on the surface."

"I'm not going to bet against that," Paristur bitterly replied. Ekodas had told them over and over how difficult it was to hunt the self-proclaimed 'Skaven' and their leadership in the subterranean galleries, and yet, somehow, Erebus had successfully demolished their military strength in a single campaign?

No, it was exactly as he had feared: the furry heretics had multiplied until the tunnels were unable to contain their monstrous numbers, built hundreds of thousands of new weapons, invented new devices an Ork would deem too dangerous to use, and unleashed everything when the Sicarus garrison was too weak to hold back their vermintide.

"We need to land our troops and stabilise the situation."

Kor Phaeron's face showed how little he thought of the idea, but he didn't disagree. Between losing Sicarus entirely and delaying the beginning of the Black Crusade for a campaign, the choice wasn't difficult. The latter was a mere delay. The former would be the first step before they lost the entire system, for the heretical rodents would not miss the opportunity to attack shipyards and their bases in the asteroid belts.

"Very well, I will go ahead and-"

"**You will do nothing of the sort, my son**."

The Dark Apostle began to bow as he heard the first voice. Once the uttered order was complete, the Empyrean screamed as an enormous fleet materialised one hundred thousand kilometres to the starboard side of the *Trisagion*.

If they hadn't already been preparing a worthy armada for their offensive against the Cadian Gate and beyond, Paristur would have felt awe at the sheer military might represented here. The feeling nonetheless blossomed in his heart, but for a different reason.

At the heart of this fleet, standing side by side, were two juggernauts of the void, starships even bigger than the famous Gloriana hulls.

One bore no similarities with any warship built on the orders of the Seventeenth Legion. It was a gigantic pyramid shining in blessed blue sorcery. The designation *Tizca's Revenge* was not really necessary; Paristur like all other Apostles could recognise the style of Prospero and no one but Magnus the Red would ever have the will or skill to create something like that.

The second flagship, on the other hand, was a modified Abyss-class Super-Battleship. But where the *Trisagion* was instantly recognisable with its trident-shaped prow, this colossal temple to the Primordial Truth had been restructured to look like a Gloriana, albeit one with a gigantic prow cannon. Paristur didn't need much deep thinking to know it was likely the gift of Kelbor-Hal to their father.

The name flashed in black and red, in daemonic and technological transmissions, and the Legion roared in approval.

The *Word Bearer*.

Their surroundings disappeared into the darkness, and under the blessed acclamations of the Neverborn, Paristur was transported into a room where he had never been before, accompanied by Kor Phaeron and seven other Dark Apostles of high rank.

Their father was already there, of course. Magnus the Red, Cyclops and favourite of Tzeentch, arrived nine heartbeats later in a pillar of blue-gold lightning.

They weren't alone, as an eight-pointed pentacle in brass and flaming daemonic runes was carved by invisible hands under their feet. Against the walls and over their heads, Champions of the Seventeenth Legion blessed with Daemonhood by the Gods were waiting with bared fangs and elongated carmine wings. These were the Gal Vorbak of the first generation, there couldn't be any doubt about it, drawn back from the domains of the Gods to serve once more. Given how Erebus was whispering wards of protection and the glares they threw him, the rumours of how many had been betrayed by the Vile One were most likely true.

For once, Paristur ignored it. There were more important things at hand.

"Father. Allow me to deploy my Host in support of Mainyu and I will restore our rule to Sicarus."

"**I have no doubt you will my son...for a time**."

"Father?"

"**I** **underestimated how damaging and corrupting the rats could be to my plans**," the illuminated Primarch admitted. "**But I have since tread on many paths and tried to gaze at many futures. There is no permanent victory against this plague of tails and fur. There won't be any as long as the fourth throne is empty. You might pile up the corpses of these heretics into mountains and drown the world in their unholy blood, they will somehow find a way to come back. It is in their nature to grasp at what is not theirs to take**."

"**In other words, what my esteemed brother is trying to say**," Magnus added in a semi-polite, semi-ironic tone, "**is that you can likely hold Sicarus and stalemate the expansion efforts of your enemies imbued by Anarchy for a millennium or two...as long as you abandon the idea of starting the war against the Imperium**."

The darkness vacillated, before everything vanished, and Paristur and the other Dark Apostles found themselves floating in high orbit above the homeworld they had settled after Horus' death.

"**Nsvrrbthn! Bwons'ntos! Nsttsrm'on'mtoeneuaanht'hqn**!"

No Word Bearer had ever heard these words uttered aloud, but even without knowing their meaning, Paristur understood what they represented as the presence of the Three Gods turned towards them.

A large section of the Eye flashed a crimson red, and in the distance there was a tall, dark figure on a throne of skulls. Blood rains began to fall upon the planets, and the Bloodthirsters on the plains of carnage raised their axes and assembled.

A tear sundered reality before spitting out several Silver Towers of the Thousand Sons and multicoloured lightning. Hordes of Screamers and Flamers erupted and began to spread secrets and lies from the nine hundred and ninety-nine canticles of Change. The tear grew and grew as the towers seemed to disappear, before it became an ever-mutating avian form carrying a tall sceptre.

Previously untouched, the third part of Sicarus' celestial possessions gave way to an ocean of blessed rot and decay, a garden of diseases where the Grandfather lit His cauldron and prepared new concoctions to test on the planets where His touch would be gladly welcomed.

"**You know I am your servant**," his Primarch began. "**You know what I aim to do**."

The Chaos Marine felt the divine pressure rise to dangerous levels, and Paristur felt the runes on his armour beginning to disintegrate and the blessings decaying, twisting, or bleeding. He didn't twitch or make a single sound. The smallest offence, the smallest gesture, would undoubtedly lead to an eternity as a Chaos Spawn.

There was silence. And then the laughter of Tzeentch echoed, followed by Khorne's rumbling, and a song of soul-gardening from Nurgle.

"**You have our attention, Lorgar the Urizen. Speak**."

The weight of Three Gods fell upon their sire, and despite knowing the sheer power of their father, Paristur felt awe as Lorgar didn't even flinch while Erebus and several others were already trembling with exhaustion.

"**This Anarchy began with Sacrifice**." The Minister of Chaos Absolute said. "**I will return the favour with Sacrifice. Let me erase the defeat of Commorragh. The blood, the souls, and the hope of the Anathema will be delivered onto your altars. Places of worship of false idols will be yours to rule over. The Cicatrix will allow you to invade the Imperium and create your own realms in the very fabric of reality**."

"**And in exchange**?"

"**Excess and the Aspects you own must be freed after the Black Crusade. There must be Chaos Undivided once more**."

The laughter of the Gods was heard.

Ultimately, it was Nurgle who replied.

"**You have your pact, Lorgar the Urizen. Offer your Sacrifice**."

Their Primarch raised his fists over his head.

And Sicarus began to burn.

**Sicarus/Skavenblight**

**Cathedral of the Maleficent Song**

**High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable**

"One small step for me-me, one giant leap for Malal!" Scrachit shouted while the former slave-things raised the flag of Clan Verminus in his great-large mighty glory. "I rename this-this place...err...Cathedral of Barbbuster Anarchy! Praise Malal!"

"Respectfully Arch-Warlord," one of his impolite minions had the temerity to not-not appreciate his genius and to fail to applause-cheer like the others. "Wouldn't it be better-greater if we renamed this church-location Cathedral of Verminus Anarchy?"

"I thought we would call-name it Cathedral of Skyre Anarchy, yes-yes!" an engineer shouted before shutting his mouth in a big-big hurry, as bayonets were pointed towards his throat. "No-no! Verminus Anarchy, my mistake!"

"But 'Cathedral of Mighty Verminus Horde' sounds far-far better, Mighty Warlord!"

"Enough!" Scrachit Barbbuster decided to stop-end this mutiny before things went even more out of control with his-his plans. "This is my-my great decision, and don't forget-contest it! I-I am voice of Council of Eleven, yes-yes! And it is my-my leadership which has seen-led us to great-superb triumph! Praise Malal!"

"Your flanking attack was-was ill-timed and- Malal save me!"

The treacherous underling-thing had come-scurried too close to the ogre-thing when trying to plant a dagger in his back, yes-yes! The High-Warlord heard his scream-cries of agony and ignored them-them.

"Now that formalities and fun-fun entertainment are done-done, we must press on-on," the supreme leader of Clan Verminus announced and all basked in his-his magnificence. "I must-must have picts of my great-glorious self standing on corpses of brute-things, and vid-vid of myself directing fire of Warp Grinders, yes-yes."

Not that-that he was going to mount-ride one when they were running, no-no! Scrachit had watched-watched and more had been lost-destroyed by their own warpstone reactors than by enemy fire!

"Another incredible invention of Clan Skyre!" an engineer of said clan exclaimed. "Praise Malal!"

"Yes yes, Praise Malal! Today Anarchy claims-conquers all of Skavenblight, tomorrow the galaxy! Death to False Gods, Glory to Skaven Race!"

In truth-truth, the slaves and daemon-things had not been that-that difficult to beat-defeat this time, oh no! The plan of playing dead-dead for a few cycles of reproduction had led-gained excellent results! Truly he was a master of strategy and war!

"Before I begin my great-great propaganda campaign to overthrow Council and declare myself Anarchy Emperor of Skavenblight, where are we-we with Spaceports! Faster we take them-them, easier it will be to send young-young tails into orbit!"

"Resistance is strong-heavy, oh mighty High Arch-Warlord!" A Stormclaw reported, while a Horror-Lord of Clan Moulder threw-tossed the remains of a brute-thing in red armour into a vat of green jelly-things. "But walls have been breached-broken! Our victory-triumph is inevitable, yes-yes!"

"Excellent, excellent!" The Unstoppable Skaven caressed his whiskers before adjusting his splendid-pretty red uniform. "We are going to-"

Red, green, and blue lightning hit-struck the spire of the cathedrals they had just-just conquered.

Scrachit Barbbuster felt his jaw fall-dropping. This wasn't possible, no-no! Clan Treecherik had assured him-him that the wards of the brute-things would hold-last for a few thousand heartbeats after their great-great victory!

The spires were going to-

The Warlord looked at the spires and he grew even more-more perplexed. The spires weren't falling. What was that saying of the man-things? Ah yes! It was a bluff-bluff!

"False-false alert, my proud-proud soldiers!" The Verminus Council member laughed. "The brute-things have lost-lost! Now they are trying to launch-shoot fireworks in hope-hope we will flee-scurry! But we won't! We are herald-champions of Anarchy! Praise Malal!"

Fire poured from the heavens, a three-coloured fire of red, blue, and green. It missed him large-widely, but plenty of his Stormclaws were hit-struck by it.

More lightning followed, and a great-great storm rose from the other cathedrals, but what caused Scrachit to widen his eyes was that while plenty of his-his Verminus assault forces were dead-slain, as many were frozen, stuck-trapped in some sorcery-trap!

"SKAVEN!" He screeched, the familiar musk of fear soaking his senses. "FLEE-SCURRY BACK TO ARMY WARRENS! BRUTE-THINGS ARE ATTACKING US-US WITH RITUAL! DO NOT-NOT STAY HERE!"

There was rage-rage. There was sorcery-sorcery. There was rot-rot everywhere. Time...time was slow-slowing. Why? Why? He had done-done everything for the glory of Anarchy and Malal!

"MALAL!" The High Arch-Warlord begged. "MOST ANARCHIC LORD! SAVE YOUR GREATEST SERVANT!"

"MALAL!"

"MALAL! MALAL SAVE US!"

A new blast of blue clouded everything, and a couple of heartbeats later, Scrachit Barbbuster felt nothing at all.

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**85th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**ALIVE ONLY – UNLESS YOU FIGURE OUT HOW TO END HIM PERMANENTLY**

**LUCIUS**

'**THE ETERNAL TRAITOR'**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**ABOMINATION**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF BETA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS ACCEPTABLE TO NEUTRALISE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT FEEL SATISFACTION AND PRAY TO THE GOD-EMPEROR FOR PROTECTION**

**DO NOT OFFER HIM A CHANCE TO DUEL**

**REWARD: 26 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PARADISE WORLD, 1 STARFORT, OVATION OF THE IMPERIUM, ETC...**

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**87th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**MOTHAC**

'**APOSTLE OF TORMENT'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-BETA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

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

**DO NOT ALLOW LOYAL MEN AND WOMEN TO BE CAPTURED**

**THE HERETIC LOVES TO PRIORITIZE TARGETING ASTROPATHS AND NAVIGATORS**

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

**REWARD: 25 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 HIVE WORLD, 10 PALACES OFFERED BY THE NAVIS NOBILITE, ASTROPATH SUPPORT OF THE ADEPTUS ASTRA TELEPATHICA, PROTECTION OFFERED BY OVER A HUNDRED SECURITY COMPANIES, ETC...**

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**Outer** **Sicarus System**

**Battle-Barge *Perfect Legion***

**Lord Commander Lucius the Eternal**

If he had to give an honest opinion about the Word Bearers before the Fall of Commorragh – which he would never have done, he wasn't that stupid – Lucius would have said the sons of Lorgar were very funny Astartes-monks, with all their religious posturing and insistence on converting their slaves to 'Chaos Undivided'.

Oh, the Lord Commander of the Emperor's Children had no doubt the Gods enjoyed the souls of the slaves which were sacrificed on the altars, and if they didn't, their Neverborn subordinates certainly enjoyed the free meal.

But the moment you gained enough survival experience inside the Eye, you knew the Gods didn't truly care about the liturgy and the words. They cared about actions. They wanted blood, carnage, sorcery, obscene depravity, lethal plagues, virulent poxes, and mountains of corpses. In one word, they wanted war.

This was one of the many, many reasons plenty of Captains like himself had largely seen the Word Bearers as religious simpletons parodying the Ecclesiarchy holding sway over the ignorant masses of the False Imperium outside the eye.

Before today, Lucius acknowledged, he hadn't realised how *frightening* that truly was.

"The Shipyards of the Truth are being dismantled as we speak."

"We have numerous impacts on the Illumination docks, Lord Commander."

"Mechanicum forces are slaying the slaves by the hundreds of thousands! Tell them to stop!"

Lucius licked the blood from his blade, and found little comfort or satisfaction in the act. Much like every time he had done it since his patron had abandoned him.

"Damn you, Weaver." The infamous traitor of Isstvan III hissed.

And sure enough, he utterly loathed the woman who had created these unpredictable changes sweeping across the galaxy.

But right now, it wasn't Weaver he truly wanted to blame. Not when madness and folly appeared to be ruling the day.

The Sicarus System was in the process of being thoroughly sacked. If there was any other word which described the situation, Lucius didn't know what it could be.

Thousands of years of industrial-daemonic investments were going up in explosions or were dragged in chains towards the hulls of the Word Bearers fleet's supply train. Asteroids older than the Long War imploded or were thrown into the maw of Sota-Nul's metallic harvesters. Shipyards were mangled or disintegrated. Overseers who had been the wardens of the facilities were thrown onto the altars where they had led countless slaves.

Lucius had seen thousands of worlds die as he was present during and after the Great Crusade. Yet there was something...visceral and horrifying occurring here.

What they had done to Sicarus itself was bad enough. The world was still there, but it was immobile...silent...frozen...out of reach, and made so by the will of the Gods. Lorgar had done what even other Daemon Primarchs would balk at: he had offered his chief powerbase in sacrifice to his patrons, abandoned his last forces on the planet, and unleashed what could be best described as a sorcerous stasis on an unimaginable scale. And it would remain that way until the Black Crusade ended, one way or another.

"Lord Commander, Dark Apostle Mothac demands to speak to you."

Lucius gritted his sharp teeth, and impaled a daemonic servitor with the Laer Blade. 'Demands'. Before Commorragh, no one save the Naga and Slaanesh demanded anything of him, and the Goddess had usually been content to watch the spectacle. Now? Everyone and their cyber-mastiff was treating him with contempt, as if he was a minor warlord under their armoured boots. Rallying six capital ships – including this old Battle-Barge – and close to six hundred Astartes, few of them of the Old Legion, was ignored. The only strength that made his enemies pause were the Knights of House Devine they had managed to save on the former worlds of their Empire.

"Open the communication."

The device which activated leaned more towards reddish than pink and in shape was more akin to a Bloodletter's head than something blessed by decadence, but it did the job as the familiar shape of a Dark Apostle in elaborate spiked armour appeared. The smell of blood and sorcery permeated the air.

"Lord Commander Lucius." The Apostle of Torment began bluntly. "You will accelerate your preparations, or I will find another 'Lord Commander' to lead your warband."

"My slaves and cultists are expediting the preparations as fast as is possible," the fallen Emperor's Children Space Marine snarled. "But you are asking for the impossible!"

"No, the impossible happened because your forces were busy violating, raping, and doing whatever they usually practise in their orgies despite being ordered to do real work!" The son of Lorgar hotly retorted. "I will be as clear as possible, 'Eternal'. The forces in your zone are to leave their bases within the next thousand heartbeats. If you refuse my order, I will cut off your legs and impale your still-living body on the prow of your flagship to motivate the others and your serpentine master. Am I clear?"

"You are insane. What point is there-"

"This is a Black Crusade, Lucius!" The Word Bearer shouted. "It demands conviction, devotion, and sacrifice! Did you really think the Gods were not going to demand a price for the abyssal catastrophe engineered by Slaanesh's defeat? Did you really think answering the challenge of the False Emperor would be all dungeon torture and sadistic orgies?"

A maelstrom of psychic energy was born on the edge of the system, and Lucius realised with horror it was the damned light of the Astronomican unleashed against endless waves of darkness, the Gods striking back against their sworn enemy.

"There is power in symbols, and in old times, conquerors burned their own sea-faring ships behind them to leave no choice to their warriors," Mothac continued in a somewhat calmer tone. "We can't do that of course, but symbolically, it is the same thing. Sicarus and everything we built are made barren, the threat of the rats negated at the price of our own garrisons and last assets."

More asteroids exploded as darkness grew and more ships deployed around his warband.

"Even I know this is a double-edged sword."

If the Black Crusade won, the threat represented by Anarchy would be completely suppressed, possibly forever. But if they lost...

"Alea jacta est." Mothac answered in High Gothic. "By the will of Blessed Lorgar, we will win, or perish in the attempt. Now move your forces into position, or I will begin this Black Crusade by destroying your warband! Oh, and our lateness has earned you a seat among the 8th Great Host of Erebus! Don't thank me, Lucius!"

For a few seconds, Lucius truly understood why the False Emperor had tried to proscribe religion...there was no 'logical' discussion to be had with fanatics like this one. But under the guns of eight Battleships, there was only one answer he could give.

"We comply. The *Perfect Legion* and its escorts are taking position."

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*Among the many iconic weapons whose renown was made by Operation Stalingrad, the Astartes Power Armour Mark IX bearing the name of said operation has always received its fair share of popularity. Millennia later, it is a rare holo-vid film of the events having marked the galaxy which will not show Space Marines parading and fighting in the Nyx-created protection.*

*And yet, despite the – justified – acclaim it received for the exploits it allowed the Adeptus Astartes to write in golden letters against terrible opponents, the Mark IX 'Stalingrad' is one of those weapons whose life expectancy didn't last much beyond the formal end of the war, except maybe in the classified operations of the Deathwatch (which still remain inaccessible despite the countless pleas of the Historian Corps). In overall numbers, less than sixty thousand of these power armours were ever produced, the worlds of Nyx, Mars, and Ryza accounting for ninety-nine percent of this model.*

*The question one has to ask is, why this – relative – failure?*

*The first reason, one acknowledged in an open session of the Martian Parliament in 320M35, was that the Mark IX was naturally imperfect due to its rushed development. The Adeptus Mechanicus was incredibly conscious of the lethal threat represented by Necron warriors, and considered – rightfully – that an imperfect armour surpassing the existing models of power armour was better than the kind of casualties a Mark VII-equipped Astartes force would suffer trying to dislodge a Necron force.*

*Priorities changed as a result, and the 'optimal recommendations' were decreased dramatically. The goal was not to solve the flaws noted* *with the Mark VII, save the most crucial. It was to build a machine which would give the Space Marines a chance to wreak untold devastation upon xenos and other enemies. The ion shield equipping the armours was therefore increased* *both in energy resistance and protection area, giving it the output to endure the fire of thirty-plus Necron infantry weapons for five minutes before failing. An armoured collar was added over the helmet's respirator, addressing the vulnerability of the neck* *joint. The lower chest armour received two new additional layers of protection in lighter ceramite alloys, something the Nyx Mechanicus openly thanked the Chapter of the Salamanders for.*

*Obviously, the Mark IX 'Stalingrad', for all its imperfections, still made the Mark VII completely obsolete as of the moment it was unveiled in 305M35. A Space Marine equipped with one could brave a level of enemy fire that bearers of the Aquila Power Armour couldn't. This wasn't enough for the Nyx Mechanicus and the Fabricator-General. It is highly likely the research and tests to develop the famous Mark X began well before Operation Stalingrad, and accelerated after it, giving birth to a new power armour which would go on to equip the majority of the Space Marine Chapters.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Edition, 310M41.

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**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**3.008.310M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

"Well?"

"It works fine," Gavreel grumbled.

"So nice of you to finally admit it," Vulkan N'Varr told him with that indulgent smile all Salamanders seemed to learn before they reached the equivalent of ten standard years.

Unfortunately, there were dozens of other Space Marines present, and not all were so prompt to limit themselves to an 'I told you so'.

"YOU HEARD THAT? THE TRADITIONALIST HAS FINALLY ACCEPTED THE MARK IX! THE END OF THE GALAXY IS AT HAND!"

"Pierre, not so loud," Cabrero of the Soul Drinkers complained. "The illogical conservatism of our cousin aside-"

"Ahem!"

"Come on cousin," Midas of the Golden Sons interjected, "You have to realise that with his skills, the ion shield is less useful than it is for us!"

"I refuse to engage in a debate with an Astartes who is parading in so much gold and auramite we will see him coming a kilometre away," Gavreel commented.

"Of course not, you are not dashing enough to look the part."

"As amusing as it is to hear you bicker..." Gamaliel interjected, bringing the conversation to an end. "Our Lady is coming. Is everyone here?"

"We are," Kratos answered for everyone.

"WE ARE."

Mere seconds later, the Basileia entered the room, with T'klis Rubix and Diamantis in tow.

Dozens of fists were struck against their armours in salute.

"I see everyone has donned the Mark IX Power Armour...even you Gavreel." The former Dark Angel sighed. He had a feeling he had not reached even the mid-point lifespan of these jokes, if even their Lady was involved with them.

"I DO NOT HAVE THE MARK IX."

"Of course not," Taylor Hebert rolled her eyes, "our Mechanicus Magi have done their best, but they had the modifications of the Quetzalcoatl Dragon Armours to implement these last several years, plus the Mark IX development, plus various things which cost millions of Throne Gelts."

The golden-winged Basileia sighed as Pierre gave an imploring expression...as far as a Dreadnought could make one.

"However," the ruler of Nyx sighed, "the Tech-Priests are ready to test giving you an ion shield if you are ready to spend a few days at *Terra Cimmeria* before our departure. I have to warn you though: there's a high chance it will further decrease your mobility on the battlefield."

Since the Dreadnoughts were hardly the fastest forces of the Adeptus Astartes – a reason the White Scars were using them more as fortress protectors and teachers than indispensable frontline assets – this was not something Weaver would say lightly.

"I AM GOING TO TRY THE MODIFICATIONS." The Heracles Warden Dreadnought declared at last, not that there had been much doubt he would refuse. When it came down to it, Pierre was an Astartes, and staying far from the battlefield was not in his nature.

"Good."

"Not to press upon a point you already know, my Lady," Chaplain Verdugo of the Star Leopards began, "but these modifications will be sorely needed. The doctrine of the Codex Astartes for the 'classical' Dreadnoughts demands they be more resistant and protected than the average battle-brother."

"I know," the insect-controlling parahuman replied, passing a hand through her black hair, and adjusting the red cloak her wife had placed over her golden power armour. "And I see the logic of it. Alas, I do not have an unlimited number of elite Tech-Priests available to work upon difficult and valuable projects, and the fierce warriors of Chogoris," her black eyes shot an amused look to an unrepentant Stormseer Uriyangkhadai, "were particularly insistent the Einherjar-class Dragon Armour was the utmost priority."

"It is a formidable weapon for our Venerable Ancients," the White Scars noted without a trace of apology in his tone.

Gavreel nodded with many others, reflecting that when the Tech-Priests would figure how to safely transfer the occupants of the 'old designs' of Dreadnoughts into the Einherjar draconic mounts, the Castraferrum and the other patterns of land-bound Dreadnoughts were likely going to go extinct, at least among the ranks of the Khan's sons.

"And one wonders why you're a favourite of Dragon's." The Basileia mused with a good dose of humour in her voice. "Anyway, I have not assembled all of you here today to talk about Dreadnoughts and Dragon Armours. We have confirmation the Battleship of the Queen of Blades has entered the Nyx Sector, and is being escorted on its way here. So after my work day, we are all going to the Arena of Blades."

All levity left the room. During the last twelve years, each and every member of the Dawnbreaker Guard had trained and trained to become faster and deadlier. No one was ready to bet it was likely going to matter anything to the monster of the ancient times known as the Queen of Blades if it decided to fight them seriously.

"I'd certainly hoped she would not answer in time," the Basileia confessed, "but she is here. And she isn't alone. There are other Eldar starships requesting access to the Arena, though those are of the Craftworld classes."

"That is...inconvenient," Kratos remarked, as predictable as ever. "But surely we can blast them apart, right?"

"No." The golden-winged woman who had overseen from afar the construction of the Arena reluctantly disagreed. "Not as long as they have champions to throw into this arena, anyway."

"I do not like this, My Lady." Gamaliel told her frankly. "The Arena of Blades is far from any vital industrial asset in the system, but allowing the Endbringer in your presence is already a tremendous risk."

"I know. I don't like it any more than you do, and if we didn't have far more pressing things to deal with, I would joyously push for a gigantic Eldar hunt across the galaxy. The fewer of those long-ears are around, the better for Mankind. I can assure you I did not forget which race sneered at us and declared us brutish primates while they at the same time refused to admit that they almost sounded the death knell of the galaxy by creating Slaanesh."

Luminous flies danced around their fingertips, the ones they had trained as pointing markers when training as snipers.

"But I signed several accords, and I won't break my word first. If they behave, I will allow them to fight, and speak their piece if they're not dead at the end of the 'spectacle'."

The smile of Taylor Hebert returned.

"Before that, however, I have one last war council with nine Battle Group Commanders to preside over. And I want you there with me."

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

Over a decade ago, being surrounded by men and women having centuries more experience than her on the frontlines would have made her nervous. Of course, more than a decade ago she hadn't met so many Chapter Masters that she had truly lost count of them, thousands of guardsmen officers ranking between Brigadier-General and General, entire groups of Admirals of the Imperial Navy, Rogue Traders by the scores, and Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus by the hundreds.

Then again, a decade ago or now, Taylor knew she had the unfair advantage – compared to a 'normal' Lady General, that is – of having other high-ranked commanders of the Imperium come before her in positions of weakness. Being recognised as a Living Saint would always have its multitude of perks, including in military politics.

It was really important when her interlocutors had the weight of millennia-old traditions and countless victories to support their position.

"I suppose the Princeps Senioris won our little contest, then."

"Princeps Maximus," she corrected politely after sipping half of a glass of water. "There was no contest, I can assure you. I assigned the Battle-Maniples of your respective Legios to the Battle Groups which, in my humble opinion, were the most suited to exploit your strengths and negate your weaknesses."

The black-haired parahuman gave an ironic smile to the black-skinned colossus representing Legio Ignatum. Whoever thought the Princeps of Titan Legios were frail creatures hiding inside amniotic tanks had obviously never met Princeps Maximus Cyrus.

"You will not pretend, I hope, to have gained the tactical flexibility of Legio Astorum since the last war game we organised?"

The Martian-trained Princeps quickly shook his head in negation.

"I admit my efforts to convince my fellow Princeps to share his secrets have lamentably failed. But since my predecessors didn't have much luck with it either, I know the Fabricator-General is unlikely to fire me tomorrow." Cyrus drank the contents of his glass in two seconds, and unless she was mistaken, it seemed his preference was inclined towards strong wine. "Perhaps if your Celestial Highness made discreet inquiries..."

The Basileia snorted.

"Nice try, Princeps Maximus. But since you asked politely, I will tell you that for all my popularity among the noble Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus, there are many secrets locked behind adamantium gates, and some of them can't be opened, not even when they call you 'Chosen of the Omnissiah'."

And honestly, after the generous contributions of the Lucius Mechanicus to the order of battle of Operation Stalingrad, including but not limited to the support of Legio Astorum, the Aegis-class Battlecruisers, and other vital pieces of machinery, including one now integrated to the *Angel's Tear* protecting her life, asking for more could be considered tech-gluttony.

Lucius was allowed to protect the secret which allowed them to make Legio Astorum a teleportation-capable assembly of Titans...for now. In the long-term, both Dragon and she had not given up on the idea of spreading the knowledge among the Mechanicus as a whole. Entire Crusades had been won since the dawn of the Imperium by the formidable capabilities of the 'Warp Runners'; if three or four Titan Legios were able to gain this capability, the Traitors would never know what hit them.

But as mentioned previously, the Tech-Priests of Lucius guarded their most valuable secrets extremely jealously.

"Ah, my Battle Group commander is joining me." Cyrus noted with good humour. Taylor didn't raise an eyebrow; she had seen Gastaph Hediatrix stopping his conversation with General Perry Tereyev of Battle Group Bagration a full minute ago, and he had already politely declined conversing with other Magi on his walk.

"I deliberately asked for another Princeps to be in charge, you know," the Voice of Mars among the Nyx Mechanicus drily replied before his metallic tone became nearly filled with despair. "But alas, I was overruled."

"Your confidence in my Maniples is extraordinary," the Princeps Maxima placed his hand on his chest with a wounded expression. "Is Legio Ignatum not worthy of being recognised as the foremost Legio defending the honour of Her Celestial Highness?"

"The competition is fierce," Hediatrix didn't miss a heartbeat before answering. "Legio Defensor, unless I am gravely mistaken, is already worshipping the Lady Basileia. And I would be very surprised if the Legio Venator wasn't steering in that direction as well."

Taylor almost snorted at that. By a curious turn of events which made her wonder how much the Emperor planned behind the scenes, the Legio Venator had been created on a Forge World where arachnid mega-fauna was the alpha life-form before humanity landed. Two guesses how they had reacted to the revelation she could master spiders whenever they were in range of her power...

"Setting aside levity, the percentage of the 'Carrhes variant' being necessary as calculated by the Logis has risen significantly this last year," the Archmagos Prime commanding Battle group Berezina told her very seriously. "The Orks are not yet routing, but the Ymga Monolith has recently activated plenty of new macro-capital Gauss weapons to massacre them, and if our Necron enemies are able to do that..."

"The scenario of the metallic xenos having restored some measure of FTL travel capability increases in likelihood," Taylor finished. It wasn't exactly a new debate. Her nine Battle Group Commanders had exchanged their points of view several times, but for once, were far from unanimous in their replies. But then, aside from by engaging the Ymga Monolith and finding out the hard way, they wouldn't get a definite answer. "I hope your Battle Group is ready if the Necrons fall into the nice trap you are busy preparing for them."

"We won't fail you, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

"We will teach the xenos the wrath of Legio Ignatum."

"Thank you, gentlemen." Alas, as fascinating as the conversation was, she couldn't continue speaking to them for long, there were plenty of other important humans and transhumans vying for her attention. "Now I'm afraid I have to leave you, High Marshal Barbarossa isn't the most patient of Space Marines..."

**Armoured Train *Celestial Lightning* – on its way to the Giraffe Spaceport**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

"I thank you again for granting my battle-brothers and the Blood Angels the opportunity to fight by your side once more."

It was reassuring to receive that familiar smile in return.

"Chapter Master, don't be ridiculous." The Basileia replied. "You recruit your aspirants from Nyx. You are equipped with guns and tanks coming out of the Nyxian Forges and manufactorums. If I didn't decide to include you among my Battle Group, people would wonder if there was a problem of loyalty among your ranks."

Well, seen that way...

"Perhaps," he conceded, "but I thank you for the honour nonetheless."

The young woman huffed, but the smile didn't leave her lips.

"Anyway, how did the last naval fleet exercise go? I was too busy speaking with my Guard's chief of staff and the other superior officers of the Army Groups yesterday. I will analyse the post-exercise data once I am on the *Enterprise*."

Agiel let Chapter Master Malakbel, his friend and superior of the Blood Angels, answer this one.

"The fleet coordinated well, and all ships were able to stay in formation for the ten hours the exercise lasted. There was no issue from the *Covenant of Baal* or the *Opera Exitium*, and if the *Eternal Crusader* or the *Flamewrought* had issues, our cousins of the Black Templars and Salamanders have not chosen to share them."

"Hmm. No problems with the Angels Vermilion? I know there were concerns, since they only recently ended their isolation."

"No," the tall Astartes wearing the traditional golden armour only the Lord of Baal had the right to wear assured, "I won't deny there are still mock battles to train on to improve, but in a way the fact they came only with Strike Cruisers helped. We were – and still are – rotating them aboard the larger ships. This way not only could we renew the bonds of Blood, we form a far more coherent and formidable assault force. I suspect the Salamanders are doing the same with their brothers of the Magma Spiders, and so are the Black Templars."

There were other Space Marines Chapters, Agiel knew, who wouldn't have reacted with a smile and approval to this common training and new doctrine.

But since most of those had 'Ultramarine' somewhere in their gene-legacy, the protests weren't voiced, and certainly not on this train.

"Good. Now as for the question of leadership. I apologise in advance to the Brothers of the Red, but it will be Chapter Master Malakbel who will have command of the companies of the Blood included in the order of battle of Battle Group Volga. You will be his second of command, however."

Agiel nodded. He did not even feel disappointment, to be honest, and Malakbel only greeted it with another polite smile.

"I thank you for the honour, obviously," the golden Chapter Master of the Blood Angels replied. "May I know your reasoning, my Lady?"

"Your Blood Angels having the greatest contingent of Astartes – at least of the Blood – in this Battle Group with four full Companies was of course an important factor. That your Legate-class Heavy Battleship is more powerful and more suited for playing the role of flagship doesn't hurt either. But what is really the deciding factor is how respected you are by Chapter Master Ta'Phor Hezonn and High Marshal Barbarossa."

"I wasn't able to place them under a single Astartes hierarchy," the older Astartes commented good-naturedly.

The mistress of all insects snorted.

"If I wanted a miracle of this magnitude, Chapter Master, I would have sent my request to Terra directly. You and I know very well that for all that certain idiotic claims say otherwise, I respect the independence of the Chapters fighting by my side."

That, and the Black Templars and Salamanders had not come with insignificant contingents. It was difficult to know how many Black Templars were currently assembled in the shipyards and squadrons of Nyx, but the High Marshal had delivered 'four Crusades', and given the assets placed at the disposal of Operation Stalingrad, there was a high likelihood two thousand Astartes was not an unrealistic number.

Expecting the heirs of Sigismund to be completely subordinate to a thousand Space Marines of the Blood – four companies of the Blood Angels, three of the Brothers of the Red, and three of the Angels Vermillion were present – was not infeasible, but it was something the golden-winged commander had decided to not use her influence on.

"Any other concerns?"

"A minor one. We have an increasing number of simulations where our Furioso Dreadnoughts are falling too far behind the spear of assault forces. In two cases, the gap between vanguard and rearguard was so significant the cogitators ruled a Necron force would have been able to separate us from our fierce Venerable Ancients."

Taylor Hebert didn't look surprised.

"You aren't the first to remark upon it today." The grand commander of Operation Stalingrad inclined her head. "I'm assuming these situations happen whenever there aren't Guard forces in position to play the role of junction?"

"Indeed." Malakbel confirmed, sounding very pleased.

"We will have to give you mechanised support then," the Basileia shrugged. "It's not like I or anyone in the Battle Group thought you would be able to take on the Ymga Monolith by yourself."

Any other operation, Agiel would have protested and voiced this was underestimating the striking impact of an Astartes invasion. Not so much here and now. Like every Space Marine commander, he had been allowed to see what had happened to the Second Legion's landing zones. The Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red had watched speechless as they were shown what happened when overconfident Marines descended upon a Necron battlestation in a flawless Bellicosa-pattern approach.

'Slaughter' was maybe the most generous way to describe it. The Second Legion had learned the hard way that Necron warriors and constructs could come from anywhere, walls or no walls, ceilings or no ceilings, pillars or no pillars. That the fight had lasted close to one hour was a testament to the ferocity a Legion cornered could unleash, but it certainly wasn't an example to emulate.

"But what is most important is that the fleet can manoeuvre together flawlessly. It is the very cornerstone of the Operation we are about to launch."

"I think I can promise in every commander's name," Malakbel declared very seriously, "that you aren't going to be disappointed."

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*The year of 310M35 would see thousands of ancient ships re-emerge from relative obscurity alongside newer Navy vessels to fight in the cataclysmic battles where the fate of trillions of souls was decided. Of course, many of them couldn't be considered new designs. For all the repairs it had benefitted from by the Artisans of Mars, the Gloriana* Flamewrought *was hardly a new warship. The same could said about Arks Mechanicus, Apocalypse-class battleships, or Astartes Battle-Barges. The Hoplite-class Destroyer had been in service for more than fifty standard years now; its presence in an Imperial order of Battle had raised few eyebrows from naval commanders.*

*There were starships on which the judgment wasn't so clear-cut. The Venus-class Cruiser was an improved variant of the Lunar-class whose future appeared compromised before the Fall of Commorragh; after it, the Fabricator-General of Mars and the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy's opposition to the project vanished and full production was authorised in 298M35 outside of Mars. Nyx and Ryza would be the first Forge Worlds to be granted the authorisation for their construction outside of the Ring of Iron. As a result, thirty-six Venus Cruisers, all Nyx-built, were integrated into Battle Group Volga at the beginning of Operation Stalingrad, with a classified number being placed in the reserves. Some of these capital ships' presence was definitely confirmed during the Atlantis Purges, but that Operation Stalingrad was their first major military campaign was hard to dispute.*

*On the other hand, variants of the widely-spread Lunar-class were hardly something new in the Imperial Navy. Between the different 'flights' of Lunar and its variants, it was often joked that the popular warship had as many patterns as there were Sectors in the Imperium. It was an exaggeration no doubt, but one which emphasized how this Cruiser was anything but the herald of a doctrinal change.*

*The situation was completely different where the Aegis-class Battlecruisers and the Warrior-class Destroyers were concerned. These two classes, or any variant of them, didn't exist before the Fall of Commorragh – Her Celestial Highness had recovered the templates which would allow the core of their doctrinal requirements to flourish in the devastation unleashed against the Dark City.*

*Normally, this would have rendered the commissioning of any ship relying on these priceless technological schematics impossible, but the favour of the Mechanicus towards Lady General Taylor Hebert and the threat represented by the Ymga Monolith and other heretical forces crippled the political opposition before it could really present more than a few token objections.*

*But even if things were resolved in the councils of war, the Tech-Priests and shipbuilders were nonetheless forced to find hasty alternatives for both classes. The original schematics of the Aegis-class were never put into production; there simply wasn't enough time to build the hulls to the quality levels demanded by Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan. Instead, the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Imperial Navy requisitioned twenty-four Mars-class Battlecruisers from mothball, before proceeding to remove each and every offensive armament of the warships as the first phase of the modifications. That there was barely a whisper of protest was quite indicative of the fear the Reaper batteries of the Ymga Monolith had spread throughout the Imperial Navy's officers.*

*The Warrior-class Destroyers faced different problems. Having hulls of Destroyers, time was not the great limiter it was for the bigger Aegis. But it remained a serious constraint. Neither the Adeptus Mechanicus nor any Imperial loyalist fleet had ever built a ship integrating an electromagnetic cannon in living memory, and the prototypes of the class were barely completed by 306M35. That the Mechanicus Council successfully delivered one hundred and forty-four into active service before Operation Stalingrad under these circumstances was a triumph of industry, artisan craftsmanship, and military planning. Numerous titles and promotions would be handed out by the Parliament of Mars after Stalingrad for this exploit integrally realised in the Nyx System.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Edition, 310M41.

***Ferrus' Revenge* Shipyards**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

As usual, her arrival on *Ferrus' Revenge* was greeted by an impressive clamour coming from tens of thousands of hands applauding, uncountable voices cheering, and the crowd this clamour belonged to.

As expected, she spent the next hour giving 'unofficial audiences', kissing babies, giving her blessings to new couples, and congratulating PDF recruits and newly enlisted SDF personnel for their contribution to the defence of the Nyx System. It was a delay on her way to the *Enterprise*'s dock, but it was a necessary one; with how little time she spent in Hive Athena these days in preparation for the coming campaign, meeting the Nyxians like she did was the best way to gauge the mood of both the military and the civilians.

And besides, it wasn't exactly like only shipyard workers and market merchants were taking the opportunity to talk to her, as proved by the presence of Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan herself when she left the thousands of pilgrims behind.

"I heard no major problems occurred during the latest fleet exercise," the black-haired parahuman began once the salutations were completed. "Are we on schedule?"

"We are," the Mistress of Ships proclaimed, her mechadendrites ever in motion. "It took us over three hundred hours of modifications, but the *Megara* at last performed on the level of its other Aegis sister-ships. The blessed Psy-tech Field was recorded at a most impressive ninety-four percent for twenty-four minutes without incident, and the communion with the Aegis squadron will be at ninety-three percent."

"Outstanding," the Basileia complimented the female Archmagos. "Where was the problem, in the end?"

"Much as it shames me to admit it, when we received the first Battlecruisers out of mothball, two hulls out of twenty-four presented alterations most common with warships repaired in the shipyards of Metalica. Previous problems meant the *Petersburg* already had potentially altered machine parts removed and replaced, but the *Megara* didn't have these problems, and thus was allowed to proceed further along its commissioning without challenge. I think that if we had proceeded with more twelve-blessed verifications, we would have caught the problem sooner, but we were trying to keep as close to the schedule as possible..."

Taylor had worked with and listened to Arithmancia Sultan for long enough to know this was not an implicit criticism; this was just the basic truth. Any warship – or civilian ship, honestly – commissioned too quickly risked encountering these kinds of problems if the Admirals supervising the shipyards were stupid enough to demand the impossible of the Tech-Priests.

Unfortunately, she and Arithmancia Sultan had agreed upon a construction schedule which came very close to it.

Alas, there was no alternative – at least not one which wouldn't cost the forces of Operation Stalingrad years of delay. After watching the sheer firepower used by the Szarekhan Necrons to annihilate the Second Legion once, Battlefleet Volga needed the Heimdall template installed aboard the Aegis-class Battlecruisers. Not having them increased the possibility of the first major engagement turning into a one-sided butchery, and it wouldn't be the humans doing the killing this time.

"I know you have done your utmost." The supreme commander of the ten Battle Groups assembled between Nyx and Triplex Phall reassured her. "The Warrior-class Destroyers?"

"The forty-eight of your personal Battle Group have all passed the fleet exercises with flying colours. So have the other forty-eight sent to Battle Group Berezina. As agreed during our last meeting, twenty-four have been placed in the Reserve Fleet. The other twenty-four have been sent to Battle Group Dnieper like you desired. Coupled with the Hoplites, I have no doubt our new Destroyers are going to be the bane of many Necron ships."

"And I am sure plenty of officers will come to thank you after the operation," the owner of the *Enterprise* nodded. "While the Hoplites decimate the Monolith's heavy starfighter cover, the Warriors are going to shred the armour of their Cruisers."

Best of all, it wasn't something the Necrons could anticipate. The Railgun template had only been recovered at Commorragh, and the numerous prototypes had begun to be tested after Trazyn dealt with Orikan. So unless the perfidious 'Diviner' had warned his fellow genocidal partners of everything which might or might not happen in the future, the element of surprise should still be intact. The Second Legion had not deployed any electromagnetic weapons during their final stand, and the Orks had not shown them any either.

"A most satisfying outcome for these enemies of the Omnissiah," Arithmancia approved. "I have more good news. The modifications of the Moth Super-Carrier *Aethergold* are completed. You can transfer your singing companion to it whenever you wish."

"I am going to wait until I return from the Arena for that." Taylor answered slowly. "I don't want to do everything at the last minute, but the longer Lisa is unable to move, the more...significant her food requests are going to become."

Her Moth-Diva would also find uncountable ways to drive her escort of Templar Sisters and Tech-Priests to tears. Best to leave her in her Dome for as long as possible, where she stayed – relatively – well-behaved.

"A last point I think has not yet been brought to your attention. One hour ago, the Ark Mechanicus *Zar-Quaesitor* translated out of the Warp."

Taylor blinked. Any Ark Mechanicus was always welcome, but the Mechanicus orders of battle for the ten Battle Groups didn't include that one, and all fleet exercises were completed. Adding more elements was always going to be a headache.

"Archmagos Belisarius Cawl has returned." Her Mistress of Ships and Shipyards informed her when it became obvious she failed to react in the expected manner.

"Ah." Honestly, how many Arks did Cawl have in his service? The reason she hadn't connected the dots was because after seeing the *Iron Revenant*, the parahuman hadn't believed an Archmagos could own two of these gigantic starships. Hediatrix was a very senior Archmagos of Mars, and he only had the *El Dorado*. The same was true for many other high-ranked figures of the Mechanicus.

Her conversation with the Archmagos ended a couple of minutes later, and the Dawnbreaker Guard and she pressed on in direction of the *Enterprise* – across a cheering crowd, it went without saying.

They were barely two hundred metres from her personal Thunderhawk when a person she had really not anticipated meeting today intercepted her group.

"Lord Commissar Zuhev," if there was anything reassuring in this galaxy, it was that her senior officer of the Commissariat had barely changed these last several years. The Atlantis Purges had been such a lightning-fast affair he had no time to gain new scars, and though he accepted a rejuvenation treatment, it had been a light one, barely enough to return to the vitality he had during the Fall of Commorragh. "Have there been any problems with the Commissariat?"

"No, everything is proceeding as per the schedule I gave you," the austere and threatening-looking man assured her. "But there have recently been...unforeseen developments."

"I was made aware Cawl is back."

Zuhev...grimaced. Interesting, apparently whatever he wanted to tell her, Cawl played no part in it.

"I hope he's not going to play with any more moons."

"I will confiscate his Ark Mechanicus if he so much as thinks about it." The insect-mistress promised. "But you were saying about interesting developments?"

"Ah yes," Zuhev took two steps to the left, revealing in full the woman half-hidden behind him. "Your Celestial Highness, may I present Lady Foronika Argovon, Rogue Trader, until recently operating in the Nephilim Sector. She has some information I believe you need to be informed of immediately."

Apparently, it had been too much to hope for a few hours of free time aboard the *Enterprise*...

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Rogue Trader Foronika Argovon**

Foronika felt completely insignificant as she was politely invited to sit on the red couch. The moment she had been given permission to board the massive Battleship called the *Enterprise*, it was scene after scene of bronze and gold, silver mechanical cogs, and painted walls. It was like being in a museum, except the various stations and uniformed personnel everywhere made it clear it was a true warship. If she had had any inclination to presume otherwise, the moment you looked at an artwork, you immediately noticed there was something to protect it from fire or damage, be it a stasis field, a fire extinguisher station – the big red letters 'ANTI-FIRE FOAM' were a clue – or something else.

It was galling to admit it, but not only did the *Enterprise* have more wealth in one compartment than her entire *Dice of Topaz*, it could destroy it in a few minutes before breakfast, AND it was far better protected internally than her own ship was armoured.

But what was the most striking was the Living Saint. She was so luminous, so pure, that Foronika felt really unworthy to be welcomed into her presence. The Rogue Trader of the impoverished Argovon line had always known she wasn't a beautiful woman; her own cousins had not been shy in pointing out every flaw they found in her appearance. That she was too small, barely managing a lowly one metre and fifty centimetres. That her acne spots that for some reason had never vanished after their appearance in her teenage years disfigured her. Her nose was too sharp, her mouth too uneven, and her lips hardly beautiful. Minor consolation, her near-empty resources meant she had not compensated this by trying to gain weight, but then again she wasn't really able to afford clothes befitting of a Rogue Trader; from boots to coat, she wore black. That way she didn't look like a beggar, but she hardly looked like a dashing Rogue Trader either.

In comparison, the Living Saint was a true angel. She was tall. She was beautiful. She was illuminating the entire room with her magnificent golden wings, projecting a divine aura blessed by the God-Emperor Himself. And if half of the rumours Foronika had heard were true, Her Celestial Highness had already accomplished more in roughly two decades than three or four hundred Rogue Traders did in their lifetimes.

Given all of these facts, it immensely surprised her she had been introduced into Her presence so quickly.

"Where do you want me to begin, your Celestial Highness?" she found enough courage to timidly ask.

"I think the beginning is always a good place start," the golden-winged woman replied gently. "Do you want some refreshments? You look incredibly exhausted."

It had to be some kind of dream, because the fruity tonic she was given was far better than anything she had tasted in the last decade, and the tiredness was hitting her bones and her muscles less and less.

"It began with the Hour of the Emperor's Wrath, your Celestial Highness. The Nephilim Sector has an important Warp trail which allows ships to travel quickly towards Segmentum Solar, but plenty of systems and unexplored regions near that trail were wracked by Warp Storms. Since I had a...an arrangement with a shipyard of Nephilim I wouldn't find elsewhere, I was trying to access – with little success – several stars until the Warp Storms all vanished. Not losing any time, I activated my Warp Drives and translated to one of the most promising systems I had managed to guess the location of, and it was there. So I claimed it for the Imperium."

"Well," the ruler of the Nyx System commented, "congratulations are in order."

"Thank you." Foronika cleared her throat. "But it was once I left to report my discovery that the problems began. I was made aware that two people named 'the Monsters of Lomorr' had seriously damaged a tithe-fleet of the Adeptus Administratum and killed the tithe-master. Your name was mentioned in rumours, in general associated with the fact the dead Adept was a member of the Vandire Clan."

The poor Rogue Trader didn't know what she had expected, but the Living Saint rolling her eyes, revealing an exasperated expression, and mumbling something between clenched teeth were not it.

"These...these 'Monsters of Lomorr'...their names wouldn't be 'Leet' and 'Borek', by happenstance?"

"Err...yes, yes, they are. Do you know them...your Celestial Highness?"

The beautiful woman sighed.

"Yes. I have the great misfortune of knowing them. And the moment I can catch one, we are going to have a little chat about the vagueness of their Astropathic communications. Amongst other things. They had told me they had killed someone named Mephistopheles Vandire; they had been very vague about everything else. But since we didn't find a Lomorr System near the Maelstrom or in any Mechanicus database..."

A Space Marine poured a ruby-coloured liquid into the glass of the Living Saint, her own glass was replenished, and for a few seconds they sipped their drinks in silence.

"I suppose the Administratum threw a fit over it, and there are going to be violent complications. But I don't know how any of this is a problem for you."

"The two Rogue Traders sponsored by Mephistopheles Vandire fled as quickly as they could when their patron died," Foronika explained. "They took the liberty of emptying the coffers before departing, though. So the local Administratum really needs to present something good to their superiors, and a newly discovered system ready for colonisation would their lifesaver."

"Ah. But you discovered it, so they want you to transfer certain colonisation and trade rights to them...in perpetuity, I imagine?"

"Exactly," Foronika confirmed, the warmth of the tonic a welcome sensation in her throat. "This is obviously highly illegal, but the Nephilim courts are theirs, and I'm hardly an influential Rogue Trader."

In fact, if she didn't manage to defend her claim on this newly discovered system, it was likely that in a decade there wouldn't be an Argovon Rogue Trader House. She had loved her parents, but their disappearance with the penultimate ship of their dynasty had left her a mountain of unpaid debts and the *Dice of Topaz*, which was itself in need of massive repairs and mechanical parts' replacements.

"I see." The black-haired Saint said with a sympathetic smile. "But why come to me specifically? I mean, I feel a bit responsible for having given a ship to Borek and Leet. I should have sent an Astartes company or two to keep them on the straight and narrow, and the Administratum plotting is characteristic of what happens once you get rid of a Vandire. I think he was pilfering from the Sector's coffers well before his Rogue Traders took it upon themselves to steal precious metals and other resources. Still, rumour or no rumour, Nyx isn't exactly next door to Nephilim."

"Because some of the rumours about you I learned from an Explorator Tech-Priest from Stygies VIII. He was hardly the...err...best source of information, but he affirmed he had been there at Nyx and that certain edicts had been approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus."

"I'm afraid you will have to be more specific. I used the Adeptus Mechanicus to enforce many edicts during the last twelve years."

Foronika drew the black rock – darker than obsidian, to be accurate – that she had shown to the Commissar from her pocket.

One of the Space Marines present hissed, and the Living Saint's expression also turned from polite interest to incredibly attentive.

"Noctilith," the name passed her lips, the same the near-heretek had mentioned. "Gamaliel, if you would?"

A tall golden Space Marine, armoured like an angel and more beautiful than most propaganda vids, advanced and placed a strange device against the night-coloured stone as she continued to hold it.

"This is indeed Noctilith, my Lady," the confirmation arrived five seconds later. "The purity is a bit inferior to the ore the Mechanicus refine at Alamo, but it's still over ninety percent. And judging from the form and the list of impurities, it wasn't gathered on a volcanic Death World."

"It wasn't." She mustered her courage to not feel...too intimidated by the gigantic Angel of Death. "There are many of these rocks on the surface of every planet of the system I discovered."

"How many planets?"

"Six."

"Six," an angelic version of the same Space Marine, but clad in white and gold, repeated with what had to be a slightly ironic tone of voice. "And to think the Mechanicus is still trying to find one where the deposits won't run out in a few months..."

Foronika felt incredulity. It was that rare? Of course, the Space Marine hardly had any reason to lie about that...

The Saint rose from her couch and delicately took the Noctilith stone from her hand. The moment her fingers touched it, it was like veins of gold were revealed inside it. It was...beautiful. It couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, but when it was over, it was like a new lighthouse had been created to help the Living Saint.

"Aethergold," the golden-winged woman explained. "Noctilith imbued with the power of the Emperor. The bane of the darkness and the heretics. Wherever it shines, hope continues to exist and the monsters flee."

The formerly black stone was placed back into her hand, and aside from a brief feeling of warmth, the only sensation was a sort of...dancing song playing in her head.

"Congratulations, you passed the test."

"Err...thank you?"

The Living Saint chuckled.

"While it can have unpredictable effects, Aethergold doesn't do that much to men and women who are untainted and loyal to the Golden Throne. The corrupt and the untrue...well, let's just say that if you were one, we wouldn't be having this kind of conversation."

Foronika couldn't be gladder that she had always followed the advice of her mother and never forgotten the ancient words written on the vellum of the Warrant of Trade. Though her mother mustn't have ever thought about a situation like this one...

"Err...you want it back? The Aethergold, I mean?"

"Keep it," the Living Saint waved her hand. "Think of it as an insurance on my part, since you're going to become a very wealthy woman."

"You will support my claims on the Argo-...err the system I discovered?"

"Yes. Yes, I believe I will." One of the red-clad Space Marines handed her a data-slate. "I will even repair your ship, the *Dice of Topaz*, and send a Mechanicus flotilla to secure the system and protect your assets while I'm waging my wars...though I have one request."

"And that is?"

"Please don't call the discovered system 'Argovon'. I have nothing against the name, but labelling an important system with your own identity is generally not the most humble thing ever. The name of your ship could be a good choice."

The Living Saint read something on her data-slate before giving it back to the Space Marine.

"But it is a request, feel free to disregard it if you want. Have you brought more Noctilith with you?"

"Yes, your Celestial Highness. One ton."

"I will buy it for ten billion Terran Throne Gelts."

Foronika felt weak again. This was...she was going to be able to repay all her debts and then some! She was...

"Gamaliel, please call the Magi Biologis for a full medical check-up, this poor Rogue Trader doesn't seem to be in good health..."

**Nyx** **System**

**Arena of Blades**

**3.025.310M35**

**Maea Teallysis**

The new 'Arena of Blades' was already an incredible sight viewed from a spaceship approaching it: a jewel of emerald – the dome protecting arena fighters from the void – surrounded by a vast fortress-stadium.

It was even more impressive once you saw it from the inside, Maea acknowledged that much from the start. There were wall frescoes no matter which direction you looked, sculptures representing Asuryani and Drukhari by the hundreds in various gladiatorial positions, and precious gemstones beyond comprehension, the majority being emeralds, rubies, or stones having similar colours.

Maea felt very underdressed walking the long avenue they had been directed to...and she was in the new body-tight black-and-blue armour the Queen of Blades had ordered her to wear. By the lost temple of Asuryan, she didn't want to know how she would have felt if they travelled here half-naked.

Not that there was a big risk of this happening. The forty Wyches that Lelith Hesperax had 'volunteered' to fight in the human-built arena alongside her had all been directed to wear similar armours. The main difference with hers was that their armours were a combination of black and this magenta fuchsia which seemed to have become the default colour of the Atharti worshippers in the time it took to reach and return from the Shrieking Labyrinth.

When she thought about it, it was likely it wasn't a minor detail that aside from Lelith Hesperax and herself, all the Wyches had these magenta Spirit Stones under their armours, and the ancient Aeldari had feigned to not see them when they reunited with the Cult of Blades recently.

"Ah, at last, a welcoming committee."

Maea didn't know whose mouth had run wild, but she had to repress an urge to strangle them. Because when the great gates at the avenue – the ones carved in a very realistic artistic representation of Hesperax – opened, it was no human army or even one of the 'Space Marines' who greeted them. It wasn't even the Queen of the Swarm.

It was a massive golden spider with silver stripes, one which was big enough to do a size contest with a grav-tank...and likely win if it came to close-quarters, as its 'legs' and abdomen had a formidable chitin armour.

Maea tensed, and her reaction was likely among the less vocal of the group – minus Lelith's reaction, which was to smile and bare her teeth. Because of course the Queen of Blades would see this opponent as a worthy challenge. One of the Hekatrix Bloodbrides outright asked if the arena contest had already begun.

"No, it hasn't, arrogant female long-ear."

The voice was entirely metallic, but since there was no one around...and the metallic box dangling like a collar around the spider's neck...merciful Isha, had *Maelsha'eil Dannan* found spiders which were able to talk?

"You are a new one, aren't you?" The Queen of the Arenas spoke with non-hidden curiosity. "I didn't see spiders of your species at Commorragh."

"Indeed I am!" The spider's maw clicked loudly, and her posture shifted from defensive to what could be described as 'prideful'. "The Glorious Webmistress, May She Rule The Swarm Forever,recognised the majestic beauty of the arachnid form, and ordered her Tech-Priests to enhance us into a new glorious body. We are the *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert*, and we have sworn to protect humanity, in the name of the Webmistress! And since we need to be polite and present ourselves, even to infuriating long-ears, I am Bellona, daughter of Artemis, the Warden of the Arena of Blades."

"Of course the Queen of Helspiders would let spiders rule this arena..." A Wych complained. "I mean, what we were expecting?"

'Bellona' appeared offended by this comment, since she stopped using her four forwards legs and went on a position which for an Asuryani or a human would have been considered 'bipedal'. Of course, since the spider had a massive abdomen, the effect was...intimidating. Very intimidating.

"I assure you, arrogant long-ear, I am more than capable of administering this arena! For two standard years I have been in charge, and I have prepared this event far better than any of your perfidious race can!"

"I'm sure Al'krina meant no offence," Lelith smiled, though whether it was because she was amused because a huge spider was insulting one of her Wyches or for some other reason was impossible to guess.

"I am rather sure of the contrary," Bellona clicked a lot between each metallic word coming out of the metallic box. "But I'm not one to bear grudges indefinitely. Since she voiced reserves, she can open the ball with my Helspider cousins. They are very, very enthusiastic to end their lives in a glorious massacre of long-ears."

Al'krina flinched. She had been among the Drukhari who had fled Commorragh before the Gates were closed, Maea remembered.

"That won't be necessary," the ancient Aeldari voiced an objection. "The opening needs to be grandiose, no? Al'krina won't give a good opening performance."

The Queen of Blades smiled, and Al'krina gave her a look which was half-relief, half-confusion.

"I want my Apprentice," and suddenly Maea felt very, very alone, "to go against the Helspiders in the opening fight. I can assure you she will give the spectators and your mistress a prodigious fight."

Oh no. Oh no...

"An interesting suggestion," the golden spider shook her gigantic head in a very humanoid gesture. "And one which merits a lot of thought..."

Maea, watching these eight eyes filled with curiosity and a great intelligence, knew she had just been volunteered to become Helspider-chow.

"You don't seem that annoyed at the idea of modifying the order of the fights nor their composition?"

"I was already modifying it before you set a foot in this Arena!" Bellona exclaimed, two of her legs slashing the air. "We were not expecting so many long-ears to accept our invitation to get themselves killed!"

This time the Queen of Blades allowed them the rare opportunity to hear her purring laughter.

"You are confident. I like that."

In a feat of dexterity, the spider took something from her back and threw it to Lelith Hesperax, who caught it without looking.

"The instructions to access your lodges, the other facilities, and the basic organisation of the grand gladiatorial event. I will send my cousins to escort you when everything is ready. And do not slay any of them, or I will punish you myself."

The most dangerous sword-fighter of the Aeldari race chuckled.

"You want to kill me, spider? Your mistress failed, and you aren't at her level."

"Who said anything about killing you?" the golden spider immediately rebutted. "Of course I would lose, though you might be unpleasantly surprised at how good I am at coordinating my cousins. But I was thinking more along the lines of shutting off the warm water supply to your lodges."

The Aeldari blade-mistress...grimaced.

"Threat acknowledged. Wyches, do not slay the spiders...at least not until we fight in the Arena."

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Before the Deathwatch had presented her the 'Protocol Armour' in person, Taylor had almost refused to believe one could spend so much on a parade armour no one would even don, and for that matter whose primary goal wasn't even the protection of someone.

But it had been the complete truth, and even after seeing it several times, the ludicrous decoration – over one hundred diamonds, dozens upon dozens of former Aeldari gems, more than fifty sapphires, all upon a base of Necron Metagold – was still ridiculously impressive. If there was an award for the most ostentatious parade armour, the Protocol Armour recovered from Aryand would win it without trying.

"I am forced to admit that for all his tyrannical behaviour, your Silent King knows how to offer kingly gifts." The Basileia told Neferten, as after stepping back, the honour guard of the Nerushlatset Dynasty surrounded the Protocol Armour and teleported it back to the starship waiting half a million kilometres away.

"Make no mistake," the Phaerakh replied conversationally, "Szarekh didn't give away this armour for the sole purpose of placing the Nephrekh Dynasty in his debt. He was making a diplomatic point. The process of creation and the other secrets of the hyper-alchemical 'Metagold' are something the Nephrekh Crypteks were particularly proud of. So either Szarekh's court of Technomancers managed to replicate it by only seeing its properties from afar, or he used the Command Protocols to seize their inventions and mind-wipe the incident from the Nephrekh data-memories. And by giving them this armour, he made sure the Nephrekh leadership was aware of these possibilities."

Spoken like that, there was little doubt which option Neferten considered the most likely, but at least she had presented two sides of the debate.

"Assuming it was the latter and you can prove it, you may be able to convince some Nephrekh Crypteks to change their allegiances once all the Protocol artefacts are recovered."

"I examined the practicalities of such a move," the Necron ruler revealed. "Unfortunately, to avoid potentially unpleasant complications, Phaeron Sylphek must be neutralised first. And it appears he didn't trust his court enough to place his royal crypt at Aryand."

One of the reasons the attack of the Deathwatch upon the 'Crownworld' had been even more devastating than the success won at Orrak. It had barely taken three hours before the Tomb's AI was neutralised, and the Space Marines' casualties had been extremely low, even compared to the standards set at Orrak.

"It wasn't his Crownworld, then?"

"No, it was, the few vaults your forces found are proof enough of that." Taylor hid a grimace; it had been hell to convince the Tech-Priests to respect the treaty, especially when the artefacts found were so close to impressive piles – or was it mountains? – of strategic metals. "But Sylphek apparently decided to go against tradition and move his most dangerous weapons and most precious vaults to a secret location. That was...innovative. I didn't expect it from him."

It was a friendly reminder that for all the knowledge brought by a Necron Dynasty, the Imperium's best source of information – Trazyn didn't count – was not infallible.

"My Overlords have brought forth the hypothesis this will be the last Protocol Artefact we will be able to recover in a while...aside from the one you have made so many preparations for."

"The hypothesis is indeed correct." Taylor told her Necron ally. "Given how defended this Protocol Artefact is, the numbers the Deathwatch need to deploy to have good odds of success, and how badly things can go wrong during Operation Stalingrad...I can't possibly justify operations against the other targets you gave me. Nothing went wrong when the Deathwatch attacked Orrak, Sarlok, and Aryand, but that doesn't mean the other citadel-crypts don't have nasty surprises waiting for invaders. And if they do have these surprises, I will have no Mechanicus or Inquisition fleet available to bombard them into oblivion for at least a couple of years."

Both organisations had been very generous – though as always, Aethergold and Bacta were so priceless she could afford to name her price and get away with it – but they couldn't be everywhere at once. Priorities had been established. First, everything which could be deployed to help the Imperial forces involved in Operation Stalingrad and the Obscurus fortification projects. After that came the protection of the Forge Worlds and other critical bastions of industry and warrior-tithing. And then there were the Noctilith-seeking operations. The 'Protocol Artefact Quest' came at the bottom of the list.

"I am not surprised." Neferten noted diplomatically. "But I must inform you as a result that as long as a Szarekhan noble is in control of the Throne of Oblivion, I won't be able to deploy even the smallest Scythe engine to help you across the Eastern Fringe. I will deploy three fleets north of the Maelstrom to protect the Nephrekh-Oruscar Pylon Line, and Sitkah has spread her assets to intervene should your Traitors move to seize important Necron fortresses. But that is as far as I can risk my Dynasty's military forces."

Given how much risk encountering a Szarekhan force placed the Nerushlatset Dynasty in, there was no arguing with that.

"That is already a lot. And since the fleet of Ryza, the White Scars, and several other allied forces are already trying to entice the Damned of the Maelstrom to sally out before springing their trap, I think it will be enough for the contingencies in that theatre. The real problems will come from another direction."

"The world you call Cadia."

Taylor nodded silently.

"It may have already begun. The Astropathic communications are getting erratic in western Obscurus. A veil of darkness is falling upon the Gate and the nearby systems. This is of course why I will soon leave with my forces. It is time to strike."

A massive blast of green lightning announcing a teleportation erupted five feet away, and Taylor thought at first it announced the return of the Honour Guard...but no, it was not them.

It was Trazyn.

"My friend!" The unrepentant thief greeted her. "I thought it was the perfect time to-"

"The Lady Basileia and I were about to head to the Imperial Lodge, Chief Archaeovist," Neferten interrupted him. "Why don't you escort us there?"

**Forgefather Vulkan N'Varr**

Vulkan N'Varr didn't like arenas, beautiful or not, and he wasn't going to change his mind for this one.

This was an impressive construction, the Salamander Forgefather was ready to grant the builders that, but it was a large orbital station built on the order of a xenos, and worse, a *Drukhari*. He didn't care if the Queen of Blades was so old she was practically her own race, when someone lived at the heart of a corrupt civilisation, it was impossible to keep their hands clean. And though Commorragh was no more, there weren't enough years in the history of all humanity to forget the raids these depraved monsters had launched against Nocturne. The sooner the 'arena-fighters', 'Wyches', and other long-ears died, the better.

Fortunately, it seemed the God-Emperor was smiling upon them as even the long-ears appeared to be ready to betray their treacherous brethren and throw them into the one hundred and fifty metres-wide arena.

"I think you are asking for a difficult price, my friend," he didn't turn his head to keep an eye on the Necron thief; that was the duty of Catalan, Dos Santos, and Forman.

"Nonsense. I did you a favour by taking the Bell of Saint Gerstahl, in addition to all the other things I let you keep."

"What are these 'other things' you're referring to?"

The sigh of their Lady was very loud.

"Trazyn, I'm ready to accept my Tech-Priests are not the most disciplined individuals, but when in three artefact recovery operations they each time discover compartments missing up to two-thirds of the relics they had safely stored, even they know to suspect your intervention."

"And to think you were so busy safeguarding your collections," the Necron Phaerakh spoke. "I wonder if I should not try to find ways to make yourself valuable. Like trying to entertain the Deceiver in a Tesseract Vault."

"There's no need to resort to such violent extremes!"

Yes, there was.

Trumpets sounded, and just below the Imperial lodge divided neatly between Necrons and Humans – and Trazyn going back and forth between them – entered one of the massive 'Adjutant-Spiders'.

"Webmistress! Everything is ready!"

"Then you and your sisters can invite the public in. Excellent job."

"We live to please you, Webmistress!"

The most incredible thing in this exchange was that the spider really didn't talk. When the Genetors had given birth to this new species, it rapidly became obvious that for all their intelligence, the *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert* was not capable of communicating vocally except by a few loud rattling sounds. Yet these giant arachnids, aside from a talent in silk-weaving which had made them extremely popular among the Nyxian upper classes, were telepathic, at least with their fellow spiders and other psychic species. As a result, the metallic boxes placed around their necks were not a common translator, but in fact a plain vox-caster which allowed other spiders in a vox-central to translate their mental orders into proper sounds.

To date, Vulkan N'Varr didn't know if it was an idea of genius or utter madness. It was true that with these spiders' creation, one of the principal weaknesses of their Lady was gone – when she went to sleep, an 'Adjutant-Spider' would simply take over the relay and continue to loyally follow instructions, and they could be complex to the point normal humans would struggle to keep half of them memorised.

On the other hand, well...Bellona was bigger than a Leman Russ, and she was not the biggest specimen they had running around. Plus, just like Lisa the Giant Moth, all of the adjutant-spider 'commanders' had a contagious enthusiasm, and occasionally, in their eagerness they forgot how fragile their surroundings were.

"Welcome! Welcome dear public, to the Arena of Blades!" Bellona repeated at regular intervals. "In the name of Basileia Taylor Hebert, I dearly hope you are going to enjoy the spectacle!"

No, no they wouldn't.

Bellona had been informed of the basics – what the public could and couldn't do – but she was unaware of the political realities in the Imperium of Mankind.

And the political realities ensured that the fewer people left to tell everyone what they had seen inside the Arena of Blades, the better. It wasn't to protect their Lady's aura of invincibility. Unless the Queen of Blades went berserk today, Lady Taylor Hebert would not be physically fighting anyone, even via the proxy of insects. It wasn't because the mere presence of xenos was corruption – though several ships had brought Drukhari prisoners that were undoubtedly tainted and to be exterminated with extreme prejudice.

It was because unless they succeeded in slaying the Queen of Blades, the public was better off not knowing that killing all Eldar in sight in fact wasn't the policy of the day. The revelation of the atrocities committed by the monsters of Commorragh on a daily basis had generated an intense wave of anti-Eldar propaganda, and there were people as important as the High Lords debating if after the current series of threats was over, hunting the Eldar to extinction was perhaps the best service that could be given to the galaxy.

After that, the only question had been how to find a million expendable spectators. No Gubernatorial rebellion having agitated the Nyx Sector in twelve years, it was in the Atlantis Sector Lady Weaver had found her 'volunteers'. While many men and women were directly thrown into the Penal Legions – where they would have the honour of being in the first wave of Operation Stalingrad – five hundred thousand adults had been set aside and prepared for a very different assignment.

Decadent nobles, avaricious Ecclesiarchy Priests, gladiators of illegal arenas, Frateris Templar Traitors...what they all had in common was that they'd thought their precautions had been enough to trick the Arbites, the Administratum, the Ecclesiarchy, and Lady Weaver.

They were fatally mistaken.

These men and women didn't yet realise it, but they weren't going to leave this space arena alive. The only question was how they were going to die, and how long it was going to take.

"In this arena, I am the Judge, the Executioner, and the Commentator!" Bellona shifted from greetings to her instructions. "If I say a fight begins, it begins! When I say combat is over, it's over! If you don't listen to my instructions, I and my sisters will make you stop! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"WE UNDERSTAND!" The crowd answered like a single man, apparently beginning to have some dark thoughts about the reason they had been led to this spectacle when they had just been 'judicially pardoned'.

"Good! Now let's begin the grand opening of this Arena of Blades, under the wise guidance of the Webmistress and the Golden Throne! On my right, the magnificent, the lethal, the veterans of Commorragh, my cousins the Helspiders! They will face before your very eyes the Apprentice of the Queen of Blades herself, in equilibrium above an acid pool!"

**Maea Teallysis**

There must have been a more partial crowd of spectators at some point in galactic history, but Maea for the life of her wasn't able to remember *when*.

"DEATH TO THE ELDAR!"

"DIE, DIGUSTING XENO!"

"CUT OFF HER EARS AND THROW HER INTO THE ACID POOL!"

Why the hatred for her ears? They were very nice and well-proportioned, by Isha!

Really, these humans were cruel and barbaric.

Two heartbeats, and Maea toned down the noise of the crowd like she had learned to do in the Shrieking Labyrinth. Save the 'judge-referee' – which was obviously the gigantic spider speaking just below the grand podium – everyone was unimportant for the time being. The Malan'tai Asuryani needed to focus on her own survival.

Something which was easier said than done. This wasn't the Labyrinth where the floor could collapse at any moment, but it wasn't normal ground either. Someone had weaved multiple layers of silk in equilibrium above the large arena, and the 'web' was neither very solid nor very large. A normal Asuryani would be able to walk upon it reasonably safely...assuming the silk was not doused with a slippery substance – which it obviously was.

And since the humans – or the spiders – had chosen this time to reveal their building capacities were up to the task of creating a pool of acid to 'welcome' the losers of this arena bout, the encouragement not to fall was strong. Maea was rather confident this acid was a wraithbone-dissolver, developed by the red robed-humans who had sacked Commorragh.

"Let the First Game...begin!"

The Helspiders stopped their choreography at the other end of the arena and charged her. They were all Death-touched, of course – Asuryani and Drukhari both had agreed upon this nickname to designate insects which had been once placed under the control of Weaver. Aside from making them more intelligent, it also led them to be more organised and vindictive against their people in the Webway.

This wasn't the only change shown by these arachnids, descendants of the ones bred in the pits of Commorragh. Four of their legs were busy keeping them alive on the silk webs, but two of their appendages held long spears, and two others rather large shields.

Weaver had taught Helspiders how to wield weapons. What was wrong with this galaxy?

"There should be a law against arming Helspiders," she grumbled, jumping and avoiding three of the weapons which had been used as projectiles with a wide margin. "Fine, no need to restrain myself."

Embers began to burn in the palm of her left hand. Three heartbeats later, a storm of fire was born and struck one of the Helspiders right in the head, which, surprised, wasn't able to avoid a deep plunge leading to her demise.

"One down, err...ninety-nine to go."

The Helspiders tried to encircle her, just as several humans were forcefully catapulted onto the upper layer of the spider silk's web.

"Ah, our first courageous volunteers of the night!" Bellona proclaimed. "We are glad for your timely arrival, citizens of Atlantis! Your challenge is simple: kill this Eldar, and you will receive an Imperial Amnesty! Good luck!"

The crowd screamed so loudly even the Helspiders appeared to suffer from the storm of noise.

But sure enough, the humans thrown into the arena had really, really vicious expressions looking at her. Well, the ones which managed to stay on the web for several heartbeats. It was slippery, after all...and a Helspider profited from their inexperience to impale one of them on a bloodied spear.

"No, my cousins the Helspiders aren't on your side! Isn't it exciting?"

For the first time of the night, Maea wondered what the penalty was for killing the chatty giant spider.

**Autarch** **Ulion Lakadieth**

The problem when your Craftworld thought you were a hero was unquestionably the fact the Asuryani thought you were obligated to continue playing the role.

At least this time he wasn't forced to stare at an armada which had destroyed several fleets and was advancing on his. He just had to watch a series of fights in the arena which would result in the deaths of many members of his own species, though at least the Drukhari were estranged cousins at best.

This was why like every soul in their lodge Ulion cheered when the last Helspider died and Maea Teallysis emerged victorious. Trained by the Queen of Blades or not, the young Asuryani's performance had been a thing of beauty, and she had proved that no matter how unfair the fight was – seriously the Helspiders receiving new weapons and shields every time they asked was just cheating – victory was possible.

Now the question was...

"Victor: the Eldar," the enormous golden spider grumbled in the device allowing her to play commentator of the arena. "As per the will of the Webmistress, the life of the winner is spared and she will be granted an audience with the Glorious Basileia and Phaerakh at the end of the event. Now as Warden of the Arena I am proud to announce an interlude while we reconfigure the Arena for the second round of fighting. Before that, one minute of silence for my poor cousins who fell trying to kill this tenacious long-ear."

The crowd booed. Whether this was because of the spider's words or the reality many humans had taken a final bath in the acidic arena, Ulion didn't know, but the spider – Bellona – didn't like it at all.

"I SAID ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE!" The arachnid unleashed the equivalent of a roar. "OR I WILL PICK TEN OF YOU RANDOMLY TO SERVE AS MY NEXT MEAL!"

Silence immediately fell in the stadium.

"Thank you," the spider added sweetly...and despite the metallic 'tone', the threat was not far from it.

"Well, it is a victory," Eldrad whispered next to him. "And *Maelsha'eil Dannan* looks ready to respect her word. I will treat it as a good sign."

The Autarch rolled his eyes.

"I will only stop watching my back when we will be safely back in the Webway, out of reach of her Battleships and her Swarm." Ulion Lakadieth gave the Senior Farseer an unimpressed look while murmuring. "Let's not pretend that anything save the presence of the Queen of Blades is protecting us right now."

If anything, they had a demonstration of it as the acid fluids were removed in record time and then what felt like millions of beetles, crabs, and centipedes went to redecorate, burning the web silk – who knew there were pyrokinetic crabs? – and bringing large decoration stones and what looked like gigantic dart-launchers.

"Thank you for your respect," the spider spoke again. "Now for the second round of fighting! Three Wyches of the Queen of Blades will have the honour of fighting our Mecha-Centipedes! Oh and I suppose we will throw in the tainted wretches some of our long-ear friends so generously delivered into our care!"

Ulion Lakadieth grimaced. It was him who had captured the Drukhari...hundreds of them, fleeing the Webway, pursued by the Harlequins. Needless to say, they had not been the kind of dark cousins interested in redemption. No, these ones had already sold their souls to the Primordial Annihilator, specifically the aspect of lies.

He didn't know what the most unpleasant thing was: selling dark cousins to a grisly fate, no matter how much they deserved it, or having the unpleasant realisation that the Drukhari population they had tolerated for so long saw nothing wrong with worshipping the Primordial Annihilator as long as they could continue slaughtering and torturing.

"There was no other option," Eldrad assured him calmly.

"I know. It does not make me any happier," the Lugganath fleet commander responded as three Wyches in armours black and...dark pink?...walked into the arena. Not long after, the other Drukhari were admitted by another gate. There were one hundred of them, clearly not the entire group of prisoners he had surrendered to the spiders.

"So she has followers of Atharti inside her ranks," the older Asuryani commented whimsically. "The threads hinted it was possible, but the Cult of Blades moved too fast to be absolutely certain."

"You're playing with fire, Eldrad," the grating and arrogant voice of Farseer Eldorath Starbane introduced itself in their conversation. "What do you think that psychopath of an Aeldari is going to do when she realizes you are trying to snatch away her Wyches?"

Ulion had wondered from the moment he had met this idiot what the purpose of Starbane coming here was. It was certainly not for his mental clarity or the wisdom of his speeches. It wasn't for his capacity at deciphering the threads of the future; one might think not seeing the future would have taught him a little humility like it had for so many Seers, but apparently not.

Eldorath Starbane was a peerless Farseer, all must bask in his mighty presence or risk being utterly wrong.

The Autarch wondered which Alaitoc female had committed the sin of siring a child with a Biel-Tan male, because this stupidity was typically more the domain of the warmongers than it was usual in the corridors of Alaitoc.

"And now, dear public, the Mecha-Centipedes!"

For the second time in a short period, the human spectators went silent.

Ulion thought...at first...these were human machines. At first. But no, these masses of metals were undoubtedly insect, for all the guns and blades strapped to them. At least they behaved like insects, the golden lights where their eyes should be glaring at everything.

They were huge, and their progression was anything but silent. How much flesh was hidden inside this armour was impossible to discover without psychic scrying, but Ulion knew it wasn't going to be a lot. After arming Helspiders, Weaver had evidently found a way to parody the Necron constructs and make her own metallic insects. An army which was as loyal to her as her talkative spider, but wouldn't need to breathe, eat, drink, or rest. All it needed was energy...and the blades of the Wyches seemed really, really insufficient for the task.

The tainted Drukhari were the first to scream imprecations and charge, prayers to the Primordial Annihilator on their lips.

It was a one-sided massacre.

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

The strike was flawless and the target had not recognised the feint for what it was.

The head of the Wych rolled on the sand of the arena, cleanly decapitated.

The tall and dark Space Marine, presented as a 'Blackshield' by the giant spider, raised his sword and saluted Weaver, before cleaning the massive blade and re-sheathing it. Then he moved towards the exit, not a glance spared for the two Wyches, the small army of 'volunteered spectators', and the countless carnivorous beetles which had been part of the contest and were now truly and completely dead.

"Victory goes to the Adeptus Astartes! Five minutes of interlude before we move onto the next round of fighting!"

Aurelia murmured a word, and the world pulsed. Six heartbeats later, two magenta Spirit Stones appeared in her hands.

"These girls deserved better."

"Yes." Part of the Cult of Blades or not, there had been no real way for the Wyches to survive a duel against such a formidable opponent. They were simply too young, too untested, and not coordinated enough. "But I did not choose to let them participate, and neither did you."

The massacre had been just as bad as he had feared after having the first visions about the Arena of Blades. It was quite clear the Destroyer of Commorragh had not changed her opinion about their race, and as far as she was concerned, the more Asuryani and Drukhari warriors she killed today, the better.

Counting Maea Teallysis among them, eleven out of forty-one Wyches had survived the game of massacre in the arena. All of them had done it by sheer talent, not luck, for the Queen of the Swarm and her executor-spider had definitely not made things easy for them.

Mecha-insects had been released, bastardised versions of the ancient Necron Canoptek weapons, but no less proficient in the art of murder. Monstrous insects covered in blades, spikes, and armour, some of them able to shrug off the best Drukhari weaponry. Three Space Marines had also fought, the official reason being given for their presence being egregious failures having led to the death of their brothers-in-arms – except the last one, they had died, but not before taking down four Wyches and twenty more Drukhari Hellions with them.

There had been hellish traps. The lake of acid of the first fight had been just the prelude to things much, much worse like a small sea of flames. The final count had to be close to three thousand Drukhari killed, most of them brought here by his hand or the help of the Lugganath ships. The worst part was that if the choice was placed once more upon his shoulders, he would do it again. Except the Wyches sworn to Atharti, none of those Drukhari souls were redeemable. They had, by weakness or by delight for ambition and lies, said 'yes' when the Great Liar of the Primordial Annihilator came forwards with his bargains of nightmares.

Eldrad had wondered at first why so many of the Swarm's priceless assets had been unleashed when the souls of the Damned would inform the empyreal monsters of all that happened here. But one try to look at the future had told him everything there was to know. He had received a massive headache and no visions.

The Anathema's null-maidens were forming a circle immediately outside this arena. Not close enough to forbid the usage of military skills, but not so far away that their presence in such numbers didn't destabilise the threads of the years to come. Their enemies would know little of what happened here, and the hazy visions may be more damaging than no vision at all.

"I have a bad feeling about these negotiations," the Herald of Atharti confessed.

"I am not exactly brimming with enthusiasm about them myself," and not just because he had no idea of how they could go or whatever good would emerge from them. Being blind to everything was not something that happened to him often, the last time it was this bad was during the Fall of Commorragh, and this alone put him ill-at-ease.

Eldrad sighed before giving his lover a sad smile.

"At least it is almost over. I don't think the Cult of Blades arrived with a lot more Wyches than those who fought, and I know for sure the tainted dark kin are all dead. Which means-"

"And now, for the main spectacle of this grand event!" the giant golden spider announced excitedly as her 'cousins' pushed more spectators on the stands to replace those who had been thrown into the arena. "She is the eleventh most wanted being of the Imperium! She is one of the rare enemies who can challenge the Webmistress! She is older than most sins in this galaxy! She was fighting C'Tan in the War in Heaven millions of years ago! All rise for Her Excellency Aenaria Eldanesh, the Queen of Blades! Cousins, play the Imperial March!"

A second later, the order obeyed, and the gates opened to a very martial music to reveal the crimson-haired foremost killer of Commorragh...and certainly the rest of the galaxy.

Call her Aenaria Eldanesh or Lelith Hesperax, these were merely two out of a list of uncountable names and titles.

"To greet such a prestigious opponent, we didn't skimp on the quantity!" Even from here, Eldrad could see the smugness radiate from the golden spider, and as a result he knew this one kept her independence of thought from Weaver. The servant of the Emperor was in total control, but let this strange spider serve her of her own will. It was...dangerous. The human woman was only a single being, but if her giant spiders spread across the galaxy...

"Obviously, all the spectators in this arena have volunteered to try to claim the bounty!" Bellona the golden spider exclaimed. Terror exploded in the crowds of humans. "A bounty which stands over one quadrillion Throne Gelts, and provides an Imperial Amnesty signed and sealed by the Great Webmistress. But you won't be alone!"

The different gates allowing participants to walk into the arena the 'normal' way were opened, and from them a small army of Necrons marched out.

Eldrad felt himself freeze. It was one thing to see the ancestral enemy of his race from afar. It was another to see them march in tight formation going to war. And it wasn't a small deployment. Eldrad hadn't the slightest idea of what these units were called, but many had such decorations and molecular-severing blades that they couldn't possibly be simple warriors. From hovering constructs with enormous guns to ground machines, this was a force which could wipe out entire cities.

Just merely looking at them was generating a feeling of dread, something that went well beyond the greenish glow of their monstrous weapons and the unmoving metallic skulls.

"I wish you good luck..." this had to be one of the least impartial referees in the history of arena fighting, and Eldrad had been forced to be a spectator in a Drukhari arena once before. "You are going to need it. BEGIN!"

The Necrons instantly opened fire, an annihilation bombardment of green light materialising to strike everything. The crowd bayed, either for blood or in terror, and began to leave its seats. In less time than it took to say it, thousands died.

But where the Necrons had struck, the Queen of Blades wasn't there anymore. Instead in a single jump she had landed on one of the tallest Necron machines, and eagerly proceeded to carve it with her two daggers.

"XENOS," Eldrad felt at last the presence of the massive blue machine waiting behind them. But why was it wearing that ridiculous pirate hat? "MY LADY WANTS TO SPEAK WITH YOU."

**Yvraine Kaydinn**

"This monster allowed you to train with her?"

Yvraine felt her question was very legitimate, since two heartbeats ago, it began to rain Necron parts over them and only the shields protecting the principal lodge was preventing them from receiving the shattered remnants on their heads.

"No," Maea whispered. "I died ten thousand times and she called it training before beating me down until I passed her 'minimal standards'. The Queen of Blades didn't train with me, she sparred...often with a hand tied behind her back, naked, and sometimes with a mini-dagger."

Yvraine wanted to believe her friend was joking. But as the small army of Necrons in the arena was trying to kill Lelith Hesperax and utterly failing, she had to admit it was entirely plausible.

As they climbed the last marble steps, Yvraine shook her head and tried to shrug off the feeling of terror she felt towards the old Aeldari. She was good with a blade, but the 'demonstration' which was playing out in the Arena of Blades was something else. The humans trying to swarm her by sheer numbers? With a good strategy and a few specialised weapons, it would be quite easy to tear them apart. Not with a pair of daggers, though. But no one, not even the greatest of the Phoenix Lords, was known to fight the ancient monsters that were the Necrons alone and unsupported.

And yet the Queen of Blades was doing it all the same.

Suddenly, the 'ridiculous rumours' of Commorragh didn't seem that ridiculous at all.

"Webmistress! Should I unleash the Mecha-Centipedes again?"

"No, Bellona. They can't coordinate with the Necrons...and they are too slow. We will keep them in reserve for another day."

"By your command, Webmistress!"

If anything, this exchange forced Yvraine to refocus on what the lodge they finally entered housed. It was an incredibly beautiful place with shifting landscapes of greenery on the walls, a profusion of sculptures and other artworks, and a lot of furniture in green and red colours.

It was also very big, but the reason for that was revealed immediately: the massive judge-referee-commentator spider known as Bellona was taking instructions from her 'Webmistress'.

Somehow, Yvraine knew instinctively it was a spectacle similar to the one offered by the Harlequins. The Burning Angel governing the Cycle of Entropy didn't need to speak to her arachnids; the attack on Commorragh wouldn't have been so successful if that were the case. No, she spoke to this spider because she had use for it as a performance...and this spider was largely able to hold a conversation with her.

Silence reigned as they advanced past the arch and the white pillars marking the entrance of the lodge.

It was a parade of monsters. On one side of the lodge, the Necrons were staring. More than twenty-five Necrons, and all were presenting so many richly decorated armours that Yvraine knew these were incredibly powerful nobles. The Nerushlatset Dynasty, Eldrad Ulthran had called them, but that was just a name. Seeing them awake and glaring at you was a reminder the War in Heaven had not erased the threat they represented.

The other side of the lodge was no less dangerous. Yvraine had seen plenty of the 'Space Marines', but the thirty-plus present here were bad news. Armoured like they were going to stroll into combat at any moment, the gene-modified humans were colossi bred and built for war. And the golden-winged figure they were surrounding, well...

Merciful Isha, what had convinced Biel-Tan it was a good idea to attack Weaver after the first time?

"Phaerakh Neferten, by the treaty which governs the diplomatic relationships between our two Empires, I inform you several individuals of the Aeldari sub-species known as Asuryani have entered contact with me, in affairs not related to the Queen of Blades."

"I acknowledge the information," one of the Necrons replied, the one sitting on a silver throne. "I formally consent to your suggestion of letting them speak. We should get some amusement out of it at least, since it appears my warriors won't be able to kill the Queen of Blades today."

"Or you know, we might add them to my collections," another Necron with a purple cloak intervened, and Yvraine instinctively knew it was the 'Necron Arch-Thief' Trazyn.

"Do you not have enough long-ears in your collections, Overlord of Solemnace?" Another Necron asked what was clearly a rhetorical question.

"I do not have an Apprentice of the Queen of Blades, no," the thief admitted, shifting into a greedy stance which made Maea flinch. "And I could always benefit from an Ulthwé Farseer and his interesting escort."

"The two Primarchs have reunited in the Webway."

Yvraine didn't know why she had blurted it out so quickly, but she had, and at least this had the effect of the Destroyer of Commorragh stop caressing her spider and turning her head – hidden by a beautiful golden helmet – in her direction.

"Continue."

So Yvraine told her tale. How the Harlequins had permitted her to follow the tool of the Primordial Annihilator, giving her a single opportunity to reclaim *Kha-vir*, the Sword of Sorrows, in the process making sure the thing had no chance against the Space Marines and their two leaders.

"You could have guided them out of the Webway." The golden-armoured force of psychic light pointed out. It wasn't a question.

"The Harlequins refused. In their own words, a sword cast in the sea of fate can't return until the right moment."

Trazyn laughed.

"Typical Harlequins. You know my friend, I've always wondered if they truly can see the future, or if they just deliver a few suitably cryptic and poetic lines nobody can understand, that way they will always smugly confirm they were right a million years later."

Much as Yvraine wanted to say the Arch-Thief was wrong...well, for once the Necron was making a disturbing amount of sense. The Harlequins were not a community which revealed their plans in plain words. They were worse than the worst Farseer in that regard, and that was saying something.

"Those clowns should be forced to attend several seminaries," Weaver nodded, "I, for one, certainly fail to see how their jokes are funny."

"They have been fighting against the Primordial Annihilator and its servants since the Fall," Eldrad Ulthran spoke for the first time in the presence of the Queen of the Swarm.

"When it suits them and butchering human populations has grown boring, I suppose," the tone of the mistress of spiders had stopped being so pleasant. "Two of your group know what I am speaking about, after all. Did you think I would not recognise you, the two prisoners we took on the Ork battle-moon?"

Well at least this answered the question of how good the memory of the Destroyer of Commorragh was.

Maea stepped forwards.

"We wish...to mend the differences existing between our two species. Further conflict will only reinforce the Primordial Annihilator."

Several of the armoured giants, both humans and Necrons, made noises that Yvraine knew were ones of derision.

"Further conflict will render your race extinct, you mean," the Necron leader corrected in something that would be akin to amusement for the soulless. "Commorragh was not enough to wipe you out to the last life, weak descendants of the Aeldari, but it ended a significant majority of your population. Even if the Imperium of Mankind lost a million humans for every single warrior you have left, they likely have enough to drown every Craftworld and planet you still have."

"My point stands. It will leave you open to the attacks of the Primordial Annihilator."

"Give us a little credit, *Eldar*," Weaver had returned to caressing her spider. Well, to each their own, Yvraine supposed. "We are going to fight the Primordial Annihilator. Unlike your race, we have no wish to empower the Ruinous Powers and let them tear open the fabric of this galaxy. No, I have no intention to fight a war against your species in the next centuries unless you continue to annoy me. If you do however, I can promise you the retribution I sent against Biel-Tan will seem like a mere skirmish compared to the efforts the Imperium will unleash against the Craftworlds and every power allied or supporting your race."

"You need us." Oh, damn it. Wasn't someone supposed to keep the mouth of this Farseer shut if he tried to open it?

"And you are?"

"Farseer Eldorath Starbane of Alaitoc. And you need us to counter the rise of Oblivion, Angel of Death."

The golden-winged being burning in golden light...exploded into laughter.

"Oh that's a good one," Trazyn chuckled too. "Can you repeat it once more? I wasn't properly recording it the first time."

Even a few Asuryani laughed behind her, the Autarch of Lugganath foremost among them.

At least for a few seconds, the great lodge was a chorus of laughs and hilarity.

Laughter which abruptly stopped when they realised who else was laughing, or rather purring, with them.

"I'm sorry," the Queen of Blades commented while baring her teeth, playing with her daggers and leaning against a green column. "But there are no more opponents, and you sounded like you were having fun. Don't worry, I will just listen. Act like if I wasn't here."

That had to be one of the most ridiculous 'suggestions' Yvraine had ever heard...

**Herald** **Aurelia Malys**

Aurelia had to admit it. Like a child, she gaped. The fight was over in the arena...everyone was dead. Well, everyone but the Queen of Blades.

Khaine's bloody hands, how...how strong was this monster? Necrons, humans, insects...all had been slain with a frightening rapidity.

"Do you want to spar with me, 'my Empress'?"

It took a long moment for Aurelia to realise the last Eldanesh had spoken to *Maelsha'eil Dannan*.

"No, thank you," the golden human replied. "I am going to leave for a military campaign soon, and I don't want to do it counting how many of my bones aren't broken."

"Ah yes, the Dark Throne of the C'Tan." The tone was light, but there was something resonating beneath...respect. "You're going to have a lot of challenges with the Necron opposition with that horror."

"I'm really surprised you didn't choose to go fighting with them at least once a while."

For the first time, the ancient red-haired beauty sounded...less than confident.

"I am a highly-psychic being, despite my preference for the blade." The Queen of Blades reluctantly admitted. "The null zone hurts my psyche and my body...significantly."

This was apparently something born of experience.

"I can't fight normally there, and there's a reason we named it 'Dark Throne of the C'Tan', you know. Even after the Star-born monsters were shattered, many of their shards have been stored there. Attacking it...I hope you know what you're doing. You may be able to partially shrug off the effects, but a lot of your troops won't."

"We've been working on sabotaging the devices creating the null-zone." Weaver revealed slowly.

"That might be exactly what the Primordial Annihilator is waiting for." Eldrad Ulthran warned.

The mistress of giant spiders made no move, but Yvraine could almost feel her irritation.

"I've spent twelve years planning this campaign, Eldar. Do you really think I've not considered that once or twice?" This was not an official dismissal, but it was very close. She immediately returned to her exchange with Hesperax. "I suppose you aren't eager to participate, then?"

"There are a few heads which might be worth my time," the Queen of Blades said. "But I've not decided if I will intervene. My Wyches really need more training."

"Too bad." The human seemed sincere. Maybe because after fighting each other at Commorragh, Weaver would like the Damned and the Soulless to deal with Hesperax.

"We however are willing to intervene."

It was not very pleasant to be the undivided focus of this fledgling burning angel. A song resonated deeply everywhere. And it demanded Sacrifice, a shadow even affecting the power of Atharti.

"And you are?"

"I am Aurelia Malys, Herald of Atharti, now of Ulthwé-"

"-and formerly of Commorragh."

That...had not been part of the plan.

"I believe I now have a clue why the Emperor wanted you taken captive. Creating a new God? That's impressively arrogant, even by Eldar standards."

Aurelia feigned to ignore the purring of the crimson-haired gladiator.

"The Aspects were purified by your own deeds, Queen of the Swarm. And there isn't one, there are two."

"Yes, I suppose the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom has the other one, right?"

The human was...disturbingly well-informed.

"How?"

"There are few things I failed to accomplish at Commorragh. Your capture was one. His death was another. Since I see you burning in pink-red fire, it's rather easy to conclude he's the other one."

The golden human took what had to be a meditative stance.

"Obviously, knowing your species, this has disaster written all over it. I just hope the next disaster won't end with you creating another galaxy-spanning nightmare."

"We have learned from our mistakes."

"No, no you really haven't." There was no negotiation, no hint of compromise. "Let's stop the debate, I have better things to do. Why have you come to speak with me? You know I hate your species. I've seen the pit of atrocities you called Commorragh. I can assure you, I have not forgotten the good men and women who perished in my service to obliterate that evil realm of depravity."

This was...not the way Asuryani or Drukhari conducted diplomacy...ever. But since there was no other choice...

"I am the Herald of Atharti. As you said, it might come to grow into a God protecting our souls in full from the Primordial Annihilator. But to let it grow in strength, aside from prayers from dedicated followers, we need to consecrate new temples. And for that, the resource you call 'Blackstone' or 'Noctilith' is required."

"You want us to deliver you one of the most vital strategic resources in this galaxy?" the outburst had not come from Weaver or the Necron ruler, but from the Arch-Thief. "No, no! The last time they stole significant stocks from us, they used it to build the 'Talismans of Vaul', also known as the Blackstone Fortresses! We can't trust them to not stab us in the back immediately once they will have completed their new weapons!"

Several eyes turned to Lelith Hesperax, but the Aeldari female feigned to sleep. Obviously, no one believed that for a second.

"For once, I am in full agreement with the Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace, young Asuryani." The 'Phaerakh' rose from her throne. "I would not have trusted your race with our precious Noctilith during the War in Heaven, and I trust your crippled sub-species even less now. You created an abomination the likes of which had only been created by accident and during the greatest conflict the galaxy had ever known. Most of your fellows refused to change their behaviours. And if there's one pact you never betrayed, one species you have never insulted or broken oaths with, I have no idea which species that might be."

A sceptre slammed upon the decorated floor of the lodge.

"Humans and my Necrons have already enough difficulties finding sufficient quantities of Noctilith for our own purposes. Why would we even consider opening negotiations with Craftworld Ulthwé...or any faction of Asuryani?"

It was a good question...and one which had taken them a lot of time to find a good answer to.

"Because," the Herald of Carnality tried not to show any nervousness, "we believe we have discovered the very goal of the 'Word Bearer' faction which will strike at your alliance."

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From: Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller

To: Lady General Taylor Hebert, commander-in-chief of Operation Stalingrad

Date: 700.309M35

Clearance: Sapphire-Black

Subject: Preliminary Order of Battle, Battlefleet Volga

*Your Celestial Highness,*

*As per your previous request, I can present the warships for which I can guarantee the full readiness of in time for the beginning of the military operations below. For the reasons you are already aware of, the special units and Mechanicus warships dispatched to the Oblivion Quarantine Zone ahead of schedule aren't included in this list.*

*1st Battleship Division:* Eternal Crusader *(Gloriana, Black Templars),* Flamewrought *(Gloriana, Salamanders),* Covenant of Baal *(Legate, Blood Angels)*

*2nd Battleship Division:* Enterprise *(Enterprise, Stalingrad flagship),* Hornet *(Falchion, Mechanicus),* Opera Exitium *(Battle-Barge, Brothers of the Red)*

*3nd Battleship Division:* Dominus Astra *(Emperor, Müller),* Admiral Lawson *(Apocalypse),* Divine Diadem *(Apocalypse)*

*4th Battleship Division:* Son of Victory *(Victory, Reuenthal),* Sword of Jupiter *(Victory),* Admiral Kennington *(Victory)*

*5th Battleship Division:* Xenos Slayer *(Apocalypse),* Imperial Dawn *(Apocalypse),* Illustrious *(Emperor)*

*6th Battleship Division:* Crusade of Defiance *(Retribution),* Venerable *(Apocalypse),* Colossus *(Retribution)*

*7th Battleship Division:* Holy Diligence *(Emperor),* Prince of Stars *(Apocalypse),* Admiral Greenwich *(Apocalypse)*

*8th Battleship Division:* Star Ocean *(Retribution),* Superb Triumph *(Vanquisher),* Neptune *(Emperor)*

*1st Carrier Division:* Audacious *(Nemesis Fleet Carrier),* Admiral Houston *(Nemesis),* Moonstone *(Nemesis)*

*2nd Carrier Division:* The Great Quest *(Peregrine Fleet Carrier, Adeptus Mechanicus),* Holy Seneschal *(Peregrine),* Khan *(Nemesis)*

*Aegis Defence Squadron (4 Divisions of 3 ships): 12 Aegis-class Battlecruisers (Navy and Mechanicus crews)*

*Mars Battlecruiser Division:* Champion of Kar Duniash *(Mars),* Domination's Pride *(Mars),* Tribune *(Mars)*

*Cruiser Divisions (72 ships in total, 12 Divisions of 6 ships):*

*36 Venus-class Cruisers*

*12 Dominator-class Cruisers*

*6 Gothic-class Cruisers*

*6 Lunar-class Cruisers*

*12 Astartes Strike Cruisers*

*Light Cruiser Divisions (72 ships in total, 12 Divisions of 6 ships):*

*24 Dauntless-class*

*18 Defender-class*

*15 Endeavour-class*

*15 Endurance-class*

*Frigate Flotillas (130 ships in total, 13 Flotillas of 10 ships):*

*22 Falchion-class*

*24 Firestorm-class*

*70 Sword-class*

*14 Tempest-class*

*Destroyer Flotillas (144 ships in total, 12 Flotillas of 12 ships):*

*48 Hoplite-class Destroyers*

*48 Warrior-class Destroyers*

*48 Cobra-class Destroyers*

*Starfighter Squadrons:*

*20 000 Fury-class Interceptors in 2000 Squadrons*

*10 000 Starhawk-class Bombers in 1000 Squadrons*

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**Nyx** **System**

**Emperor-class Battleship *Dominus Astra***

**3.031.310M35**

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

"A new contingency plan? With all due respect, Lord Admiral I can't say that fills me with excitement."

Neidhart didn't turn his eyes from the spectacle of the hundreds of warships returning to the *Ferrus' Revenge* shipyards one last time.

"Something tells me it is more the source of information which might have caused such plans that troubles you."

"One can't hide anything from you," Oskar von Reuenthal joked before returning to a more serious expression. "But yes, the origin of the information is...troubling."

The Lord Admiral had a feeling the younger man wanted to use a far, far stronger word than that, but refrained, for the sake of politeness.

"I understand. To be clear, what this contingency implies doesn't fill me with joy either. Nor do I think the Basileia is overjoyed to consider it. But we have a duty to the Imperium, and in this case, the Eldar have a really good motivation to sell us the truth. After all, the Basileia and the Nerushlatset Necrons have only agreed to begin true negotiations *if* the information ends up being valuable for the campaign and they don't stab us in the back. In the case the Eldar are...their usual Eldar-selves, they will receive nothing, and I suppose whatever Battlefleet we can free from patrol duties will receive the enjoyable privilege of getting to punish them."

It was not a plan 'whatever happens we will win', but it was not a situation where the Imperium had a lot to lose either. Unless the long-eared xenos had really decided to begin a total war against the Imperium and believed ambushing the forces of Operation Stalingrad was the first step of their master plan. That said, whatever early victories they would win in the first months, it would end with their bases destroyed and the Eldar being on the receiving end of a xenocide. After Commorragh, the mood of the High Command of Kar Duniash wasn't Eldar-friendly. Not when every rumour about the 'Drukhari' had revealed themselves to be true if not an outright understatement, no matter how horrible.

"I will concede that is true," Reuenthal relented, before adding the fatal word. "But...there was no logical incentive I am able to see which would entice some of these xenos to interfere at Commorragh – apart from their love of killing our soldiers, that is – and yet, they did it nonetheless. So yes, there are no obvious reasons for the Eldar to betray us, but that doesn't mean their twisted minds won't find one."

"A fair point," the grey-haired Admiral conceded before shrugging. "That said, I don't see what the new contingency will change if they try to betray us. We aren't really positioning any Battlegroup in a stellar region where their corsairs are able to strike with impunity, and if anything, the fact they presented themselves in front of Lady Weaver is heightening our state of alert against any Eldar sneak attacks."

"Yes..." His second-in-command for their – temporary – detachment to Battlefleet Volga nodded. "With your permission, I would like to relay the basic details to von Schafer. I know he probably won't need it, but at least if the Eldar want to pull any tricks in the Sector, the fleet assets we leave behind will be on their guard."

Neidhart thought about it for a few seconds while abandoning his sightseeing hobby and returning to his desk.

"Fine. It's not like it is really classified information in our circles anyway. Now what was the next order of the day?"

"Oh, the usual, Lord Admiral." Reuenthal was not known to show him wide smiles, so when the young Admiral did, Neidhart knew it was going to be 'interesting'. "I think you missed it with all the fleet exercises, but Archmagos Cawl is back."

Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx Neidhart Müller groaned.

"Please don't tell me you have what I think you have on your data-slate."

"Sorry, Lord Admiral." The apology was particularly insincere, in his opinion. "He wants to be included in the order of battle."

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**3.035.310M35**

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

Marianne had expected a lot of things to happen the moment she landed on Nyx.

She hadn't expected to be intercepted by a golden spider the size of a Baneblade.

Second surprise, the Vicequeen had not expected the spider to be able to *talk*.

Evidently, things had changed at Nyx during this last decade.

"Now let's go back to my original question," the metallic box serving as translator wasn't sufficient to hide the curiosity of the enormous arachnid. "What is in the container behind you?"

"It's a surprise for Lady Weaver." The Speaker's daughter replied before frowning. How did one address an arachnid in the first place? "Lady-"

"I prefer the title of Adjutant-General of the Webmistress, but I love Lady too!" Had her impressive interlocutor been human, Marianne believed she would have beamed and inflated under the compliments. "I am Artemis, the Cunning Huntress, Prime of the *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert*, chief of insect operations under Marshal Rokossovsky for Operation Stalingrad."

Marianne smiled.

"The Departmento Munitorum really accepted that? I don't doubt your talents, but the Munitorum in general is very...err...discriminatory about the presence of nonhumans in the command structure."

"They are very racist, you mean," the spider corrected without bothering with diplomacy. "But I became very good at burying them in mountains of vellum with the help of my sisters, and if Lisa bludgeoned her Templar Sisters into accepting her as 'Mistress of Lisa's Dome', then surely I should have a title, the influence of all my arachnid sisters and cousins in the Swarm demands it! The ants are already the wardens of Formicarium, the spiders must unite and prove they are one of the three great powers of the Swarm! We are after all the sole providers of the fabulous silk! Don't you think that alone deserves plenty of recognition?"

"Assuredly," Marianne quickly agreed. "Judging by your words, should I assume a Guild of Silk is going to be created?"

"Its official unveiling will happen immediately after Operation Stalingrad," the spider joyously proclaimed. "We already have plenty of positive returns for contracts of heraldry banners with the Titans Legios we could contact over these last several years."

In the depths of her mind, Marianne significantly upped her assessment of how intelligent this species of spider was to think about business practises...if not for their particular inclination to spout all their secrets in the middle of a spaceport.

Unless...

"You are trying to convince me to join one of your business ventures, aren't you?"

"The Webmistress' affirmations you were very smart weren’t exaggerated!" The eight silvery eyes stared at her. "She also said you were quite attractive, but no offence, except the Webmistress, you humans all look the same to me. You are intelligent, that much isn't in doubt, but you have too few legs and eyes to be as attractive as me! It's not your fault, of course...err...I'm going to stop talking. The Webmistress tells me I should not speak with everyone I meet."

Marianne chuckled.

"Yes, you should follow her advice." The owner of the *White Ducat agreed*. "Do you know where I can find the Lady Basileia?"

"Oh she should be here soon! I was coming to give her my report. You aren't here to ask for her hand in marriage, are you? I have already been ordered to incinerate thousands of proposals this year! Or is it about what you have in the container?"

Marianne wasn't going to reveal to this Baneblade-sized arachnid she had another spider in said container. Would 'Artemis the Cunning Huntress' insist upon freeing her 'cousin' immediately? She had a good feeling that the stasis field trapping the elusive spider was the only thing which hid it from the 'Adjutant-General'.

"It's a surprise for your mistress, not you, Cunning Huntress. Now you were saying something about business opportunities?"

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*Vehicle Name: Sphinx*

*Classification: Self-Propelled Howitzer*

*Project leader: Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus*

*Worlds of production: Nyx, Alamo*

*Known Pattern: I*

*Crew: 5; Commander, Driver, Gunner, 2 Loaders*

*Powerplant: Nyx-Vulkan V18 Coupled Multi-Burn*

*Weight: 50 tonnes*

*Length: 7.5 metres (without cannon); 12 metres (with cannon)*

*Width: 4.1 metres*

*Height: 2.91 metres*

*Ground Clearance: 0.47 metres*

*Operational Range: 500 kilometres*

*Max speed – on road: 65 km/h*

*Max speed – off road: 30 km/h*

*Transport Capacity: none*

*Main Armament: Sphinx Cannon (175mm Delta-Septimus pattern)*

*Maximal Range of the main armament: 60 kilometres*

*Secondary Armament: Heavy Bolter*

*Traverse: 360 degrees*

*Elevation: From 0 to 60 degrees*

*Main Ammunition: 50 rounds*

*Secondary Ammunition: 500 rounds*

*Armour Superstructure: 100 mm*

*Armour Hull: 150 mm*

*Gun Mantlet: None*

*Vehicle Designation: S162-P7725-H4102-I223-N9001-X6734*

*Firing Ports: N/A*

*Turret: N/A*

*Important: Possesses an ammunition resupply vehicle based on an unarmed Sphinx-pattern*

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**Hive Athena**

**3.039.310M35**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

The Spire's kitchens of Hive Athena were a temple where the noble art of cooking was worshipped. Even someone like Dragon who had no real need to eat normal food acknowledged it without hesitation.

Immense – the cooks had to satisfy the hunger of the entire Spire, from the Basileia to the humblest employee – you could ask someone to present you anything related to food or drinks, and save very rare exceptions, it would be brought to you. Baking ovens, pans, utensils, spits to roast the meat, and countless other things were at the disposal of some of the best people, receiving enormous quantities of food from the new Agri-Hives, the Garden-Domes, the Agri-World of Ruby's Harvest, and other locations of the Nyx System where food was grown each day. Sometimes it went well beyond that, but only rarely: Taylor Hebert didn't like wasting money when an extremely varied array of meat, crustaceans, vegetables, fruits, and other delicacies was harvested next door. These days, even Lisa and the other Titan Moths' impressive appetites were satiated by Nyxian food-production...mostly. Especially in the case of Lisa, who was always ready to 'discover' new culinary experiences.

In this kingdom where the chefs were vice-kings, two Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard were playing the role of overseers, sentinels, and master chefs. Unlike what had happened for paintings, statues, and other forms of art, the two Astartes weren't from the line of Sanguinius, but Dorn's. Their names were Apothecary Moreno of the Halo Brethren and Captain Vilanova of the Emperor's Warbringers – though the latter generally preferred to be called by his title of Master of Reconnaissance. Ever pragmatic, the descendants of the Imperial Fists recognised that for all their claims of ultra-performance, even a Space Marine had to eat regularly. And since the sense of taste was not in the least diminished when you were surgically altered to become one of the Emperor's Angels of Death, it was all the better that the food was of excellent taste and quality.

They had not met many complaints coming from the other Space Marines; everyone knew that on the battlefield, the 'rations' of the Mechanicum contained all the nutrition required to survive one more day...and were so awful even starving men still complained about them. Indeed, the 'culinary reforms' that began ten years ago may very well be the ones which would have the greatest impact from the point of view of the lowest-ranked soldiers of the Imperial Guard.

Dragon didn't come to these kitchens often, she could say this without lying. And in general, it was for the same reason she did today: because Taylor was there.

It would be a surprise for many, though not for the people who knew her, but the no-longer-terribly-young 'Living Saint' frequently visited the kitchens of the Hives she resided in, and didn't hesitate to play with the ingredients for a few hours on her own.

Dragon was rather certain this was the case today, as when she had passed the security checkpoints outside, a rather pleasant odour of cooked tomato and cheese reached her and nearly overwhelmed her senses.

Seconds later, she found the Victor of Commorragh busy preparing a few more pizzas to accompany the dozens cooking inside the ovens.

"Dragon!" the black-haired woman welcomed her. "You see Moreno? I told you Dragon would smell the pizza half a continent away!"

The Space Marine shrugged and continued a precise and incredibly dynamic work of putting toppings on the pizza before him.

"These are the pizzas for your Astartes, aren't they?"

"Yes," the Basileia replied. "What gave it away? The pieces of poisonous lobster, or the ultra-concentrated ingredients?"

"The poisonous lobster," Dragon snarked. "Though I think the 'light tomatoes' used are also a clue. Normal humans generally don't eat those."

"Which is a pity," remarked the second Space Marine, bringing new piles of food which would undoubtedly serve for new pizzas. "The taste is absolutely fantastic."

The conversation was idle chatter for a few more minutes, until the work on the last pizzas was declared complete and there was nothing to do but wait.

"I have good news. We were able to finish one more division's worth of modern artillery before the deadline."

"Basilisks and Vermilion rocket-launchers?"

"And Sphinxes. We're beginning to resolve our trained manpower problems in the orbital production lines."

"Well...that's good news." The parahuman insect-mistress touched her lower lip in deep thought. "Of course the big question is what we're going to do with them. The Tank Armies and Artillery Armies have all received their standard allowance in artillery guns, and it's far too late to shift from Basilisks to Sphinxes for the armies which don't have them."

"I know." Only someone who had not learned anything about weapon training and logistics would try that. "That's why I'm willing to experiment a bit and try a few things like we did with the forces we sent to the Atlantis Sector a few years ago."

"We did that for the Nyx Mark II Carapace Armour, Dragon, and it wasn't exactly what I would call a rousing success." The reaction of her 'boss' wasn't exactly filled with unbridled confidence.

"Don't forget the rocket-launchers," the Tinker cheerfully added. "In fact, that was what made the soldiers change the name from Katyusha to Vermilion Dawn."

The bureaucratic change of the name had taken a lot more time, but it had been done nonetheless, proof officers and enlisted men could really do their share of paperwork when they wanted something.

"I have not forgotten. Do you really think it's that good an idea? I'm not against the concept of improvising, but it's not going to be Atlantis PDF and corrupt Priests on the other side this time, Dragon."

"Technically, one side does consist of corrupted Priests..."

Taylor snorted.

"Be careful and don't let any Ecclesiarchal ears hear that. I have a feeling they wouldn't like the comparison."

"What is spoken in my enclaves stays in my enclaves." The draconic Tech-Priestess swore, before giving the latest updates on the multitude of things produced by the Nyxian industry to contribute to Operation Stalingrad. Most were the routine updates on the Mark IX Astartes Power Armour, the 'Hospitaller' equipment of the Templar Sororitas, the new Volkite Blasters, and obviously the ferrying of her Dragon Armours to the *Hornet* and other warships where they would await the order to be unleashed. "And speaking of what must stay behind closed doors, I've noticed our dear Lady Marianne Gutenberg is back."

"Well, since Artemis is the queen of gossips and happened to meet her at the Giraffe Spaceport..."

Dragon smirked. She had had her doubts about the orders which had led to the genetic experiments on several spiders, but the mistress of the Fafnir Mechanicus Enclave had to admit the final result was very...entertaining.

Oh, Taylor had absolute mastery of these giant golden spiders when they were in the range of her power – which had never stopped expanding for these last several years. But these 'General-spiders', as the crowds loved to nickname them, retained funny personalities in addition to an adamantium-strong sense of loyalty to their 'Webmistress'.

"Afraid that your loyal Adjutant is trying to play matchmaker again?"

The Basileia raised her eyes to the ceiling in consternation.

"Very funny, Dragon."

"Well, it is very funny, you have to admit." The Minister of Industry was tempted to laugh. "You know, when you arrived at that conference, the High Queen of House Terryn was sooo disappointed Artemis had falsified the papers..."

"Continue and I confiscate your personal command vehicle."

Dragon tried to show an expression of outraged innocence.

"You wouldn't dare."

She received a very deadpan stare as her only response.

"Fine." The Mistress of Dragons relented. "Pleasant company aside, were there important technological items released into your custody?"

"One, as a matter of fact. You know the request we made a few years ago to examine the Ansibles of Sol?"

"The one which is probably buried somewhere between Mars and Jupiter, you mean?" She asked rhetorically. "Yes, I remember. Did the Heiress managed to recover it and pass it through?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Though she confirmed the 'delays' may be due to the intervention of the Administratum."

"The Adepts of that organisation have no jurisdiction in the...ah, I see. Vandire is trying to play games because it's you making the request?"

"Almost certainly," was the not very comforting answer. "But while it's still blocked officially, the Fabricator-General and the Speaker for the Chartist Captains accepted your arguments...unofficially. Some of the data will be sent via an unofficial line to Fafnir and stored there. Obviously proper studies will have to wait until we're back from the military campaign, but the data will be there, waiting for you."

"That's very good news. It's only the first step towards FTL communications I have in mind, but it is a massive step."

"Don't sell the bear's hide before you shot the bear," the golden-winged parahuman warned her. "There's a reason the Tech-Priests are unable to build new ones."

"I remain confident I will be able to find what's missing. Don't ask me for a proper schedule, however. I have a feeling understanding the basics of these devices is going to take me months if not years."

"Even if it is years, at least you won't have the weight of the Terran bureaucracy on your back to screw everything up..."

**Nyx** **System**

**Grand Cruiser *Pavian Victory***

**3.042.310M35**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

"And so I asked the spider how much her services cost," Julia finished. "She told me 'one billion per hour'. And I suddenly realised that flattering this superb silk-weaver was not enough to get me a free dress."

Wolfgang laughed at the final outcome of the 'dress negotiations'.

"I'm regretting having missed the last years at Nyx. They sound like they were eventful, especially if these giant spiders...actually, what are they called? Surely, you don't use their High Gothic Name every time."

"No, we don't," Adriana admitted. "Only in the spider's presence. It's one of the few flatteries they are really vulnerable to. In the Navy, we call them Maximus Spiders. The Guard call them General Spiders."

"And so the legendary rivalry between the Guard and the Navy continues on yet another field," Wolfgang drily noted.The twins didn't comment. "Are there many on the *Enterprise*? Just trying to prepare myself for the inevitable confrontation, you understand."

"No, not really," Julia denied. "Artemis – she's the Basileia's favourite and proud of it – is the one whose presence aboard the Battleship has been confirmed. I doubt there will be more than two. The automated systems mean there's some free space, but we can't exactly bring a colony of Baneblade-sized spiders."

"The size of a Baneblade?" Wolfgang narrowed his eyes. "You mentioned big, but not *how* big!"

"I didn't?" Julia spoke in an innocent tone which didn't fool him. "Oops."

"To be fair, that is their fully adult size," Adriana told him in a relaxing tone, "and since the first stable generation has barely reached the age of maturity, I doubt that there are that many who are bigger than a Leman Russ."

"That is a guess and you know it, sister," Julia told her twin before turning towards him. "When it comes down to it, we don't really know how many of these 'Mecha-insects' and giant specialised arachnids have been mustered. While most of the armies and fleets mustered for Operation Stalingrad are common knowledge, the only thing we know about the 'Swarm' is how many transports have been gathered. And there are a lot of them, so..."

Wolfgang raised his glass in salute.

"To the Swarm, then," the twins gave him back surprised looks. "You weren't at Commorragh when the Helspiders allowed us to devastate the first lines of enemy defences. But I can assure you that they did a fantastic job, and these were forces the xenos had been stupid enough to give Her Celestial Highness. If we are able to land these specialised insects upon the Monolith alive, I know the Necrons are going to live the worst day in their metallic lives."

"Golden Throne, I can drink to that," Adriana sighed. "I certainly don't want to share the fate of that wrecked Gloriana they towed here five years ago."

"So they recovered it," Wolfgang murmured. "I was told an operation would be prepared before I left. It looks they were successful."

"The Super-Battleship should have reached the Ring of Iron by now," the newly promoted Commander of the Imperial Navy informed him. "And the political infighting will have started in earnest."

If anything, it was certainly too weak a phrase to describe the schemes and betrayals which would metaphorically and literally send blood everywhere where the Throneworld and Sol were concerned. With the *Flamewrought*, the problem of ownership had not existed: it belonged to Nocturne – technically it belonged to the Primarch Vulkan, but who was going to argue with the Salamanders? – and thus the pyromaniac Space Marines were using it again. The case of a Gloriana which legally and bureaucratically didn't exist was...complicated.

"Nothing you or I can do about it for now, I suppose," the Rogue Trader concluded.

"Indeed," Julia approved. "But there are other activities where you have much leeway..."

"We are ordered to present ourselves on the *Enterprise* in forty-eight hours, Lord Rogue Trader." Adriana added. "And since the Lady Basileia doesn't tolerate any slacking off under her command, it might be the last period of free time we will have in a long while."

"It would be a shame, a shame I say," he declared in an aristocratic drawl, "to refuse your oh-so-pleasurable invitations when we have stayed apart for so long..."

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*Order of Battle of Army Group Volga on 3.001.310M35 (24 Armies)*:

*20th Tank Army of the Vostroyan Firstborn – 110 regiments, 500000 men*

*2nd Tank Army of Nyx – 105 regiments, 500000 men and women*

*3rd Tank Army of Nyx – 105 regiments, 500000 men and women*

*2nd Tank Army of the Faeburn* *Vanquishers – 121 regiments, 600000 men and women*

*5th Shock Army of Nyx – 170 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*6th Shock Army of Nyx – 170 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*51st Jaeger Ventrillian Noble Army – 350 regiments, 2 million men and women*

*312th Shock Army of the Vostroyan Firstborn – 100 regiments, 1.4 million men*

*19th Shock Army of the Faeburn Vanquishers – 130 regiments, 1.7 million men and women*

*9th Zoologist Assault Force of the Indigan Praefects – 85 regiments, 500000 men and women*

*4th Paragonian Mechanised Army – 143 regiments, 3 million men*

*25th Mechanised Army of Nyx – 154 regiments, 2.5 million men and women*

*26th Line Army of Nyx – 193 regiments, 4 million men and women*

*10th Korps of Krieg – 672 regiments, 10 million men*

*40th Zoologist-Group of the Indigan Praefects – 268 regiments, 3 million men and women*

*6th Field Army of the Vostroyan Firstborn – 228 regiments, 2 million men*

*1st Line Army of Ophelia – 100 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*2nd Line Army of Ophelia – 100 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*22nd Army of the Paruthan Immortals – 201 regiments, 750000 men*

*33rd Army of the Auroran Rifles – 117 regiments, 2 million men and women*

*11th Artillery Army of Nyx – 120 regiments, 400000 men and women*

*12th Artillery Army of Nyx – 120 regiments, 400000 men and women*

*75th Artillery Army of Vostroya – 109 regiments, 500000 men*

*64th Artillery Army of the Indigan Praefects – 71 regiments, 700000 men and women*

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**Nyx**

**Cygnus Spaceport**

**3.043.310M35**

**General Werner Groener**

"The big problem," Major-General Jack Schwarz finished his report while biting into his cigar from time to time, "is that for all the efforts of my boys, the 10th Korps of the Kriegers is really understrength when it comes to officers."

Years ago, the Catachan commander would have added 'competent' before mentioning the officers, but no longer: the aristocrats and dandies who had arrived in command had generally been demoted before the first year was over. More than a decade past that point, the new officers had all manifested some competence; it was the only way Schwarz allowed them to keep their ranks.

"The situation isn't that bad," there would be a lot of Nyxians wondering if they weren't dreaming, since the man taking this optimistic stance was Lord Commissar Zuhev. "And the Krieger guardsmen have gained in resolution and survival instincts. It will take truly crippling casualties before they break now."

"Or it will take the Necron 'Deathmarks'," the officer most troopers called by his nickname of 'Death' replied.

"These Necron snipers we were unable to confirm the existence or nonexistence of with all the vids and picts of past battles we have?" Nikolai Rokossovsky asked in his quality of senior officer in the conference room, since the Basileia was doing a formal inspection of the Templar Sororitas right now.

"Lady Weaver recently asked," at the Arena of Blades, everyone understood the implicit admission, "and it appears they are indeed very real. The problem is that the Nerushlatset Dynasty was not allowed to use more than a few lone units of them. Their superiors didn't trust them with these snipers, go figure."

"Meaning we don't have an exact idea of their capabilities, wonderful," Werner said. "That said, the situation may not be as dire as you think. With the notable absence of decorations on the new equipment like the Mark II Carapace Armours and the *Angel's Sword* Power Armours, the differences between many of our officers and our most experienced troopers isn't that huge. And the duty of a sniper isn't to decimate an army by himself."

If these Necron assassins were really capable of it anyway, well...they were screwed, and there was no point making plans. So Werner was going to plan that their prowess was extremely good, but not mythical in lethality. After all, the reports they had showed the very conventional infantry of the Necrons winning victories against Space Marines and Orks, not snipers.

"Well said," Nikolai approved after emptying the large tankard the Basileia had offered him of alcohol. One might say it was one of the best gifts the Lady General had offered her chief of staff. Some had even been courageous enough to say it in Rokossovsky’s presence, and received laughter as their sole answer. "The logistics?"

"Except the troops on parade duty, everyone is ready." Werner informed the Vostroyan in his persona of Quartermaster-General. "The Centipede-class Assault Landers are all prepared aboard our Termite Transports, the Departmento Munitorum is pretty sure we haven't lost a regiment somewhere in the Nyx Sector, and with the last Astropathic communications, I am reasonably confident the other nine Army Groups are in position to execute their part of the plan."

"Good. Other remarks?"

"I will have to remind my Commissars that it is best to avoid taking examples from the Paruthan Immortals where discipline is concerned, twice." Zuhev declared coldly. "In fact, I intend to give my informal support that wherever we deploy, we don't place Paruthan and Indigan guardsmen close to each other. Their fighting spirit tends to flare in these instances, and I can only thank the fact we used paint instead of real ammunition for plenty of war games."

"The joys of having an Army Group with so many traditions and different Sector cultures together," Jack Schwarz chuckled, continuously playing with the cigar between two fingers. "I think the inter-regimental tensions are still pretty low, all things considered."

All things considered, yes. But obviously, few Army Groups could boast having a Living Saint, and one who was willing to use her considerable influence and resources to convince frontline officers and the recruiters back in their home Sectors to give their best.

"The last batch of Aeronautica liaison officers?"

"Average," Zuhev said. "I certainly won't recommend them for the Tank Armies."

"Now you are being unfair, Lord Commissar," Schwarz chided. "The ones rotated between these commands have twelve years of training plus several rebellion-crushing operations under their belts. For all their qualities, the newcomers are just Whiteshields. That's always the risk when we add personnel at the last minute. Just put them in the Reserve Fleet and pray they won't be needed...too much."

"Something like that will definitely have to be arranged," Nikolai Rokossovsky approved. "Unlike your other suggestion to give the 'ultra-alcohol' to your Catachan warriors which resulted in the 'Sigma Incident'..."

"We won the war game in the end, I believe."

"And we praised the God-Emperor there wasn't an Army Group of your Jungle Fighters involved..." Zuhev spat out between gritted teeth.

**Lisa's Dome**

**3.044.310M35**

**Legate Galatea Dumas**

The Templar Sororitas, Galatea knew, had not been supposed to reach impressive numbers anytime soon when Her Celestial Highness officially created them after the grand victory of Commorragh. In many ways, the not-yet-Legate had understood the reasoning; when the 'dangerous activities' were the protection of the pilgrims of the Nyx Sector – where peace was reigning – and the protection of important religious monuments – most of them still under construction – the need for a Templar Sisterhood numbering in the thousands simply didn't exist.

The ever-more-pressing threat of the Ymga Monolith and the future campaign in the Eastern Fringe had changed that, and the martial muster before Lisa's Dome was the result of close to fourteen years of preparation. And the view was, in her opinion, astounding: ten thousand Battle-Sisters stood in neat ranks along with five thousand Hospitallers – the name the Lady Basileia had chosen when the medical-specialised sisters asked for a name which wasn't tied to the Medicae bureaucracy.

Ten thousand red armours and five thousand light green armours, all of the most superb conception, none of them older than a decade, with a full support of Rhino armoured vehicles and Thunderhawk Transports. In numbers, it was not that much, but in total firepower, it was a force which could wipe out a million enemies, provided the enemy had no power armours of its own.

"We are ready to serve, your Celestial Highness."

"So I see," the radiant Living Saint smiled, trying to ignore Lisa who was energetically waving her wings in order to attract her attention. "So I see. You have done well these last years training the young daughters of Nyx."

"There was a lot of motivation to improve." Galatea pointed out.

"I'm not going to deny it," the Basileia nodded. "First, the bad news. As much as I want to agree with your concentration of assets into a single strike force, I can't go along with it. Lisa is much too vulnerable to the probable opposition we are all likely going to face in this campaign. In practical terms, this translates in two thousand sisters permanently assigned to protect the life of my faithful Moth."

Lisa stopped moving and sang in approval.

"You obviously will leave her nutrition and bath issues to the Biologis teams and a team of Hospitallers," their golden-winged Lady continued, "but her survival is your utmost priority. Given the immense logistical effort required to transport them and the insurance security they provide, I will only deploy Lisa and Rachel to war, and Rachel is with the reserve...if...when our plans will inevitably go wrong. This means Lisa's survival is vital. Do you understand?"

Galatea understood, yes. If the time came between sacrificing the Templar Sororitas or Lisa coming into danger, the latter's preservation would always come first.

"I understand. Though with Lisa being one noble insect to protect, this would leave us with eight thousand sisters to go on the offensive with."

"It would...if you didn't have other commitments." The black-haired divine ruler of Nyx amended. "Much as Artemis and her sisters love to pretend the contrary, my faithful Adjutant-Spiders can't deal with Necron phalanxes or Traitor Astartes companies on their own. One-on-one they will certainly kill any interloper foolish enough to try to engage them at close quarters, but their talents shine more in coordinating the swarm when I am out of range or pressed by even more important problems. And while they have devolved Red Widows to their close-quarter protection, I fear it is not enough. Thus I have to ask one hundred Battle-Sisters serve as the bodyguards for my adorable members of the 'Guild of Silk'. And there are twenty of them."

"We will protect them of course, your Celestial Highness." Galatea answered. "Besides," her mouth twitched into a smirk, "the Cult of the Holy Spider would not forgive me if they were injured while we were sworn to protect them."

"Ah yes, the Cult of the Holy Spider..." Lady Taylor Hebert, Living Saint, huffed in what was part-amusement and part-frustration. "I really, really wish they adopted fewer strange ideas. Every time Cardinal Prescott and myself are releasing new religious ordnances, they find new questions to ask...and new improbable 'superb ideas' too."

"Last time I visited their principal Cathedral, they wanted an Adjutant-Spider to consecrate the offices," Galatea informed her divine superior. "I objected, but I don't know if I managed to convince them to abandon the idea."

"I will see what I can do," Her Celestial Highness snorted. "But knowing how Artemis and her sisters act on a regular basis, I can recognise a terrible idea when I hear one..."

**Hive Athena**

**3.048.310M35**

**Baron Valentin Seignelas**

"It is not true, as some of my colleagues say, that there are no points to improve. But unemployment has diminished steadily these past several years, and now is at a lowly 6.5 percent. We have been able to pay a slightly increased Administratum tithe while calling to arms more than one hundred million men across the Sector. Both the civilian and military economy has not suffered at all from the problems which generally follow a military tithe."

Though on this latter point, Valentin was very aware his modest contribution as a Minister was not what had really tipped the scales. Having the Lady Basileia speak in front of a crowd was a far more effective measure to convince millions of soldiers that yes, the cause for which they were sent away from their homeworld was worth dying for.

"I hope that in two decades, the Nyxian Throne Gelt will be on par with the Samarkand currencies. It is not going to be easy, of course, but as per your orders the systematic deregulation of certain Governors has completely ceased, the growth of the orbital industry, the agricultural expansions, and the different planning-oversight of the principal Cartels are paying their dividends."

"Good," the Basileia told him as a multitude of beetles removed piles of data-slates and vellum documents from her desk. By a feat the Controller-General of Finances still struggled to fully understand the intricacies of, each document would be perfectly filled out and signed when it reached the hall where a vast number of men and women waited to carry them away. "Now give me the bad news."

Valentin cleared his throat.

"I'm not sure I would say there are 'bad news', Lady Basileia. It is more a...recognition that the Nyxian society is changing, and the population boom which began over the last decade isn't really decreasing, though that may be the presence of enthusiastic young men and women eager to...do what they're known for before they leave to war."

"Don't tell me," his superior groaned. "I was thinking the Astra Militarum's laws about contraception were too stringent...until they weren't."

Yes, the young Nyxians of the middle-classes had...quite clearly developed a taste for the joys of celebration. Especially since the times were rather filled with good news, and war, while not inexistent, was far away from Nyx.

"Ahem. Yes. Still, these new generations are going to impose changes in the directives we imposed these last years. Land grants on Fay, Megara, and the other planets where we negotiated training the children of pilgrims to make them very productive members of Imperial society are decreasing. Governor Dalten has been very generous and loyal, but we can't expect her to push for the same privileges past the end of the campaign of Operation Stalingrad."

"You don't even take into account how successful it will be?" Valentin was reassured that the tone was more ironic than truly inquisitive.

"Fay has recovered nicely from more than a century of inadequate rulership and poor administration," the Nyxian Minister handed a data-slate to a spider of modest size confirming these numbers. "I can't see Governor Dalten authorising more than four billion people living in the entire Fay System without major investments in orbital farms and other advanced technology. And shifting it to other planets may just be a temporary solution. Unlike highly skilled men and women, pilgrims, adventurers, and opportunistic souls arrive by the millions every year. And while I suppose the noble Regina-Consort is better informed than me, Wuhan's recovery is accelerating, which means that soon, the second Hive World of the Sector will no longer be able to absorb this surplus of manpower either."

"I assume you have seen one or several options which would allow this government to solve this problem?"

"I have," Valentin confirmed. "The political complications go, obviously, beyond my responsibilities. The easiest and most direct way I see to reconfigure this era would be to break the political opposition of Atlas."

The expression he received in return was polite...but certainly not thankful or ecstatic.

"As...tempting as it would be to travel to the Atlas System and announce to the three Dukes that their lifestyle founded on serf oppression is over and that the fragile coalition they erected with other Governors is terminated, I can't afford the political cost, Controller-General. Not now, before the largest military campaign of the decade...and even coming back in triumph might not give me the authority and prestige to change it."

Sometimes, the Nyxian Baron thought, it seemed the galaxy was really unfair. The Imperial laws recorded in the *Lex Imperialis* were the legal shields of some of the worst tyrants to have ever lived, while at the same time they prevented men and women of good nature to help other worlds. True, sometimes it also stopped the opposite from happening, but a quick comparison informed you the scenarios where the former happened outnumbered the latter by far.

"We will have several economic plans ready by the time of your return, but until then, it is vitally important the edict making sure no Planetary Governor is indebted to Nyx by more than ten percent of their gross systemic product is enforced, guaranteeing economic independence and allowing internal investments to flourish at the same time..."

**Triangle** **Citadel**

**3.050.310M35**

**King Leary O'Hara**

The domains of House Winterveil and the worlds it was sworn to defend in the stars had never been close to a Forge World or a Fortress of the Collegia Titanica. Therefore watching God-Engines walk was still a relatively novel experience for Leary; before Commorragh, he hadn't seen them with his own eyes, though obviously both the MIU of his own *Immortal Grudge* and the archives of House Winterveil had quantities of information about the Titans.

"Legio Astorum has really come out in strength," the King of Waterford – by general consensus, the name of Omsk Primus has been stricken from the records – noted to his wife as a Warlord paraded under the applause of the considerable crowd. "I think Legio Defensor's Princeps must be a bit frustrated at them, outnumbered, outsized, and all of that."

"It is not their fault." Rosaleen replied.

"I never claimed it was."

And Leary was sincere. Given how the Nova Guard had bled and suffered on thousands of battlefields before finally fighting in the middle of the burning black spires of Commorragh, Grand Princeps Surena going to war with a Battle-Maniple of twelve God-Engines was near-miraculous.

On the other hand, the ever-expanding Forges and highly-sophisticated industrial production lines of Alamo couldn't both repair Legio Defensor in its entirety and satisfy the quotas due for Operation Stalingrad at the same time. As such, the effectives of the local Titan Legio would 'only' include eleven Warhound Titans – three of them brand-new, a gift from the Fabricator-General – and the Warlord God-Engine of Surena.

Compared to the grand parade of Legio Astorum, it was underwhelming...and a reminder of the kind of sheer amount of resources and power the major Forge Worlds commanded. Princeps Senioris Darius Sobek had come to Nyx with *twenty-four* Warlords, and while these Battle-Titans were obviously the indomitable warhammer of any grand assault force, it didn't count the numerous and far from helpless Reavers.

"Bah," Rosaleen shrugged after a long moment observing two Warbringer Titans march side by side, their shape and top-mounted cannons giving them an air of family with the six Percival Siege-Walkers that House O'Hara had received for the upcoming campaign. "Numerous or not, the Princeps will still rely on our 'tiny' Knights to scout and find them their targets. Thus it has always been, and thus it will always be."

"By 'our' contribution, I suppose you mean 'the Houses of the Nyx Sector plus House Terryn'."

Hundreds of Lucius banners were brought to the fore for the crowds to admire, the hollow sun and the symbols of victories across the stars which had become so famous that Legio Astorum was one of the foremost Legios of the Imperium four millennia after the Great Crusade.

Rosaleen's nose, which like the rest of her features presented most of the traits of the Winterveil bloodline, wrinkled.

"The girl is too eager, not careful enough. She shouldn't have been allowed to sit on the High Council of Battlegroup Volga."

This, Leary acknowledged, was the Winterveil blood speaking. After so many generations having fought against the Drukhari, the Dukes and Barons sworn to House Winterveil didn't allow youngsters to speak or come into their inheritance before they had survived their first three xenos raids.

It was also the reason why Leary was the King of the first independent Knight House to ever be allowed to venture out of the domains of House Winterveil to forge their own dynasty. Before Commorragh, it would have been completely unconscionable to remove so many Knights from the defences of their homeworld.

"You know very well why the Basileia allowed it, and it's not because the giant spiders think the three-hour tales of the Terryn customs make for interesting music."

"The Knights," his wife muttered, "it always comes to the Knights."

It did.

Including Leary and Rosaleen's *Knight of Dawn*, House O'Hara would commit seventy-two Knights and six Percival Siege-Walkers to the battlefields of Operation Stalingrad. This was slightly less than half of their strength, since they had received and trained one hundred and fifty Knights, but as Lady Nyx had insisted, the Sector had to be defended and defended well. It would be a major shame to triumph on the battlefield and return to mourn in front of smoking ruins.

House Beaumaris, still terribly weakened from centuries of wandering with Legio Defensor and the casualties of Commorragh, had announced the willingness and ability to send twenty-four Knights – accompanied by six Percival Siege-Walkers.

House Terryn, despite being involved in two other theatres of war and keeping impressive forces on Voltoris, had pledged their allegiance to Lady Weaver with *one hundred and forty-five* Knights, some of them extremely rare and valuable Patterns of the Old Night like the Cerastus.

At this point, it didn't really matter if High Queen Esmeralda Terryn was young, too hot-blooded, or foolish; the size of her contribution and the total support her House Barons had for her ensured claiming a seat next to the Princeps was a mere formality. Employed wisely, the assets of House Terryn could conquer a lightly-defended Sector, or several worlds with major defences.

"No problems with the ammunition deliveries and spare parts?"

"No, everything the Tech-Priests promised us is waiting for us either on our transports or in the Reserve Fleet."

Leary O'Hara watched his own banner flying above the podiums and the stands filled with Nyxian spectators, the simple ocean blue and verdant green separated by a golden spear and the aquila.

"Good. After the Drukhari, it is time to explain to the Necrons why annoying our Knights and Lady Weaver was the greatest mistake of their robotic lives."

**Hive Athena**

**3.053.310M35**

**Fist-of-Diamond Calico**

According to his fellow Rashans' observations, there were five types of 'Tech-Priests' on Nyx, all easily recognisable. Which was stupid, because they were all supposed to be friends and unified in those robes with the cog-and-dragon symbol, but that was humans for you. Even Friend Weaver admitted her species was 'complicated' when she spoke with him two years ago, and she was one of the nicest humans Calico knew.

Right, five factions.

The first group was called the Draconians. They were the ones who had chosen the flag of the Nyx Mechanicus, a flying reptile whose two arms crossed at the centre, and with a cog above its head. It also was them who regularly pushed for the robes to be red trimmed with gold, the robes to appear scale-like, and to have their metallic bodies looking more akin than their human cousins. In speech, they equally voiced they wanted to research past, present, and future. Friend Weaver called them the 'Mechanicus moderators'. It was them who worked most often with his people, appreciating their 'innate repair-skills'.

The Rationalists came in second. If the humans speaking while he feigned to be uninterested were right, the Mistress of Ships and Shipyards was the leader of this faction. They were easily the second largest group of the red robes, and had many, many common points with the Draconians. They were more focused on the past and the present, and had an absolute love of making everything 'logical' and 'efficient'. As they had a lot of powerful red robes with them and lots of common points with the 'Moderators', they were almost-friends, and supported plenty of projects, including the ones where Rashans worked.

The third faction was the Conservatives. Calico and his furry fists didn't enjoy their words, and he frankly didn't like them. Their minds were a paw obtuse, and unless Friend Weaver asked them something, after a long discourse following, they would say everything was fine and no one needed to change anything. By his fur, he didn't know how they could lie to themselves so much. Unlike the Draconians and the Rationalists, they changed their own bodies so much they weren't exactly looking like bipedal creatures at the end. Rashans lacked this capacity to believe utter nonsense. But that was fine. They saluted the Rashans and each group went its own way.

The fourth faction was the Rigorists. There weren't a lot of them, and the Rashans had learned to steer clear of them. They didn't like his race, and wanted to do nothing with them. Something that suited the Fist-of-Diamond just fine.

The fifth was the Xenologists. They were...too happy to work with his species. But they were too...way too...crazy. Calico supposed it was why the Draconians were never far away to intervene when something exploded loudly. The Rashans had learned to be wary of them. When someone was so eager to clasp your paw, there were problems awaiting you when you weren't looking.

This was what he told to Friend Weaver when she asked him what he thought of the Mechanicus.

"Five factions? I think you're a bit too optimistic, Calico," the gold-light human corrected gently. "In this very Hive alone, I count two hundred of them...though they could be sorted into the five larger categories you mentioned."

"You humans are so complicated." The Fist-of-Diamond knew it wouldn't be the first or the ten thousandth time he said it. "How did you reach the stars by arguing until the flowers of the Lotus wane?"

"By arguing and working at the same time," the Lady of the Nyx Sector told him. "Well, thank you for your opinion. Here are the details of your funds for the next year."

Calico thanked the human and began to read the data-slate, which he noticed had been gene-coded for him.

"It has greatly increased, Lotus-Empress."

"We have sold quantities of Rashan plushies in the Suebi Sub-Sector recently to celebrate their...support in rebuilding their planets and adopting some reforms. And they are still very popular on Nyx, Wuhan, and the rest of the Sector."

"Ah." Great Lotus, he had been completely wrong, hadn't he? That would teach him a lesson, thinking he knew better than Friend Weaver...at least outside the field of spare parts and mechanics. "Good thanks, Friend. I am going to go to Fafnir Enclave and the shops to tell you what I will use the money for."

"The merchants of Floor 56 tell me that you are always welcome in their humble shops. They have new ribbons and goods for male and female Rashans alike."

"Floor 56 is good, but they are a bit too...exposed. You have tens of thousands of your youth waiting for me every time I descend there! For some reason I don't understand, they all want to picts with my fur and smile!"

Friend Weaver coughed.

"Ah yes. You might be able to avoid them today. There are large military parades on the Carmine Avenue. My subjects will be less interested in Rashans for the next few days. Just make sure to send me invoices for what you pay for within ten days. Once I formally return to military service, I won't have much time to answer every message, and that includes yours."

The door opened to reveal a young blonde-haired human female.

"Lady Basileia? He has arrived."

"Thank you Diana. I will go meet him in a second."

"An important visitor?" Calico asked as the door closed.

"You may know him as Archmagos Dominus Dominatus Belisarius Cawl."

"Oh," the Fist-of-Diamond touched the fur of his chest. "Yes, very important."

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Belisarius Cawl had not changed much in a decade, Taylor reflected, as she welcomed him into the secure room where their conversation was going to take place. A few mechadendrites had changed their implants' connection to the metallic body. Two of the previous digi-weapons had been replaced with new ones.

Then again, the Lady of Nyx hadn't changed at all, and unlike her Consort, she hadn't even required a rejuvenation session in one of the clinics she owned to achieve that result. Maybe twelve years was too short an amount of time to judge. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe the Emperor had truly made her immortal...immortal against old age, that is. Given how many dangerous weapons existed in this galaxy and the reality the Emperor himself was nearly dead on the Golden Throne, it was best to not believe being touched by a golden blessing was enough to grant you invincibility. Lelith Hesperax had taught her that lesson rather quickly during their one-sided fight in the collapse of the Commorragh pocket dimensions.

Silently, the insect-mistress activated over two dozen security systems and more than ten highly-advanced methods which would prevent anyone but herself, her two Dawnbreaker Guards, and Cawl himself from listening to this conversation.

"Archmagos Cawl. You were supposed to be here more than a year ago to coordinate for the preparations which would allow us to improve the Mechanicus' performance in Operation Stalingrad. I trust you have a good reason for this extremely significant tardiness."

He better have. Arithmancia Sultan had been extremely happy to see her point about 'Cawl is a genius unable to follow deadlines' vindicated, and knowing military realities, Taylor was going to be forced to put him in the Reserve Fleet, whether he wanted it or not. There simply wasn't any time to integrate his forces with the rest of Battle Group Volga.

"I have a good reason, yes," the Martian Tech-Priest replied levelly. "Your Council may have told you already, but I didn't arrive on the *Iron Revenant*."

"It was mentioned, yes. Some of your doctrinal opponents may have mentioned it was a way for you to show off the vastness of your resources."

Belisarius Cawl made a sound which could have been interpreted as a shrug for a non-Tech-Priest.

"Would I have really done that?" Certain questions, in her opinion as Basileia, didn't deserve an answer. "But as it so happens, the *Iron Revenant* is on its way to Mars. It is going to need at least a couple of years in the Ring of Iron's docks to repair the heavy battle-damage it suffered."

Taylor felt like the floor was beginning to open under her feet. Radical or not, there was no denying Cawl's flagship was a very dangerous warship, and the power and the range of its armaments were perfectly capable of destroying entire squadrons without encountering much resistance. And the *Iron Revenant* was an Ark Mechanicus, surpassing the average Battleship of the Imperial Navy in tonnage and firepower by a comfortable margin. That meant...

"Necrons. You found Necrons. Where?"

"About ninety light-years east of Nihilas, home of the Death Strike Astartes. Right at the edge of what is supposed to be the 'official' Sautekh territory. One of my...supporters, Archmagos Amontep, founded an outpost on a telluric planet. Mere weeks before I intended to join you at Nyx, I received an important message from him. He had apparently found a large deposit of Noctilith. Intrigued, I immediately sent him an astropathic message to inform him of my arrival, but when I arrived-"

"They were being attacked by the Necrons."

"Yes." Cawl confirmed, placing a mechadendrite against the closest servo-owl to project a hololithic image of a brown-dark planet which seemed to be...Golden Throne, were those nuclear explosions? "And in the time it took me to arrive at the planet, I was able to confirm three things. The first, which I'm sure you will be happy to know, is that the anti-teleportation jammers that were disseminated across the Mechanicus work. I was able to speak with Amontep, despite the numerous interferences of our ground-based enemies."

He was right, the Lady General admitted. It was very good news.

"And the two other points?"

"The initial limited mining digging had nothing to do with the awakening of the Necrons." A few Mechanicus cogs appeared on the projection, underlined in red light. A second later, the Necrons' complexes lit in green. And the two were nearly a quarter of the planet apart. "As you can see, the probability of the Mechanicus having awakened the dormant threat is below one percent. Naturally, it means someone else has given it the instruction to awaken...or something."

So it had begun. The Szarekhan commanders had decided to stop playing around and were beginning to wake more and more Necron phalanxes in preparation for the war.

"Just to be sure...they were Sautekh forces you fought on the world of-"

"Amontep II." Cawl finished, before elaborating. "Given that my supporter discovered it...I thought I could honour his memory."

"Archmagos Amontep is dead?"

"Archmagos Amontep, seventy percent of his forces, and twenty percent of the reinforcements I brought with me," the Archmagos Dominus did his equivalent of a cough. "While we emerged victorious, it was a Pyrrhic victory. And without my Sicarian Rustwalker assassins sabotaging the command centre of the Necrons, buying the Skitarii armies the time needed to blast apart their energy generators, none of us would have left that planet alive."

"Do I want to know the state of Amontep II after the...no doubt liberal usage of rad-weapons you resorted to?"

"No." The voice of Belisarius Cawl was dead serious. "You do not."

Taylor nodded absently before turning towards Gamaliel.

"Activate Case Red. Tell the Howling Griffons and the Inquisition I want every uninhabited world of the Sautekh Dynasty we have selected to be under attack in less than one hundred hours."

"It will be done as you command, my Lady," the Herald of Sanguinius saluted and swiftly left the room, replaced a second later by Puriel, just as Taylor was viewing several vids of the...the butchery which had happened on Amontep II. And though the Skitarii had certainly inflicted non-minor losses on the Necrons, the immense 'Dolmen Gates' had never stopped sending Necrons *away* from the battlefield.

"We are going to face these troops supported by the Ymga Monolith very soon."

"The odds of it approach one hundred percent." Cawl stared at her. "The Howling Griffons?"

"Their accords with the Ultramarines are that they don't fight by my side," Taylor reminded him. "But neither Valens nor his Ultramar mouthpiece ever said anything about engaging in a campaign of xenocide against the Sautekh Dynasty."

Admittedly, it was really getting into semantics, but the Howling Griffons were not officially part of Operation Stalingrad...even if Taylor obviously intended to thank them with the rest of her forces by the end of the campaign.

"Excellent. But will lone companies be able to fight their way through Necron defences to fire Exterminatus weapons?"

"Who said anything about lone companies?" The Howling Griffons had committed two-thirds of their fleet and six full Companies to the effort. Supported by a few Navy squadrons and other Mechanicus bombardment ships, this was an extermination hammer which was going to be directed against the Sautekh worlds...with one big exception.

Cawl went immobile before making a noise which could be content or surprise.

"Ah, I see. You have been very busy these last twelve years, Lady Weaver."

"So have you, Archmagos Dominus. Amontep II?"

"I ordered the majority of the Skitarii and Mechanicus survivors back to fortify themselves on the planet before continuing limited mining operations," the Radical Tech-Priest reported. "I already sent orders to Mars to provide me reinforcements, but it's going to take time. The Noctilith deposits belong to the Mechanicus, for what it's worth. I was unable to secure more than a few kilograms for testing before travelling in all urgency to transfer my authority to the *Zar-Quaesitor*."

In the short-term, a few kilograms were completely insufficient, especially compared to the one ton of Rogue trader Foronika Argovon. In the long-term...

"How large are the deposits on Amontep II?"

"I was hardly able to do a proper mining study...only the first mining site of Archmagos Amontep was-"

"The first mining site, then."

"One hundred million tons of 85%-pure Noctilith. Probability ninety-eight point seven percent."

It was good she was seated, because her legs had a minor moment of weakness here.

Well, at least it gave her a plan B in case Operation Stalingrad ended with them unable to claim the resources of the Ymga Monolith. Between the system in the Nephilim Sector and now Amontep II, they should have all the resources they desired to produce Aethergold in large quantities and experiment with it a bit.

The next minutes were spent discussing the intricacies of the future agreements which would be signed between Nyx and Cawl. Since the deceased Archmagos Amontep and his disciples had sworn themselves to the infamous old Tech-Priest, Amontep II was essentially now owned by Cawl, though a senior Archmagos would have to be sent...maybe a lot of Archmagi.

The Fabricator-General wasn't going to thank her for recognising Cawl's claims upon a Noctilith Mining World, but hopefully more Aethergold being sent to Mars to protect Olympus Mons would satisfy him.

"Now for the orders you made a few years ago." Cawl opened the mid-sized red-black strongbox on a hover-field that she had almost forgotten after all this debate.

The first object to be revealed was a gun the size of a Plasma Pistol, but one look at it was sufficient to know it wasn't something an officer normally had. Instead of the blue light managing to escape the reinforced transparent top of the container, the energy for this weapon was red-orange.

The rest of the weapon was difficult to distinguish from other parade armaments, since Cawl had plated it gold everywhere.

"The Adrathic Destructor you asked for, Lady Weaver. I know it is safe in your hands, but I will warn you nonetheless...this is not a weapon for training. I tested weapons of similar potency in null-zone conditions, and...there aren't many things which don't result in your target being erased from existence."

"Thank you. I promise I will use on targets which are beyond redemption."

Belisarius Cawl nodded, before handing her several models of grenades, most of them completely forbidden to any guardsman or guardswoman who didn't at least hold the rank of General.

"And that," the Archmagos Dominus said while revealing what could be nothing else but a large blade, "is one of my best creations this millennium. Adamantine, Adamantium, a crystal of Aethergold, and several priceless alloys recovered from Terra. I fashioned it to resemble the Nebula's Shard and modified some construction secrets of the Silent Sisterhood's blades, since I knew it was destined to be the replacement for your psychic sword in environments where there are doubts about its serviceability."

The golden-winged parahuman grinned as her hands touched the hilt of the blade. Many years spent training with close-quarters weapons gave a lot of insights about formidable weapons, and Taylor knew instinctively she had one in her hands.

"I leave you the honour of naming these weapons. I was a bit pressed for time..."

"Don't worry, Archmagos. I'm sure I will be able to find one before impaling my first enemy on it."

**Regina-Consort** **Wei Cao**

"Yes, your spies did a good job. We did it exactly like that."

Wei would not have admitted such a detail to anyone, but by now, most of it was ancient history for someone of Gutenberg's rank.

"I thought the plan was to rotate every six standard months between Nyx and Wuhan."

"It was," the Regina-Consort confirmed. "Like a lot of things, it wasn't really enforced once we had to deal with the consequences on each world. We quickly realised that when it comes to dealing with reforms, one year was the minimum necessary to institute new laws and make sure our subordinates weren't facing too many insurmountable political and social walls."

A spider rushed through an alley on their right, carrying a basket of fruits freshly picked from the trees behind them.

"We spent four years at Wuhan all in all," the Governor of said Hive World told the Vicequeen. "And six years were lived here at Nyx. The other two years were spent on several diplomatic journeys, mostly Theta in the Marches, Fay, and Vijayanagara."

"Oh? So you spent your honeymoon on Lemuria?"

Wei smiled ironically.

"One month out of three we stayed in that system," the Wuhanese-born noble admitted. "The other two we had a lot of problems to deal with...neither Taylor nor I were directly involved in the Atlantis Purges, but we spoke a lot with claimant-Pontifexes and claimant-Governors and had to find solutions to stem the refugee crisis."

And while the agitation – a polite word to describe what had to be a very ugly Ministorum rebellion combined with a popular uprising – had ended, there remained a lot of problems in the planets of the Atlantis Sector. Like who was going to hold the title of Lord/Lady Atlantis.

"I know the seat of ruler for the Sector is still empty," Marianne Gutenberg chimed in as if she had read her thoughts. Which was impossible of course, since there was a Librarian Space Marine in the garden. The Vicequeen was just very well-informed, in addition to being one of the foremost beauties of the Imperium.

"One can't hide anything from you," Wei chuckled lightly. "Yes, the succession of the unlamented Cardinal of Atlantis. It's...complicated."

"As always," the blonde in her white dress nodded knowingly. "Let me guess. The Ecclesiarchy is trying its best to convince your wife the treachery and disasters created by the former Lord of Atlantis did not severely impact the loyalty of the Adeptus Ministorum as a whole. And other Adeptuses are urging Nyx to support a return to secular rule of the Sector."

"An extremely simplified summary, but the core of the political infighting is there," Wei confirmed.

"I'm really surprised the last loyalist Pontifexes didn't try to support the Atlantis diocese being swallowed into the Nyx Sector." The blue-eyed ruler of Solingen remarked gently.

"Oh they have already tried twice...no, has it been it three or four times?" Wei shrugged before disregarding the matter. "On this point, Taylor was strongly against the idea from the very beginning, and I supported, support, and will support her wholeheartedly. The Sector is big enough as it is, and if we have our way with it, Suebi will be the last 'annexation' in our lifetimes. There are only so many Sub-Sectors you can add until your administration system begins to reach its limits and your realm become ungovernable."

Marianne laughed quietly for half a minute.

"You realise that most of the Adepts on the Throneworld would sell their souls for having the opportunity to add a Sector to their powerbases, right?"

"I know. And it is one of the reasons we aren't going to do it."

Besides, between the traditions, the social differences, and the fact many of the Suebi worlds had entirely different law codes when they were transferred to Nyx rule, it had been far from easy to prevent economic and political disaster in the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector.

Keeping doing that while trying to replicate the exploit in the Atlantis Sector would be...what was this word Lady Dragon had used?...ah, yes, *hubris*.

"The other being the example of Ultramar?"

"You are too perceptive for your own good." Wei smiled.

"A family gift, I'm told," Marianne joked. "But more seriously?"

"There's no denying the refusal of the Ultramarines to have anything to do with us caused numerous headaches." The Regina-Consort admitted. "The sons of Guilliman don't control all the main Warp trails in the Eastern Fringe, but they have dominion over a large area of space, and the muster of several Battle Groups had to be made discreetly for...many reasons. Having them on our side would have been an enormous help. As things stand, my wife and I have...well, found several reasons to be less than fond of Macragge."

Politically, she was sure this had led to the political choices made in the last decade. Nyx would not follow Ultramar in creating a miniature empire of its own. Because, as the Ultramarines had made clear, there was always the risk of becoming isolationist and forgetting you were part of a much larger Imperium, and that unity was necessary to fight off the monsters lurking in the darkness.

"And the Great Matter?"

"You heard of the 'Artemis-Terryn' incident?"

"I have, yes." Marianne shook her head before baring her teeth. "And I want to hear every detail about it."

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

The Grand Strategium couldn't be said to be very orderly when Isley made his entrance. Between all the conversations, the flag officers arguing with each other, the chiefs of staff asking for data-slates which came too slowly for their sense of self-importance, the Tech-Priests babbling in binary language, and other forms of loud arguments, the entrance of a single Space Marine wasn't likely to attract attention.

"CHAPTER MASTER ISLEY TO SEE THE BASILEIA!"

Unless of course one Dreadnought made sure your presence couldn't be more official and noticed if you pushed the button activating the war sirens.

"For this stunt, you can go outside and wait with the young battle-brothers waiting for me," the Lord of the Heracles Wardens ordered in a tone that tolerated no refusal.

"I COMPLY, I COMPLY."

Seconds later, the incident was almost forgotten as all the 'spectators' of the Strategium went back to doing their usual activities, and the 'dance' of orders, counter-orders, and updates was resuming at full speed, leaving Jeremiah the leisure to approach the Basileia.

Taylor Hebert must have had enough of her bureaucratic duties for the day, because right now, over fifty beetles and two dozen Tech-Priests were writing down an impressive number of commands and instructions under her dictation.

"-and the current situation makes your Universe-class Mass Conveyor all the more important. It is my command that you return to Baal as fast as possible to deliver the strategic cargo. Use your best judgement to choose between staying as part of the assets defending the moons or returning to Nyx, with the knowledge few escorts are available for the latter. End of message."

Ah so Rogue Trader Amanda Salvia – formerly Alyena Sinblade – was still operating in northern Ultima close to the homeworld of Sanguinius. And apparently the aftereffects of her Aethergold-binding were still as stringent as they had been fourteen years ago, since the ex-seductress was reliable and loyal.

The next orders confirmed this was a new series of commands for the Rogue Traders working far outside the Nyx Sector. Violent Warp Storms having delayed his flotilla's return again and again, Lord Dennis Peters had made a detour to Nocturne and several systems, using his privileges to increase the water reserves of the Salamanders. This 'service' would undoubtedly bring rare ores and gems in return, not that they were really necessary by this point; of all the Rogue Traders tied by writ and oath to Nyx, 'Clockblocker' was certainly the wealthiest by now.

The case of Wolfgang Bach was not discussed, but Isley wasn't surprised, since the young man's warships were currently being repaired in the docks of *Jaghatai's Celerity*, and the man himself was assigned to the *Enterprise* together with his lovers. The moment Operation Stalingrad was over, he likely would head back to the Marathon graveyard and continue the Terrathens Quest.

Magdalena Orpheus, once more venturing into the darkness of the Nostramo Sector to dig up more adamantium and wealth, was warned of the incoming war and commanded to take refuge at Triplex Phall should enemy opposition be encountered – she had an Astartes Strike Cruiser with her as always, but it wouldn't be sufficient to discourage an aggressive opponent from engaging her flotilla of ore-transports.

As for Foronika Argovon – the impoverished woman who seemed destined to be the newest addition to their ranks – it wasn't her who was contacted, but several Forge Worlds Nyx traded with, the Basileia beginning negotiations for the service of multi-purpose Explorator vessels and a few specialist Magi.

There were other messages for the Rogue Traders which had come with the Ventrillian nobles, though those were mostly exemptions from past debts and suggestions for future diplomatic accords.

All of this was done in roughly fifteen minutes, with the orders sure to be transmitted by Astropathic choirs within two hours. Jeremiah was sure that in a great number of Sectors, arriving to this point would have taken more than twenty days...if the powers-that-be had a sudden bout of competence.

"Chapter Master Isley," the insect-mistress greeted him once her long tirade was over – and the glass of water handed to her was emptied.

"Lady Weaver," the Heracles Warden nodded back. "I have contacted the Lamenters' fleet. Archmagos Cawl was right. Exactly two days ago, a sizeable fleet which corresponds exactly to the description of military assets that disappeared from Amontep II emerged from the Dolmen Gates of the Ymga Monolith."

Boosting the already-sizeable fleets fighting the greenskins by fifteen additional Battleships and their Cruiser escorts.

"Good."

"Good isn't exactly the word I would choose...my Lady."

The smile he received was positively carnivorous.

"The Logis analysing the data Cawl gave us agree we likely deprived the Necrons of fifteen more Battleships. In addition to the Strike Forces we are deploying against the different Sautekh worlds of the Eastern Fringe. This force reinforced the Ymga Monolith, yes. But I am going to make sure there is nothing else to reinforce them with. Amontep II was certainly a Sautekh-Szarekhan secret no one but this battlestation's commander was supposed to know about. Once revealed – and crippled – this card loses a lot of its value."

"True." Isley acknowledged. "There is one more piece of good news as well. Chapter Master Yarhibol reports the Replicator Forges weren't directed in the direction of this new fleet. He can't be sure, but-"

"It's highly likely these nightmarish devices are at last running out of strategic materials to duplicate the Necron armadas." The supreme commander of Operation Stalingrad finished. "How fare the Orks?"

"Badly," Jeremiah replied. "The Lamenters haven't been able to find any additional fleets to throw into the Quarantine Zone, and the arrival of the Amontep fleet caught them off-guard. I don't think they will survive for much longer, and that is if the Necrons don't use the same planet-killer weapons they unleashed four years ago."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing we don't need them any longer. Your Space Marines are ready?"

"We are ready for Case Golden Fleece." The name was a bit ridiculous, but the mythology parallel was not entirely inaccurate...

**Somewhere on Nyx Quintus**

**3.092.310M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

No table had been installed in the vast room.

It would have been a waste, for no one would ever come back to sit around it a second time, and Odysseus was rather certain many of the participants would insist for the furniture to be burned in order to erase most of the psychic clues they'd ever been there.

No official summons had been made.

Only an Inquisitor of one of the thirty Conclaves in the Samarkand Quadrant had the authority, resources, and means to walk through the multiple layers of security measures, including but not limited to Inquisitorial Stormtroopers, kill-ships of His Most Holy Majesty's Inquisition, veterans of the Adeptus Astartes, assassins, and elite Acolytes.

It was not paranoia which had led them to take these measures. Though they were largely in the zone of Moth-illumination, the Archenemy had nonetheless tried to disrupt this conference. Two transports had had to be intercepted and boarded by the Brothers of the Red in the last few days, and each time the Space Marines had exterminated thousands of cultists whose goal was to eliminate as many Inquisitors as they could.

This was just the latest batch of attempts which had been thrown against the Nyx Sector in a decade. The Eternal War between the servants of the God-Emperor and the fell abominations of Chaos continued.

In appearance, nothing had changed.

In reality, everything had. Odysseus didn't trust the words of heretics, not even when they were burning in an Aethergold-induced pyre. But even he, a Lord Inquisitor with centuries of experience in this field, had been surprised by the...sheer desperation, for lack of any other word, some of the prisoners had publicly manifested after their neutralisation and their transfer into Inquisitorial custody.

The Black Crusade was coming, but even Lords of the Ordo Malleus had to acknowledge there was more than anger and hatred lurking in the eyes of the Damned when they spoke of the future to come – with the notable exception of the ambitious slime worshipping chaotic change and lies. Those always believed they would come out on top whatever happened, and the current situation wasn't convincing these traitors to adopt different opinions. 'Chaos is the ladder of change and ambition' one of them had the gall to tell him before his soul burned in golden flames.

The Black Crusade was upon them, in fact. It was time to see if decades of preparation were going to be enough against the hosts of the Lost and the Damned.

"We have lost contact with the Cadia, Agripinaa, and Belis Corona Sectors," the senior representative of the Samarkand Conclave honouring them with his presence today affirmed darkly. Like Odysseus himself, he was a member of the Ordo Malleus. "The Archenemy, through an odious number of rituals we won't speculate about, is sending a sort of...Warp miasma, obscuring the Holy Light of the Astronomican before the true assault begins. Losses in psykers, both Astropaths and others, are still relatively low, but we are unable to re-establish contact."

"May the God-Emperor protect the courageous souls who hold the Gate in His Name." A member of the Atlantis Conclave muttered. Odysseus didn't comment upon the gold medallion representing an aquila above a spider he was carrying openly.

"The time of deliberations is over." Odysseus said. "I will go with Operation Stalingrad. My successor to lead the Ordo Malleus for the Nyx Sector has been chosen, and Inquisitor Pedro de Moray will take over the role of Lord of the Conclave in my absence."

In all likelihood, the Inquisitor of the Ordo Obsoletus would serve that role well after that. Stalingrad would likely be his last true duty to the God-Emperor before he retired. The last rejuvenations – specifically tailored for his body – had been a boon, but not one which could be replicated indefinitely. His vitality would fail him again, and in the field, slowness was too often punished by death if you were lucky, something worse if you weren't.

Rafaela spoke after him, and her speech was similar to his – minus the Lord of the Conclave part. As agreed long before today, Boniface Capua and Henry-Charles III Severus added their voices to hers. Cleopatra Coral would have too, but she was already in the Eastern Fringe, her ship necessary for conducting and overseeing Exterminatus weapons.

"Thus the Nyx Conclave will do its most holy duty to the Golden Throne."

There was a respectful moment of silence. And then the members of the Samarkand, Ifrit, Atlantis, and other Conclaves spoke one after another to proclaim their commitment and explain the assets they had arrived with to pursue the fight against the heretics, traitors, mutants, daemons, and xenos.

**Formicarium**

**3.095.310M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Having a baby Mainz Cat in her arms was an interesting experience; it had been a very long time since there was an animal close to her she couldn't mentally command.

And the contact of her hands with the white fur was a bit strange too; after so many years touching her spiders, beetles, crabs, centipedes, moths, and more members of her swarm, the proximity with a baby feline destined to become a very large tiger had an air of unreality.

But Ingrid, the name the Mainz Cat was answering to when it suited her, was getting bigger, and for all the increased strength given by the Emperor's gifts, Taylor knew she wasn't going to stay in her arms for long, adorable purring or not. A 'cat' could only get so big before it was too heavy and too cumbersome for you to consider this method of transportation.

Then she banished the thought, returning to her assimilation of what Archmagos Biologis Rob-Eta-Leo Osier had said.

"So the 'Green Bacta' destined to the Custodes is proving to be impossible to effectively mass-produce."

"Yes, Chosen of the Omnissiah." The Tech-Priest with a metallic mask looking nearly human readily confirmed. "As you can see by these numbers," a finger was pointed at the multitude of hololithic graphics present in the command centre, "the production output of Green Bacta didn't increase in 309M35."

"You were still able to deliver two cubic metres of it to the Ten Thousand," Hark-Alpha Dipodies protested. "I call it progress."

"But to achieve these numbers, I had to keep fifty of my best Genetors constantly focused on its creation!" The Master of Bacta immediately countered. "And since this is very highly-sensitive work, training new Tech-Priests for this critical duty takes a lot of production hours, and the Omnissiah knows I can't exactly compensate for lost time. Creating Green Bacta is definitely turning out to be more Artisan elite work than Red and Blue Bacta ever required."

The problem, and Taylor didn't feel the need to say it aloud for the two members of the Mechanicus Council had acknowledged it time and time again, was that stopping Green Bacta production was politically impossible at this point. While in her persona of Living Saint and Lady Nyx she rarely asked anything of the golden-clad Watchers of the Throne, the informal influence justified continuing production.

"I want options when I return from Operation Stalingrad," the insect-mistress announced contemplatively before caressing the pointed ears of Ingrid, and the two high-ranked Tech-Priests nodded. "Red Bacta and Blue Bacta?"

"We produced two hundred and three cubic metres of Red Bacta last year, and twenty-five cubic metres of Blue Bacta for the Adeptus Astartes. As you ordered, seventy percent of all Nyxian strategic reserves were transported to the muster points of the different Battle Groups and allied forces."

"Which leaves in reserve?"

Rob-Eta-Leo Osier gave a number. It was less than Taylor had expected.

"I thought we could leave a larger tactical stock...just in case, you understand."

"Impossible, the Logis Strategos were very clear on that." The Master of Bacta adamantly refused. "Much as the prospect is unappealing, the 310M35 batch will play the role of strategic reserve. Since all predictions agree the danger to unescorted convoys is going to be extreme this year and the Adeptus Astartes is going to be fighting on a considerable number of theatres, it is not that much of a drawback. Do not worry, Chosen of the Omnissiah, a few months and the strategic Bacta reserve will be completely replenished."

The commander of Operation Stalingrad internally grimaced, but approved silently. After all, she had placed these Tech-Priests at the Council because they weren't afraid to tell her what they thought was the most logical course of action, and for a decade she had had no reason to complain. It was thanks to them – well, them and the Catachan Queen-ants, of course – that the forces deployed had the minimum quantities of Bacta the diverse plans called for.

Though if a human system was devastated either by the Ymga Monolith or the Black Crusade, things were not going to be pretty...but she would have to accept it. Unless ants were allowed to colonise more moons and planets than she truly felt comfortable with, the quantities of Bacta would remain strategically limited.

"All right." The Basileia said aloud. "The 'Silent Bacta' project?"

"For the moment, it is a complete failure," the Archmagos Biologis replied bluntly, "at least unlike the psykers we tested at first, injecting the Bacta to the Sisters of Silence is doing...exactly nothing."

"Motive Force and Great Cog be praised, it is really a fascinating development," Hark-Alpha Dipodies supported his colleague's words. "The 'Pariah power' of the Anathema Psykana looks like it degrades the bio-healing the moment the Bacta injection enters contact with the skin or blood. We are pursuing several paths, and my best apprentices have already written several works on this subject I will be pleased to present you with after the military operations are concluded...but for now we have no Bacta solution for the Sisters of Silence, or any person sharing their...psychic-gene peculiarities."

"Too bad," Taylor commented. The numbers of Sisters of Silence has nicely increased these last several years – though most of the Sector was utterly ignorant of this fact; their powers and the priceless skills they had required leaving them out of sight, out of mind. Plus Lisa and the other Mosura Moths really didn't enjoy their presence. The diva in particular seemed to have gained the peculiar ability of knowing instantly whenever a Sister of Silence was on the same planet as her. And like with a lot of things, Lisa wasn't shy about sending a messenger spider or two to inform her of this 'discovery' every time it happened. "Where do we stand with the gene-seed of the Adeptus Astartes?"

**Ant-Queen Muscat-Lightning-Fang**

"Glory to the Webmistress!"

*Yes, yes, Artemis. Glory to our High Queen of the Swarm, Our Golden Mistress*.

Muscat-Lightning-Fang knew the Voice-Spider could communicate mentally, and sometimes she thought the 'Adjutant-General' did this just because she wanted the other members of the Swarm to hear her voice.

*We have the honey you asked for. Do you have the silk?*

*My sisters are landing with it as we speak. Ooh! Honey!*

The great spider – not significantly larger than her, but still – rushed towards the containers and contemplated them like the red robes worshipped precious Bacta.

Muscat-Lightning-Fang eagerly watched the spectacle, knowing servo-owls were circling above their heads and would be used to create numerous pieces of evidence for the Great Mistress.

The Ant-Queen didn't know why these spiders loved honey so much, but they did, and Artemis was the most enthusiastic in consuming it.

*It is all you will get for the duration of the campaign. So ration yourself.*

*What?*

The Ant-Queen felt the sheer horror transmitted by the mental link established for this exchange-negotiation-teaching.

*But I saw entire tons of it being transported to the supply ships*!

*Those are for Lisa and the other members of the Swarm, Adjutant-General. Order of the High Queen of the Swarm, May She Reign Over Us Forever.*

*Praise the Webmistress*, Artemis concluded instinctively before agitating her legs and narrowing her silver eyes. *But rationing*?

*You must eat a more balanced diet.*

*I eat a balanced diet! Pizza and honey is a balanced diet!*

*No, it is not. We were already forced to ban you from our main Bacta-Hive one year ago. Be reasonable.*

There was a lot of mental grumblings inside the favourite of the High Queen.

*Fine, fine. Vegetables?*

*Vegetables, meat, and many nutritious foods your army will need to serve the High Queen.*

*I will not forget.*

Muscat-Lightning-Fang replied by mentally sending a deep emotion of amusement.

*We produce the best food of the Swarm. Do your best...or worst, Artemis.*

More mental grumbling followed, before the Voice-Spider accepted the inevitable and decided some honey was better than none.

*Your forces are ready*?

*Everyone is ready. We have already escorted the Ambull-brutes to the Landers. Stupid brutes. They are lucky their tunnelling-abilities make them indispensable, otherwise I am certain the High Queen would have disposed of them.*

*They are...inefficient when the Webmistress isn't present to control them. I was unable to teach them anything about operational art. Breakthrough and trying to eat the enemies are all they know...and they didn't need my teachings for that*.

The Voice-Spider paused.

*The Webmistress has finished her meeting with her metal-human-servants. I must return to her side.*

*Is it true she came here with a furry which does not belong to the Swarm?*

*It is true. But do not be worried. Except being furry, this white felid has no qualities to speak of. It is disobedient. It is unable to recognise the majesty of the Swarm or to listen to us. Its time in the arms of the Webmistress may last a few days, but it will end soon. Glory to the Swarm and the Webmistress!*

*Glory to the Swarm, Artemis.*

\*\*\*\*

*Political feuds between Nyx and important Imperial Navy bases in Ultima Segmentum ensured three predominant opinions spread throughout the last years preceding Operation Stalingrad. First, Her Celestial Highness was trying to subordinate the Aeronautica Imperialis to the Astra Militarum, or at least to create a variant which would be playing second fiddle to the Imperial Guard. Secondly, except for the Brunhilda superiority fighter, Nyx was uninterested in building the finest bombers and atmospheric fighters for the pilots transferred from Samarkand's other Sectors contracted for the campaign. Third, the Living Saint's Guard background resulted in an impressive lack of foresight where strategic bombing was concerned.*

*Needless to say, the first two points were complete lies. The Aeronautica Imperialis preserved its independence, though the methods of recruitments and financial boons drastically decreased the domination of the upper-classes in a field the 'local' Imperial Navy's dynasties had always regarded as theirs. Obviously, men and women from the middle-classes tended to be more loyal to Her Celestial Highness than their 'betters'. Add the catastrophic losses of the Ork Wars in the Samarkand Quadrant of the time, the butchery of Commorragh, and the meritocratic policy of the 300-310s in the Nyx Sector and its neighbouring client. Many Air Marshals and Admirals heavily disliked the turn events were taking, and ordered the spreading of propaganda in consequence.*

*No, the Brunhilda superiority fighter was not the only new airborne war machine to rise to the skies. It was the most visible though, with thousands assigned to Battle Group Volga alone. And unlike the evolved variants of Marauder Bombers and Thunderbolt Fighters, it presented an entirely new design, bearing traits* *akin to the long-disappeared Xiphon fighter, except for the 'nose' which gave it an 'aquila look', by its pilots' own admission.*

*The truth was, the Brunhilda had never supposed to be the only 'brand-new' design introduced by the Aeronautica during Operation Stalingrad. But while the performance of the Indigan Praefects would remain as impressive as ever, the research program for a new Bomber sponsored by Battlefleet Indiga became the very example of an industrial catastrophe. Political intervention, economic pressure, increasingly unrealistic expectations on the parts of several Magi and Archmagi, funds mishandling...the list was long and not limited to a single issue. It was a sad reminder that while the program of the Invincible-class 'Fast Battleships' was no more, all the stupidities which had led to its inception were still very much present at Kar Duniash and its tributary Battlefleet bases. And when the failure was finally acknowledged as complete, it was far, far too late to do anything but deploy the 'classic' war machines available.*

*The critics of specialists accusing Lady Weaver of not believing in the Aeronautica's duty to conduct strategic bombing, however, were perfectly right. Then again, the sheer number of Marauder Destroyer Bombers present in the order of battle of every Battle Group was a large clue close support missions were going to be prioritized over hypothetical long-ranged aerial offensives on 'vulnerable' enemy strongholds. Once again, it would be the Enemy which would reveal if the opponents to this philosophy were right or not.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Edition, 310M41.

**Nyx**

**Hive** **Euboea**

**White Palace**

**3.102.310M35**

**Commander Freya Brasidas**

Freya had expected the familiar dinner to be bad. She had, after all, completely ignored the 'suggestions' of her father and volunteered for Operation Stalingrad, refusing to take the bait of exemption. Worse – from his perspective – she had been one of the one hundred confirmed veterans chosen after an unofficial council of the higher-ups.

The pilot of the Brunhilda *White Lance II* had expected a long bout of arguing and an even longer period of having to justify herself.

What a shock that she wasn't the one being shouted at this evening.

"Do you realise what you've done?" Valdemar Brasidas, Duke of White Shield, fourth most powerful Duke of Hive Euboea – by default, since with the execution of two of his peers a decade ago, there were only four Dukes in the entire Hive – was so furious he had stopped shouting to glare. For anyone who knew him, it was a very bad sign.

"It is only a military training school," her little sister Annika replied unrepentantly, her long white hair arranged to cover half of her face insufficient to hide a satisfied smirk. "I don't know what you're so worried about, *father*."

"A military training school which in the last four years has become known to physically and mentally prepare young girls to join the Templar Sororitas and other Basileia-approved organisations," her youngest brother, Valdemar-Erland, voiced in a tone which was constantly alternating between flattery and sycophancy. "You might as well announce your vows to pledge your allegiance to the Living Saint, *sister*."

And he began to serve himself a glass of three hundred years-old amasec.

"I don't see where the problem is."

Valdemar-Erland was in the middle of drinking, and the surprise was almost sufficient to give him a heart attack. As it was, he spat out the amasec onto the previously immaculate white tablecloth, and the coughing was impressive afterwards.

"You are a daughter of House Brasidas." Their father declared icily.

"For how long?" Annika asked. "One of our dear cousins is due a trial with the Adeptus Arbites. And I may be young, but even I know that when the government decides they have enough evidence to try you, it's the Penal Legions or a few years of heavy labour in the public works...if you're lucky."

"You are an impertinent child that should have been more attentive when your tutors taught you your duties to this family," as always, her eldest brother played the role of the attack mastiff.

"Where are mother's collections of paintings? Where are the hundreds of soldiers and servants we could count upon?" Annika rose from her chair. "Not in this palace, that's for certain. I prefer living a life of adventure and action, trying to regain some fortune. I don't know if I really have the temperament to be a Templar Sororitas-"

"You don't." Freya interjected with no small amount of humour. "I have seen the battle-sisters of the Silver Rose, and believe me Annika, they are more respectful of the Ecclesiarchy than you will ever be."

"Then I will try to impress other potential powerful women when the Sanguinala Trials are held next," Annika shrugged, and once again, Freya was surprised how...free and detached from true nobility obligations her sister was. Freer than she had ever been before formally entering the Aeronautica Imperialis. "I don't think the Guard is for me, but since our generation will be the one coming after an important military campaign, I think there will be a lot of opportunities to seize."

"Absolutely not."

If their father had been enraged before, now his face was really frightening by its intensity.

"You will not serve that parvenu of Governor. We are Brasidas. We bow to no one-"

"Except when it is time to lick the shoes of Prince-Magister Justinian for more funds to compensate for the loss of our traditional contracts to rising Cartels, of course," Annika interrupted sweetly before marching in direction of the white-painted doors.

"If you walk through that door, I will disinherit you."

Blue eyes shifted to stare at Freya.

"The same ultimatum applies to you, Freya. It is time you stop playing this ridiculous farce of Aeronautica pilot. Your duty is here, not shooting xenos on some forsaken battlefield no one will care about in a decade."

Okay, this one she hadn't seen coming. Then again, her little sister's decision had also caught her off-guard.

Maybe she had stayed away from her family for too long...at least from those who mattered.

Her sister had stopped at the doors. Not because she was indecisive; you could shout a lot of insults at a Brasidas, but their line was not known for hesitating.

Neither was she. The ultimatum was new, but she had already made her choice, hadn't she?

Freya seized the crystal glass before her, emptied it of the amasec – it would be a shame to waste it – and then threw the glass against the wall behind her, where it shattered.

"I leave for Operation Stalingrad. Feel free to disinherit me, I am still a Baroness on my own merits. Heroine of Commorragh, remember?"

And the two sisters left the ancestral home of House Brasidas hand in hand. They would never return.

**Hive Athena**

**3.104.310M35**

**Judge Missy Byron**

"So Dennis won't join you for your little military campaign."

"I think I told you that several weeks ago, Missy. And could you please stop playing with that gavel?"

"Why?" the Shaker smiled. "You play with your insects all the time, and no one says anything about it."

The golden-winged woman huffed before rolling her eyes.

"It's one of the perks of being recognised as a Living Saint. And you know it."

"What a pity. I'm thinking it would be extremely useful in silencing some idiots when they're dragged in front of me for a little trial."

Taylor seemed completely unconvinced by her reasoning.

"Missy, half of the time, you yourself personally drag the loud-mouthed nobles into court to judge them. I don't think gaining saintly status would convince the accused to be more respectful of your authority."

"We might never know. And my gavel was really useful on Thorkilsen Brasidas, I will inform you."

"The cretin tied to the Duke of White Shield?" She nodded to confirm that was indeed the one. "I wonder how he managed to avoid being purged for so long, given how many stupidities he committed in the last several months."

"We had much bigger fish to fry?" Missy proposed rhetorically, though she knew it wasn't the entire story. No, the reality was, the 'Exalted Baron' had not dared do egregious things as long as the hammer of justice slammed upon thousands of nobles, but as the devastating upheavals of the Wuhanese 'reforms' faded into the past, there were people who believed the iron fist of the Arbites had rusted.

There was no other explanation why Brasidas had decided to release several cubic metres of toxic substances into the river next to his manufactorums, breaking nearly all environmental laws formulated and enforced by the Nyx government. Worse – for him – he had done so at the moment a Mechanicus Biologis survey team was doing a routine – and unannounced – inspection further downriver.

One crime being all the excuse needed to really, really look into his affairs, she had rushed east of Hive Euboea and easily noticed illegal disposal of toxic compounds was just the first crime in a long, long list. Brasidas and his main accomplices had tried to flee. It had been their final mistake, and the trial had lasted a single day.

"I fear this is a self-perpetuating cycle, seriously," the younger parahuman told the Basileia. "The nobility and other leadership will always have to be watched with a hawk's gaze...or several. Power is a drug for them. With time, they grow arrogant, they think they know better than you, and they begin to test the limits."

"That's a very nice speech," her boss assured her. "Now tell me what you *really* want."

This time it was her turn to huff. Too often, Taylor Hebert was really too clever...

"As you said, Dennis will return soon, assuming the Warp Storms delaying him vanish as you expect."

"They will," there was no doubt in the insect-mistress' voice. "I think our good friend the Rogue Trader met these problems only because the Ruinous Powers desired that he didn't participate in the showdown to come."

"That is...frightening."

"It is utterly stupid," Taylor answered bluntly. "Most of Dennis' flotilla is in need of long-overdue maintenance after all these years; Dennis may have participated with his Seneschal, but the starships under his command wouldn't have. In addition to this, the Salamanders which went with him for the first part of his journey have long since returned and been assigned to other commands. But if the Enemy wants to waste its strength on operations which won't decide anything for the next few years, I am not going to tell them to stop."

Missy rolled her shoulders and petted the large feline animal which was waiting to be petted on the elevated couch next to them.

"Yes...well, whether Dennis is here or not, I'm sure he won't be of much help for the bureaucratic work. So I wondered if I you could assign me one of your 'Adjutant-Spiders' to help with the workload?"

The expression she received in return held a lot of undisguised humour.

"Where is the girl who three years ago swore to me my arachnid servants wouldn't be able to solve the eternal bane of paperwork?"

"Shush." Once upon a time, she would have blushed, but she had long since learned to not present such an easy 'target'. "I admit I was wrong. Now can I hire one, please?"

"Fine," Taylor agreed after enduring her imploring eyes for a few seconds. "But Bellona is busy restoring the Arena of Blades with the Mechanicus; I won't recall her. You will have to choose from among the younger ones which have been declared ready to serve."

The smile grew larger.

"I will warn you in advance, I will ask my personnel to take picts of you and your Rashan fighting against crime with a loud spider in tow."

Missy groaned loudly. Of course she would.

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

"I understand what the Second Primarch was trying to do, I really do. But it wasn't a battle he and his Legion could win."

None of the eight Chapter Masters composing the majority of the audience objected. Like everyone in this room, they had watched and analysed the one-sided slaughter.

"In hindsight it is always easy to proclaim it, of course. But the Second Legion went into the null-zone too deeply when they had little idea what they were dealing with. No, let's be honest. They had no idea what they were facing. And this lack of information was their death."

A nod to the Tech-Priests in the room, and several hololithic images flashed into existence.

"The biggest tactical advantage enjoyed by the Necrons over Mankind is their ability to teleport aboard our warships whenever they want. They don't need to wait for the void shields to be brought down."

"An advantage you have neutralised by installing jammers aboard every starship mustered for Operation Stalingrad," Ancient Rylanor declared calmly.

"Yes," Taylor confirmed. "It is not perfect, of course. First, obviously, this jammer must stay intact whatever the cost. The Battleships and critical hulls received two to three for obvious reasons, but there is a reason I assigned each a team of Tech-Priests. These jammers must stay intact at all costs, I can't insist on this enough. If they are deactivated, sabotaged, or suffer malfunctions, this battle will turn into a general massacre. The Second Legion barely managed to repel the initial assault on their first fleet with catastrophic casualties, and they had more Astartes than we did in Battle Group Volga."

"And the second point?" Agiel Izaz politely inquired.

"The second point is that we can't deploy any Battle Group not belonging to Operation Stalingrad against the Necrons." The insect-mistress explained. "Their lack of Aegis Battlecruisers would make them dangerously weak for an open battle with the Necron battleline, but their lack of teleportation-jammers makes these unprepared Battlefleets a disaster-in-waiting."

It was not something she enjoyed saying aloud, but the truth was the truth. The forces prepared for Operation Stalingrad were the only available forces ready to stand against the Ymga Monolith with non-insignificant chances of victory. If other forces were thrown into the battle, it was going to unravel into butchery.

"Next we have the Replicator Forges. Which for all their construction hiatus, seem to have regained some vigour in the last several days. Chapter Master Isley?"

"The assets for Golden Fleece are ready." The Heracles Warden smiled. "We may have to adapt and shift a few formations on the fly, but I think the disposition of the Necron forces offers us about seventy percent odds of success."

"That high?" High Marshal Barbarossa wondered out loud. "Isn't that a bit optimistic? I understand you aren't going to allow the xenos to replicate their fleet until it reaches virtually infinite numbers, but their fleet has the tactical advantage so close to a star, since they can do the equivalent of mini-Warp jumps, and we can't."

"Only in the sense their fleet needs to be neutralised first," the commander of Operation Stalingrad corrected the Black Templar, who widened his eyes.

"We have a weapon which can obliterate the entire Necron fleet? Why didn't you deploy it at Commorragh?"

"Lack of time, mostly," she answered. "Plus Archmagos Hediatrix and myself weren't sure we could use it at close-quarters without destroying our own fleet with it. But it was tested at Pavia, and we recently replicated the feat inside a very limited null-zone, thanks to the generous help of the Sisters of Silence."

"I see," Agiel Izaz spoke for the assembled Astartes. "But with the Necrons possessing an advanced and horror-inducing technology, can't this be an attempt to convince us to jump into a trap while we are overconfident?"

"It could," General Nikolai Rokossovsky replied at her invitation. "But there are several points against it. The principal one being they either allowed or failed to notice the recovery operations of the *Tsunami* by the Tech-Priests. Evidently, Necron and Mankind's technology are hardly compatible without close cooperation from both sides, but I think, Chapter Masters, that you can agree no Admiral in our Imperium would be permitted to keep his rank if the Black Legion escaped into the Warp with the hull of a Gloriana Battleship."

Chuckles resonated around the command table.

"That is reasonable," Chapter Master Ta'Phor Hezonn relented, his richly decorated armour giving him the image of a reptilian-decorated warrior from millennia ago suddenly roused to defend an interstellar empire. "But these xenos don't think like us. For all we know, it could be an attempt to wait until the bait is so beautiful we can't help but fall into the trap of our own volition."

"It's always possible, of course," Taylor ignored the polite mental nudge of Artemis to speak. It wasn't the time to impress Space Marines with one of her vocal spiders. "But it is extremely improbable. First, the Szarekhan Dynasty is so arrogant they didn't bother to hunt the Lamenters and our other allies enforcing the quarantine of this region of space. Even if they pretended to not notice our forces, the intelligent thing would have been to demolish the patrols navigating too deeply inside their security perimeter. We gained too much information that way we wouldn't have gotten otherwise."

"They also should have tried to break through the blockade to see our reaction," Rylanor interjected. "In the likely scenario their FTL capabilities have been repaired, humility and past failures should have forced any intelligent commander to recognise no plan of battle is infallible. Unless the enemy doesn't give you the time to think about it, always try to keep an escape path open. To do anything else is courting destruction."

To this, the other Astartes had no arguments to oppose to their 'elder'.

"Arrogance," Chapter Master Malakbel commented. "It's all a question of arrogance. The amount of time we can keep the xenos arrogant and contemptuous of our capabilities is going to determine the course of this campaign. The longer they sneer at us and think they can repair their fleets and armies without going all-out, the greater our chances of victory rise."

"What is the status of the military operations?" asked Chapter Master Sulla.

"The Inquisition has just reported the completion of an Exterminatus bombardment upon Schrodinger VII. The Necron infrastructure has shattered under the planetary destruction created by the Cyclonic Torpedoes. The Howling Griffons are making good progress at Davatas." The ruler of Nyx looked at each participant of the conference. "Except one target, the general offensive against the holdings of the Sautekh Dynasty has begun. The Tech-Priests of Hypnoth are beginning their own attacks in forty-eight hours. The other forces will all be in action less than twenty-fours after this mark."

There was no backing out now; not that they could have sent Orks against the Necrons forever, but this time they had begun the war. The Sautekh Dynasty could not and would not tolerate these challenges to their military supremacy. The Szarekhans...well, they would find in these offensives more motivation to pursue their genocidal deeds.

"Ave Imperator," the black-haired parahuman spoke. "Are you with me?"

"AVE IMPERATOR!"

**Basilica Hagia Sanguinala – under construction**

**3.107.310M35**

**Grand Architect Cyrene Versailles**

Cyrene was very proud of the – incomplete – work done upon the Hagia Sanguinala, and the fact crepuscular rays could illuminate some of the greatest mosaics and statues at particularly auspicious moments of the day had led to many praises being directed towards her person.

Still, the Grand Architect wasn't about to let pride get to her head. Months before the first stone was emplaced, the Perpetual woman had known there was exactly one person in the entire world whose opinion counted, and the rest of the compliments were irrelevant wastepaper if she didn't approve.

Today this person had come.

To her surprise however, the Basileia had not directly summoned her, and after a few hours of waiting, the ancient architect had dismissed her subordinates and gone searching for the Lady of the Nyx Sector.

Given the advantage of being the architect of the gigantic edifice, it didn't take long to find her. Not that there were many golden-armoured women with brilliant wings of gold in the Basilica at every hour.

Lady Weaver was motionless, staring at the great sculpture representing Sanguinius swearing his loyalty to the Emperor. Like a lot of artistic projects ordered by the government of Nyx, it was fairly realistic, for it had been based upon picts which had remained in the Blood Angels' databases for several millennia.

The ruler of the Hive World was not praying, however. That much the Grand Architect was pretty sure of. A certainty verified by the many ants patrolling on the outskirts of this section of the Basilica along with Space Marines.

"I thought you wished to inquire about the progress we'd made in the last two months." Cyrene whispered. She was not a religious woman anymore, but the solemnity of the location imposed a minimum of dignity.

"Your efforts are more than satisfactory," the Basileia replied in an unconcerned tone. "I had Pierre infiltrate the construction site times to correct the security flaws, and he brought back plenty of visual material for me to judge."

Cyrene didn't know if she needed to grimace or grin.

"That Dreadnought, I swear..."

"I also sent Artemis several times. To see if she could stop talking for a few hours."

"Ah." The Perpetual commented. "So that's why certain of the artists swore they saw spiders debating at the entrance of the narthex. A few workers thought painting all day was making them go crazy."

Taylor Hebert chuckled lightly.

"No, the spiders were very real."

"May I suggest they come officially next time, your Celestial Highness?" Cyrene asked. "Just to avoid...minor emotions of panic?"

"We will see."

Cyrene knew it was the best she could demand of her powerful and very influential patron. The seconds passed, and the conversation didn't resume. And the rays of the sun disappeared one by one, until the last source of light was on the face of stone used to represent the Emperor.

It was...oddly poetic, in a way.

"I'm going to war."

"So I've heard." If someone in the Nyx Sector was unaware of it, he or she was a recluse and lived like a hermit away from any form of civilisation.

"I'm going to kill them, Cyrene. For what they've done to Mankind. For all the innocents they've killed and will undoubtedly kill in the coming years. And for all the atrocities they will commit if they're not stopped in time. I will not let them enslave us to the will of the Ruinous Powers."

"Good." Her voice was hard, unyielding, much like the materials she built the Hagia Sanguinala with. "They have made their choice...and it was the wrong one. I am sure of it now."

The light disappeared after several minutes and two Dawnbreaker Guards arrived with some candles to make sure they didn't remain in complete darkness...though the golden wings made sure they weren't blind and unable to find their way back.

"And if you have Erebus in your sight..."

"I will fulfil my promise, don't worry."

"First make sure this vermin doesn't escape." Cyrene hesitated before going on. "Like a lot of people, I underestimated him, thinking him a slimy bastard, but...he's still there. He survives and always comes back to turn good things into ashes. Don't let him escape, that's the only thing that matters in the end."

"The Vile One will die." The young woman swore. "And the Black Crusade will fail."

**Arch-Cardinal Winston Marlborough**

More than thirteen years after the Battle of Commorragh, the popularity of Her Celestial Highness Taylor Hebert had not diminished in the slightest, if the crowds massed in front of the Hagia Sanguinala were any indication.

No, if anything, it had massively increased. There were millions of souls travelling to see the Living Saint wherever her military, religious, or governmental duties led her to each day, and today was no exception. In fact, given that there were always large numbers of pilgrims paying tickets to be allowed to contemplate the rising structure of the Basilica under construction, the audience was likely larger on this day than on any other.

Knowing the Basileia was going to war and would not be seen in public audiences for a while may have given more impetus for a last short pilgrimage despite the dark clouds gathering over this part of Nyx Tertius.

"I heard you planned to visit Claire 47 after my departure."

"You heard correctly," Winston nodded curtly. "While I do not make a habit to visit every Shrine World of Ultima, this new visit is a good opportunity to see with my own eyes how well the reforms and the Martyr Monuments have taken inside the Nyx Sector. In addition to this, your Grand Architect told me the grand dome of the Gaius Mausoleum was nearly completed. I'm quite curious to see how good it will look in reality."

The Mistress of Spiders – said animals had strongly encouraged that particular title among the pilgrims – nodded while waving at the crowds as she descended the red stairs.

"I thought about visiting it myself," the Living Saint confessed. "But there was never enough time. I had a lot of more important things on my schedule...and in the last couple of years, overseeing the military preparations has not left many hours of free time. There just weren't enough days for a visit to that Shrine World. Maybe once I return. I certainly intend to take a few holidays."

"If Operation Stalingrad ends in a victory, as I'm sure all Nyxians hope, I don't think you will face any objections."

"You might be surprised." The black-haired woman smiled as her wings tensed. "But that is all in the future. For now, there is a war to win."

"My prayers and those of the Faithful will accompany you wherever you go."

Taylor Hebert nodded, before once more donning her helmet and descending two more steps.

Then she drew the new sword which was handed to her by a Space Marine and presented it to the millions of pilgrims and other members of the public in the classic imperious salute.

Given the explosion of cheers and joy, the Nyxians and other members of the audience loved it.

**Giraffe** **Spaceport**

**3.112.310M35**

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

Friar bowed as Lady Weaver nearly ran into the room he had selected for their meeting.

"Your command was relayed to all Navigators of Battle Group Volga. Many were...surprised. They understand what is at stake though, and will comply."

The Chancellor kept his voice devoid of any accusation. It was obvious the Basileia had prepared this move for years, possibly ever since the moment she returned to Nyx after the Fall of Commorragh, and informed almost no one. Zero Navigators had been taken into confidence for sure.

Friar was not vexed. Like many things the Basileia did, it was for good reasons. This was a major tactical and strategic advantage which could make all the difference between victory and defeat. It couldn't be jeopardized because someone had spoken in front of the wrong servant and aroused suspicions of inimical parties.

"Concerns?"

"Of course. Unlike so many things that were tested in a decade, the members of the Navis Nobilite are wise enough to recognise this had never been tested before. They have worked with Aethergold and visited your giant companion at least twice, but being in contact with the light in the Materium for several minutes is very different from what you propose."

This raised barely an eyebrow from his interlocutor, who in her magnificent golden armour was equipped like a lesser goddess going to war.

"I, being an old experienced hand and having come into contact with Aethergold plenty of times..." He coughed before resuming his speech in a blunt manner. "Our Navigators will obey and do what you expect of them. But it is going to be extremely exhausting. All warships which don't have a replacement Navigator won't be able to guide the hull into the Warp without twenty-four hours of rest. Maybe longer. Thus I plead in the name of the Navis Nobilite you don't sacrifice our strength lightly."

"I *never* sacrifice my allies lightly," this was not a rebuke, and it was...more conviction bathed in light speaking. "But there is a reason why the monsters we fight are called 'the Enemy', Chancellor."

The golden-winged Lady's face relaxed a bit.

"We plan for an initial assault of extreme violence, but our starships' drives will still need many hours to travel across the null-zone. The only plausible scenario which would truly require going back into the Warp so early would be that for one reason or another, the Ymga Monolith manages to translate out of the Volga System before our arrival."

The Chancellor of House Achelieux nodded. It was indeed...incredibly unlikely. The Necrons had not yet finished breaking the resistance of the greenskins, and leaving an enemy alive at your back was not the kind of strategy favoured by the Necrons.

"But I can't promise several days of respite will be granted to your Navigators, so best prepare for the alternative. Now your message mentioned something interesting?"

For sole answer, he unrolled the priceless map he carried upon his person on the closest table.

"This is a map of the Great Crusade-era." The Basileia commented after a couple of seconds. "You combined the data with the current reach of the Astronomican?"

"We did, and by we, I mean the Magisterial Houses involved in Operation Stalingrad. Our best estimates is that after the Emperor's Light grew in strength two years ago, approximately ninety-six percent of our galaxy which was illuminated at the end of M31 is now within His illumination range. Counting the Sectors razed during the Heresy and other subsequent wars, various cosmic phenomena and other disasters, this leaves very few anomalies."

"One of them being the Calyx Expanse."

"Yes," Friar admitted. "Though it's not the only one. The Dark Marches beyond southern Tempestus are also in the dark. The north of the Halo Stars is...was never a pleasant region to explore, and it has been steadily getting worse these last several years. My assistants are forming a more complete list for you to study in the next few days."

The eyes of the insect-mistress didn't stop observing the map.

"Part of the main assault, you think, or contingencies in case their forces fail?"

There was no need to ask who – or what – was the 'they' the Lady Nyx referred to.

"Both are not completely incompatible, I think. But in my experience, it sounds more like a contingency plan. The regions in the shadows are too far from the Monolith to be the staging points of counteroffensives, especially as in some, Imperial order was confirmed to be strong as of the last Astropathic communications. The Archenemy...may believe precautions are needed where you are concerned. Especially after Commorragh."

"Then let's hope their preparations and contingencies are inferior to ours." Taylor Hebert concluded in a voice of command. "Thank you for the information, Chancellor. You can return to the *Enterprise*, I will join you soon."

**Brigadier-General Tanya Sevrev**

There were some categories of people who were dedicated to assassinating the Basileia, or at least paying someone to order the attempt and pay some hired blades to do so. In general, these scum were either aristocrats, heretics, or simply outright stupid.

The three psykers definitely fell in the last category. Trying to attack the Basileia in the middle of the Giraffe spaceport before her departure, at an hour where security was raised to the maximum, the Space Marines were everywhere, and over one hundred Sisters of Silence were patrolling not far away?

Stupid may be overestimating these psykers' intelligence, really.

"Death to the Tyrant!" one of the three assassins screamed as two Sisters of Silence dragged him in front of Lady Weaver. "Death to-"

His scream of defiance was brutally stopped as the Basileia placed a small crystal of Aethergold upon his forehead.

A second later, the assassin screamed louder...and then completely collapsed. The impact of his body hitting the ground was rather loud, all things considered.

"So that's how they were able to stand being in Lisa's presence for so long," the Lady General of the Imperial Guard mused. "Rogue psykers, but with only minimal taint. Inventive, I will give them that...though I doubt you are the ones who thought of it."

"We acted of our own volition, Tyrant!" the second psyker assassin spat. His deranged eyes and almost clownish clothes may have been funny if he hadn't just demonstrated his powers by liquefying five civilians and two guardsmen before being neutralised. "Your limitless tyranny is approaching its end and-"

One of the Sisters of Silence's fists met his jaw. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Somehow I rather doubt it was your idea. You aren't intelligent enough. Lord Inquisitor Tor?"

"Yes, Lady Weaver?"

"I know it will be difficult, but can your interrogators break these men before we embark? It's unlikely they know anything interesting, but it's better to be safe."

"My teams will do their best to break them in the allotted time," the black-armoured elderly man carrying the rosette of the Holy Ordos declared.

"Please! Please not that!" the third psyker – who looked like a very ugly Underhive ganger began to plead between two series of mad screaming.

"What did you think was going to happen to you even if your assassination succeeded, witch?" one of the Priests hotly retorted.

The mouth of the criminal instantly clamped shut. So there was someone or something which still terrified them more than the Inquisition. For how long that would stay true, the Brigadier-General had no idea, but she was betting the timespan would be counted in hours.

"Now that this assassination attempt appears to have been dealt with the severity it required..." it said quite something about the numbers of death cultists and other types of hired killers she regularly had to deal with that their Lady General appeared more incredibly annoyed than actually worried. "We can begin the real order of the day. Shield-Captain Veii Volterrus, the floor is yours."

At first Tanya frowned, much like the rest of the Fay 20th she stood in parade formation with. Not for long, however. The ranks of centipedes and spiders opened to reveal the auramite-clad Custodian who was sometimes seen in Hive Athena and other command centres of Nyx.

The Fay guardswoman had the greatest difficulty not sweating or fidgeting as the Watcher of the Holy Throne marched less than ten metres away from them. Meagre consolation, she was far from the only one. The assembly had Mechanicus Archmagi, Knight pilots, Titan Moderati, Guard officers, and senior Adepts amongst many higher officials, but aside from the Space Marines, few were those who were able to stand without shaking from head to toe. Even veterans like General Flabanico of Ventrillia or General Dundee of Indiga were clearly intimidated.

So powerful was the presence of the majestic Custodes that Tanya only belatedly realised that the Sentinel sworn to the God-Emperor was far from alone. Behind him, several massive insects had carried an object which was very similar in basic shape to one of the Pylons of Cadia she had seen in so many picts these last years.

Like them, this object was clearly constructed from Noctilith. Unlike them, it was not devoid of marks and inscriptions. In fact, it seemed some sculptors had tried to do the very opposite. There were at least three Aquilas upon it, and wherever her gaze fell, there seemed to be stone-seals of purity immortalised into the obsidian-coloured pylon.

"As per the agreement between His Majesty and the forces of Operation Stalingrad," the member of the Ten Thousand rumbled in a tone which managed to be heroic, threatening, and inspiring at the same time, "I deliver this Imperial Pylon into your custody, Lady Weaver."

"And I accept it gladly, for all the brave souls which are still fighting and will fight against the horrors of Oblivion and Damnation." The Living Saint answered with a respectful nod.

She took a series of fluid steps forwards. The Custodian took one step left.

An orb of light hit the Noctilith construct while she blinked, and in mere seconds all spectators, be they military or civilians, had a free pyrotechnic display as the black substance shifted to a more pleasing – and holy – shining golden colour. Heartbeats later, it was literally golden fire which burned everywhere on its edges. Then it intensified by several times.

"This Pylon," their Lady announced in a very satisfied tone, "is a focus which will allow our fleet to sail far more smoothly inside the Empyrean. Our Navigators will be able to guide the shipmasters of the Imperial Navy and more brave men far more accurately without needing to break formation."

Given that neither Tanya nor anyone Hive Athena had ever even heard about this Pylon's existence, the secret must have been incredibly well-guarded.

"I heard rumours," this time there was definitely a thin smile on their supreme commander's lips, "that we would need months to travel to the Eastern Fringe. That we had ceded too much of the initiative to the Enemy. That the initial deployment moves were too risky given the threats hanging like swords of Damocles over our heads."

Lady Weaver bared her perfect white teeth.

"Let me reassure you. With this Pylon placed on the *Enterprise*, the dangers of the Immaterium won't be capable of hindering our offensive against the Ymga Monolith. We are going to bring the Light of the God-Emperor to the darkest pits of hell once again, and we are going to teach them that waiting for so long was the greatest mistake they could have ever made. Mankind rules this galaxy, and we will show no fear. Ave Imperator!"

The speech resonated in her brain and her soul. And like millions of throats, hers did the only thing it could do in response.

"AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR!"

***Vulkan's Arsenal* Shipyards**

**3.113.310M35**

**Regina-Consort Wei Cao**

"I will miss you."

The kiss which followed these words was extremely long.

"I will miss you too, love. Keep my heart, it belongs to you."

Their hands separated, and soon, too soon, the golden armour and Baal rubies went away.

"I will return. Hell itself won't stop me."

Wei believed her. She had survived Commorragh; this new storm would be endured and vanquished.

It still hurt to see her walk away, surrounded by the Dawnbreaker Guard, the Fay 20th, and hundreds of other officers and military personnel.

It hurt that she couldn't go with them...and yet the Regina-Consort knew it was the logical path. While she had assiduously followed an exacting physical training regimen these last several years, Wei wasn't blind to the fact that in a major war zone, she was a liability, not an asset.

There would still be regrets.

"Magos, please open the plates and shift the salon into observation mode."

"I comply, Regina-Consort."

It took five seconds for the order to be fully carried out, but once it was, the view was phenomenal. Thousands of starships had been gathered here, from the two gigantic Gloriana Super-Battleships to tiny recon vessels and small supply transports.

It was a fleet the likes of which had rarely been seen in the Nyx Sector for millennia...and Wei could only hope it would be seen again. For at its head was the *Enterprise*, and like billions of souls, she could only hope this Battleship would return triumphant, like she had promised.

For many minutes, nothing happened. The mighty force labelled Battle Group Volga – a Vostroyan-Terran name assigned to the uninhabitable system where the Ymga Monolith awaited – stayed relatively immobile, a gigantic serpent of metal, ceramite, adamantium, and advanced technology.

And then the *Enterprise*'s engines activated, and one by one Battleships and Cruisers imitated the fleet's flagship. In less than a minute, it seemed like the Hive World was surrounded by a myriad of extra-large candles. But these were not candles. Each dot of light was a Warp-capable hull containing thousands if not tens of thousands of humans, and all of them answered to the orders of a single woman.

"Glory to the Webmistress, may she trample the xenos and the heretics."

Wei gave a sardonic look to the giant spider Taylor had gifted her, 'just in case'. It wasn't the only being ordered to make sure nothing regrettable happened to her, but it was obviously the most...remarkable.

To be honest, Wei was surprised she had managed to stay quiet for so long.

"Indeed," Wei agreed softly as Battle Group Volga travelled away from the high orbit of Nyx at increasing speed. "Please remind me what is next on my schedule, dear?"

"Of course Regina-lover of the Webmistress! The answer is...bureaucratic work!"

Wei groaned. Nobody should be able to utter those words in a joyful tone of voice. Truly Taylor had created monsters...

**Nyx System**

**Approaches of the Primus Mandeville Point**

**Battleship Enterprise**

**3.120.310M35**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

As a Lady General, Taylor had to have high standards – it wouldn't do at all to base her 'successes' on the kind of screw-ups some of the idiots fired from the Departmento Munitorum considered 'extraordinary'.

But this time, she was really satisfied by Archmagos Sagami's report.

"Not a single problem? Give my compliments to the Tech-Priests in charge of the engineering sections."

"The maintenance reforms we passed a decade ago have proven their worth," Dragon preened smugly on the lithocast screen showing her the images of the *Hornet*'s bridge.

Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller seemed really amused by that.

"If I intervene to protect the honour of the Imperial Navy, will something bad happen to me, your Celestial Highness?"

Taylor took two good seconds to feign thinking about it, before nodding gravely.

"I fear so, Lord Admiral."

There were a lot of chuckles, both on her bridge and on the audio links established with the other flagships of the fleet.

After half a minute of idle jokes and pleasantries, Taylor decided the mood had been sufficiently lifted...and they were less than a minute away from the Mandeville point.

The insect-mistress rose from her command seat, looking at her senior commanders. Dragon and Archmagos Sagami for the Adeptus Mechanicus. Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller and Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal for the Imperial Navy. Princeps Senioris Darius Sobek for Legio Astorum and Grand Princeps Ctesiphon Surena for Legio Defensor. High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa, Chapter Master Malakbel, Regent of Nocturne Ta'Phor Hezonn, Chapter Master Agiel Izaz, and many other Masters and Captains for the Adeptus Astartes. General Nikolai Rokossovsky, General Flabanico, General Dundee and more than twenty other superior officers of General rank for Army Group Volga of the Imperial Guard. Legate Galatea Dumas for the Templar Sororitas. King Leary O'Hara and High Queen Esmeralda Terryn for the Questoris Knights. And though they weren't physically present, Lisa and Artemis amongst thousands of her insects were tied to her.

"I expect the best from you," the parahuman commander announced, knowing her words would reach these commanders, but also the tens of millions of soldiers under them. "And I know you won't disappoint me. We are going into the fires of battle for the Emperor, for the Imperium, and for Mankind. We broke the Drukhari threat at Commorragh forever; now it is the time for the Necrons and other horrors of the darkness to receive our wrath. You know what we are about to face. You have received the best training and equipment we could give you in twelve years."

And since Dragon had deemed fit to remind her of the famous historical citation...

"Some may ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival."

The moment she ended her speech, thousands of men and women were already roaring in approval aboard the *Enterprise*.

"We march for victory. Illuminate the void."

**The** **Warp**

Once upon a time, they were Four. Now they were Three.

But since an eternity or mere seconds ago, they were once more united in a common purpose...in theory.

In practise, what the Three considered unity would have caused hysterical laughter amongst most mortal races inhabiting the Milky Way. There was no friendship in the Warp, no true alliance save the temporary absence of betrayals. Chaos Undivided, invoked by the Word Bearers in their prayers and dreams, made the relationship between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during World War Two look like a love affair.

The Three had decided this state of affairs would continue. Each of the Ruinous Powers found its own reasons to do so. Threads of the future had been explored with great difficulty, and unlike the events they had been witness to during the destruction of Commorragh, their survival was not in question this time.

The horrors of the Empyrean were confident the Anathema had no way to hurt them.

To see this foundation be toppled at the very beginning of the tragedy promised by Lorgar was one of those kinds of surprises they very much could have done without.

There was a lance of light hurled at the surface of the Sea of Souls. One ship, guiding thousands of others, shining and travelling as it wished, sailing safely in their very domain where the Three were Gods.

The Three sent their servants and hordes of predators to shatter it, of course. Such was their instinctive hatred for this accursed light that no other reaction was possible.

But the light was too powerful up close. And though the appearance fooled a few servants, the Three easily recognised the effort and the knowledge which had been poured into the 'Pylon'.

This was the hand of the Anathema at work. Of this the Three had no doubts.

Obviously, this realisation did nothing to solve their current problem. Weaver had unveiled this asset too late for a countermeasure to be found at such short notice.

The Three couldn't stop or delay the ship-beacon inside the Warp, as much as they had intended to.

The first battle was going to take place exactly when the Angel of Sacrifice had planned for it to, in the shadow of Oblivion. This much wasn't in the power of the Three to prevent.

This was no minor reverse, but as Tzeentch was the first to inform the other two, it could be easily countered. There was no delaying the first fleet, but time-dilatations could be...encouraged elsewhere.

After a period of negotiations anyone but a daemon would have called a civil war, the Three were in agreement.

They would grant an easier passage to the Black Crusade fleet advancing towards the Cadian Gate.

And as their observation continued, Khorne was the first to manifest what may have been called approval by an insane psyker.

The two great offensives would strike their first targets at nearly the same moment.

Nothing of importance was lost, and the plans of the Three – each entity having a very different perspective of what constituted victory in this new game – could continue.

Laughter echoed, the very essence of nightmares tormenting the dreams of billions.

The Warp erupted and boiled where the Astronomican could not force it into a simmering pause.

The Fifth Black Crusade had begun.

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Volga System**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**8.188.310M35**

**Overlord Sobekhotep the Dust-Maker**

If there hadn't been any good news, the Royal Cryptek wouldn't have been granted the honour of receiving an audience. But he had good news, and as such was granted a reprieve.

"Hem, hem, hem. The Star-Eater Drive is repaired, oh magnificent and peerless Overlord."

"At last," Sobekhotep rejoiced, before glaring at the other Crypteks waiting next to the 'Master of Despair'. "Are there any limitations or other problems I should be aware of?"

"No, Overlord," one of the numerous Szarekhan Crypteks, a female his cousin Simut had allowed him to borrow for several years, replied for all of them, "the Star-Eater Drive is fully functional once more. We only wish to bring to your attention that each of the replacement parts alchemically-forged for it is unique. Therefore we can only pray no other sabotage or destruction will be inflicted on it."

The Dust-Maker wished he could tell the Cryptek to return to its stellar studies, but it was admittedly not a topic that could simply be dismissed. And it forced him to ask a second question to Sneferka.

"I hope you have put many engram-defences and extermination protocols in place to make sure this kind of sabotage won't happen again."

Having it happen once was not only a humiliation, it had also resulted in the Throne of Oblivion being unable to rally towards a safe system where repairs would have been conducted in a far more secure environment. Instead they had expended quantities of fleets and armies in battles against the greenskins. No doubt the Silent King, praised be his name, would not be at all happy at the expenditure when he returned.

Having it happen a second time would make them the laughingstock of the galaxy. Sobekhotep would kill several Crypteks with his bare hands before that happened.

More concerning, they had lost too much time. Time the vermin had used to prepare, and now they were becoming so arrogant as to attack Sautekh worlds! Sobekhotep wasn't fond of the court of Mandragora, but he couldn't tolerate Necrons coming under fire from upstart species.

"Hem, hem, hem. The thief-secessionist won't be able to set a foot upon this battlestation without being obliterated." Sneferka promised. "We can't deny however the criminal will have most likely delivered valuable information to the enemies of the Mighty Szarekhan Dynasty."

Overlord Sobekhotep nodded before dismissing the Crypteks. That piece of news, sadly, wasn't unexpected at all. He would be more surprised if the thief-secessionist didn't auction off the secrets of the conquerors of the galaxy to the highest bidder.

"Royal Warden. Report on the military situation."

"Overlord Thakmatar the Oppressor of the Sautekh is leading the Assault Fleet against the green vermin, my Glorious Overlord!" Sihathor the Impaler proclaimed. "And unlike some, he delivers results! He has cornered the beasts against the giant blue star. Your total and uncontested victory will be celebrated for aeons!"

Sobekhotep consulted the lists of phalanxes and capital ships waiting for repairs – the recovery protocols and the Crypteks assigned to this boring duty had long been overwhelmed by the flow of damaged Necrodermis assets – and felt dismay.

Yes, Thakmatar had cornered the beasts in no time, unlike Zahndrekh who had insisted in engaging in a series of long and little-understood manoeuvres over and over...but by the putrid breath of the Nightbringer, the number of destroyed ships was...not good.

"Two more battles like this, and we will have to summon another fleet." Again, Sobekhotep didn't add. "Thakmatar is suitable for his ruthlessness, but I don't want to use him for the coming grand campaign. I will choose another grand commander to lead our mobile fleet."

"This won't be very difficult, oh my Glorious Overlord," his subordinate affirmed. "Thakmatar is eager to return to his domains and crush the red vermin which have dared set foot upon the holy soil of the sacred complexes."

Any other time, Sobekhotep would have applauded this bloodthirsty determination, but not now. Worlds like those governed by Thakmatar were filled with the precious ore that the Silent King used to build contra-Empyrean nodes. And before this year, he had been certain the Nerushlatset Dynasty ignored their existence. So how were the upstart vermin able to discover their spatial coordinates? The galaxy was far too big for coincidences of this magnitude!

"By custom and law, if Thakmatar departs, command of the Szarekhan fleet should be granted to Overlord Simut."

The Overlord who had been allowed to take the title of Dust-Maker by his infallible sovereign allowed the Impaler to hear his undignified snort.

Overlord Simut was an incompetent nullity. Honestly, Sobekhotep was a bit surprised he had managed to survive the War in Heaven, even if most of his existence had been spent away from the frontlines. And the rare battles where he wasn't had all ended in...non-negligible defeats.

"The day I place Simut in command of the whole fleet is the one I free the Deceiver's shard we keep prisoner in the depths of the Throne of Oblivion." The Szarekhan Overlord sneered. "His lineage is exalted, sufficiently so to grant him the command of our rearguard," which as every Necron noble possessing a small amount of intelligence knew, had done exactly nothing for the entirety of this battle, "but he is too stupid to be granted command of a major extermination campaign."

"Perhaps, if you don't name him, my Glorious Overlord, then Zahndrekh is the next choice."

That was a...less than perfect solution. Before the Great Sleep, Sobekhotep wouldn't have hesitated for a single second before naming the old Overlord for overall command of all the capital warships.

But this had been before the Great Sleep. Before more than half of the senior Overlords of the Sautekh had gone utterly insane, and Zahndrekh believed he was still of flesh and blood. To his credit, the Overlord of Gidrim was still better than most of his subordinates, even in this state, but his nobles – the sane ones – believed him to be an insult to all Necrons. It was already difficult enough to order them to close their eyes upon his eccentricities; impossible described the challenge of giving him supreme fleet command extremely aptly.

"I am more and more tempted to go to Mandragora and rouse the rest of the Sautekh court from the Great Sleep," the Dust-Maker confessed to the Impaler. "Given how much trouble the green vermin has-"

Alarms interrupted his speech. Then more alarms shrieked and blared.

"Overlord! Thousands of unknown ships emerging from the Empyrean at the edge of the contra-Empyrean zone!"

"What? Confirm!"

"Confirmation of the threat!" one of his Nemesors answered. "Energy profile of the ships similar to the vermin we crushed several thousand years ago! They are translating in an ordered formation!"

Sobekhotep wanted to ask the Szarekhan noble what sort of hallucinogen-energy he had recently absorbed. Necrons didn't jump into the Horror Sea – without souls, they would never be able to arrive at the destination they wanted – but they had observed a multitude of enemies. They knew enough to realise that precision and accuracy for the upstart vermin was impossible. Non-Necron fleets missed their marks by light-years, and arrived in disorganised messes that Necron fleets were too happy to shatter and vaporise.

But the new fleet which was arriving on their right flank – and whose presence was now materialised upon his holographic walls – was there. It was not a decoy, the Battleships and their escorts were truly there.

They had really executed a translation at the edge of the contra-Empyrean zone with a precision they shouldn't be able to possess.

And except for one fleet, all forces at his disposal were out of position to intercept them before they entered the Throne of Oblivion's inner sphere.

"Establish communication with Overlord Simut."

"My Gracious Overlord..."

"He has more Battleships than the vermin. If he is not able to win with such a tonnage advantage, he doesn't deserve to be part of the Szarekhan Dynasty."

The rearguard fleet outnumbered the enemy Battleships two-to-one, and except two sizeable hulls – certainly the enemy's flagships – all the Necron main capital vessels considerably outmassed their enemies, all the while having better weapons, communications, and gravity drives.

Simut wasn't a good commander, but Sobekhotep didn't see any way how the second cousin of the Silent King could fail.

"They will scream eternally in the void and realise why the Szarekhan Dynasty is the greatest and most redoubtable of all Necron Dynasties. For the Silent King."

"For the Silent King, Overlord!"

**Kroozer *Don't bez 'fraid***

**Warboss Arrgard 'the Metal-Defiler'**

"Da Swarm Bringa is 'ere! Urk, urk, urk!"

Arrgard was roaring in laughter. After one-two fists to the face, the boyz roared too.

"Smartboy! Where's me smartboy?"

"Smartboy got 'imself killed, Big Warboss!"

"Whatz?" Arrgard scratched his head and trampled two squigs before remembering the incident against the metal-foes. "Argh, yeah. Fine, I'ze need a new smartboy!"

He needed one a bit smart with a big shoota. Not this one, not that one, not that squig...

"You there!" Arrgard bellowed. "What's you'ze name?"

"X-Brukk, Warboss!"

"X-Brukk, you'ze da new Smartboy! What's da situation?"

"Errz...Warboss? Da left of da fleet is gone-kaputt! Da right is burning hotz. The big centre-partz eez taking lotz-lotz of fire! And the Battlekroozerz arez all gone!"

Arrgard tried to think about...what was the thing 'umies called it? Statekgyi? Stratekogy? Bah, it wasn't likely to be important, if the 'umies used complicated words for it.

"Call da boyz, smartboy. Call da boyz. Tell 'em it is not Vallawaagh anymore, dis be Ragnarork. Da Swarm Bringa is 'ere. Orks missed Commo'ra-ragh, we won't miss dis one!"

"Yes, Warboss!"

"Da Enemyz thinkz we'ze lose like 'umies!" Arrgard roared. "But we'ze ain't 'umies! We'ze are Orks! We're da best!"

One squig was close, and the Warboss was in need of a snack. Urk, better!

"Left, right, centre, who'ze caring? We'ze are Orks! Prepare da tellyporta and da fleet engines! We attack! Questionz?"

"ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK!"

The fury of his boyz washed over Arrgard, and it was...it was like Gork and Mork were with him again.

"I WILL FIGHT DA SWARM BRINGA! RED BUTTONZ MEKBOYZ! HELL OR OBLIVION! WAAAAGGGGH!"

"WAAAAAAAAGGHHHHH!"

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

"WE ARE NECRONS. SURRENDER AND DIE."

"WAAAAAAAAGGHHHHH!"

Taylor couldn't help but smile hearing the answers their arrival had generated.

"Well," the Lady General commented after emptying her cup of tea and handing it to one of her spiders. "It seems the Orks are happy to see us."

"Since when are the Necrons in the habit of mistranslating Low Gothic?" asked one of the Nyxian members of her staff. "I mean the principle of surrendering is to limit the number of deaths on each side. Or so I've heard."

"No, no, there is no mistake in their message. They meant each word they broadcast."

"And what exactly is the point?" Archmagos Sagami wondered with curiosity. 'If the choice is annihilation in battle, or annihilation as a prisoner, I can't find any race in my databases which will refuse to mount a desperate resistance...except maybe the Naiads. It is only logical, after all, to inflict as many casualties as practical to this enemy."

"The point is these Necrons are megalomaniacs." The Lady General sighed before continuing. "In their arrogance, they believe there is no point in wondering if someone not-Necron can coexist with them, be it an intelligent species or bacteria."

"Well, megalomaniac xenos or not, they are certainly not taking us lightly," Gavreel remarked as he observed the hololith. "They are sending all the warships they were keeping in reserve against us, and some of the isolated flanking squadrons are teleporting in to reinforce it."

Even the Second Legion had not been granted the honour of facing such a mighty battleline. Battle Fleet Volga was still far away, and the auspex scans were jammed as expected, but the signatures of more than thirty Necron Battleships were confirmed at one hundred percent certainty.

It was a battleline of nightmares and genocidal might.

But she had to disagree with her bodyguard.

"They aren't taking us seriously, no. The Ymga Monolith is staying relatively immobile. If they had a clue about what we've got planned for them, they wouldn't send their fleet so far from the support of their planet-sized battlestation."

The black-haired Lady General analysed the data for several seconds before resuming her speech.

"But since they're doing exactly what we want them to, I suppose I'm not going to complain. Archmagos Sagami, how long-"

Her intention was to ask how many seconds before they entered the null-zone, but the unpleasant sensation which engulfed the *Enterprise* made the question moot.

It was unpleasant. Like someone had nearly frozen a disgusting substance, and then thrown a bucket of it onto her face.

"We have entered the null-zone, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

"I think everyone felt it, Archmagos." The parahuman replied politely. "Status on the Kane-Pattern Particle-Disperser Cannons?"

"Chapter Master Yarhibol is towing them away, Chosen of the Omnissiah. I estimate he will translate away in twenty-five seconds."

"Good, very good."

And for the next minute, Taylor continued to watch with her Dawnbreaker Guard as a Necron armada powerful enough to raze entire Sectors accelerated to meet the warships under her command.

Despite the terrible null-effect – and wasn't it a surprise that her wings, while less brilliant, were still there? – despite the carnage she was about to unleash on two different xenos species, Taylor felt oddly...serene.

By her wealth, influence, and the work of countless subordinates, every preparation which could be made had been.

In many ways, for the next hours, she was going to be nothing more than an important spectator.

Only one thing remained to do. A simple vox-communication was opened.

"I formally cede tactical command to you, Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller." The pause was more theatrical than practical, honestly. "You can open fire."

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**Order of Battle of the Cadian System at the onset of the 5th Black Crusade – approximate date: 8.185.310M35**

**Prosan: Military training world**

Imperial Guard:

Bar-El Penal Legions: 10 Legions

Cadian Shock Troops: 10 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 10 Regimental Commands

Finreht Highlanders: 10 Regiments

Ecclesiarchy forces:

Frateris Templar: 1 Army Group

Adeptus Mechanicus:

Legio Cybernetica: 1 Cohort

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Scarus Secundus: 5 Battleships, 10 Cruiser Squadrons, 10 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Korolis: Production of atomic materials and promethium fuel**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 20 Regiments

Cadian Kasrkin: 5 Companies

Drookian Fen Guard: 30 Companies

Elysian Drop Troopers: 15 Regiments

Mordian Iron Guard: 50 Regiments

Vigilant Guard: 10 Regiments

Jouran Dragoons: 10 Regiments

Adeptus Mechanicus:

Legio Honorum: Demi-Legio

Ordo Reductor: Demi-Legio

Skitarii: 1 Legion

Legio Cybernetica: 1 Cohort

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Agripinaa Secundus: 4 Battleships, 12 Cruiser Squadrons, 12 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Angels Sanguine: 2 Companies

Blood Angels: 1 Company

Flesh Tearers: 1 Company

Heralds of Vengeance: 5 Companies

Crimson Paladins: 5 Companies

Space Marine Fleet assets:

3 Battle-Barges, 8 Strike Cruisers, 15 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Kasr Sonnen: Fortress World**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 50 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 2 Regional Commands

Cadian Kasrkin: 10 Companies

Cadian Internal Guard: 200 Companies

Mordian Iron Guard: 120 Regiments

Vigilant Guard: 20 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 8 Regiments

Merovincha Sentinels: 19 Regiments

Knovian Gharkas: 14 Regiments

Narsine Yeomanry: 49 Regiments

Praetorian Guard: 16 Regiments

Ecclesiarchy:

Frateris Templar: 1 Army Group

Adeptus Mechanicus:

Legio Invigilata: Legio

Centurio Ordinatus: 2 Ordinatuses

Skitarii: 2 Legions

Legio Cybernetica: 1 Cohort

House Griffith: 60 Knights

House Sablus: 24 Knights

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Corona Secundus: 6 Battleships, 14 Cruiser Squadrons, 20 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Angels of Vigilance: 5 Companies

Angels of Absolution: 7 Companies

Angels of Redemption: 4 Companies

Dark Angels: 1 Company

Space Marine Fleet assets:

4 Battle-Barges, 17 Strike Cruisers, 24 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Cadia: Critical Fortress World, Lynchpin of the defences of the System**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 500 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 50 Regional Commands

Cadian Kasrkin: 100 Companies

Cadian Internal Guard: 1000 Companies

Mordian Iron Guard: 30 Regiments

Thracian Guard: 22 Regiments

Dhonovar Heavy Armour: 10 Companies

Vigilant Guard: 80 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 13 Regiments

Merovincha Sentinels: 50 Regiments

Catachan Jungle Fighters: 10 Regiments

Necromunda Infantry: 30 Regiments

Armageddon Steel Legion: 35 Regiments

Adeptus Mechanicus:

Legio Gryphonicus: Demi-Legio

Legio Astraman: Legio

Legio Ferrax: Legio

House Cadmus: 49 Knights

House Coldshroud: 36 Knights

House Empirius: 24 Knights

House Hawkshroud: 35 Knights

House Krast: 96 Knights

House Moritain: 73 Knights

Centurio Ordinatus: 3 Ordinatuses

Legio Cybernetica: 2 Cohorts

Skitarii: 12 Legions

Ordo Reductor: Demi-Legio

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Cadia Primus: 12 Battleships, 12 Cruiser Squadrons, 24 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Silver Skulls: 5 Companies

Black Consuls: 8 Companies

White Consuls: 7 Companies

Destroyers: 5 Companies

Night Watch: 6 Companies

Novamarines: 1 Company

Storm Lords: 3 Companies

White Scars: 1 Company

Space Wolves: 3 Great Companies

Angels Eradicant: 5 Companies

Crimson Scythes: 2 Companies

Iron Talons: 5 Companies

Space Marine Fleet assets:

1 Starfort, 12 Battle-Barges, 34 Strike Cruisers, 42 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Stormtroopers: 100 Companies of Tempestus Scions

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

Officio Assassinorum forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Kasr Holn: Fortress World**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 40 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 5 Regional Commands

Cadian Kasrkin: 20 Companies

Cadian Internal Guard: 300 Companies

Mordian Iron Guard: 35 Regiments

Vigilant Guard: 27 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 36 Regiments

Merovincha Sentinels: 24 Regiments

Mordant Acid Dogs: 9 Regiments

Ecclesiarchy:

Frateris Templars: 1 Army Group

Adeptus Mechanicus:

House Navaros: 24 Knights

House Vyronii: 29 Knights

Skitarii: 1 Legion

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Solar Decimus: 4 Battleships, 10 Cruiser Squadrons, 14 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Aurora Chapter: 2 Companies

Doom Eagles: 5 Companies

Iron Snakes: 3 Companies

Marines Exemplar: 5 Companies

Mortifactors: 2 Companies

Knights Unyielding: 7 Companies

Angels Revenant: 1 Company

Inceptors: 1 Company

Space Marines Fleet assets:

5 Battle-Barges, 15 Strike Cruisers, 18 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Kasr Grad: Militarised Hive World**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 160 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 40 Regional Commands

Cadian Kasrkin: 50 Companies

Cadian Internal Guard: 500 Companies

Mordian Iron Guard: 70 Regiments

Vigilant Guard: 92 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 38 Regiments

Merovincha Sentinels: 25 Regiments

Brimlock Dragoons: 24 Regiments

Adeptus Mechanicus:

Legio Praesidium Vortex: Demi-Legio

House Borgius: 24 Knights

House Durbach: 36 Knights

House Raven: 72 Knights

House Warwick: 12 Knights

Centurio Ordinatus: 1 Ordinatus

Skitarii: 4 Legions

Ordo Reductor: 1 Legio

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Solar Tertius: 6 Battleships, 12 Cruiser Squadrons, 20 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Black Templars: 3 Crusades

Salamanders: 1 Company

Black Guard: 4 Companies

Excoriators: 8 Companies

Imperial Fists: 1 Company

Iron Knights: 3 Companies

Subjugators: 5 Companies

Brothers Penitent: 4 Companies

Viper Legion: 8 Companies

Sanctors of Terra: 6 Companies

Space Marine Fleet assets:

10 Battle-Barges, 26 Strike Cruisers, 29 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Vigilantum: Naval Base and Naval training facilities**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 5 Regiments

Cadian Kasrkin: 10 Companies

Harakoni Warhawks: 36 Regiments

Elysian Drop Troopers: 21 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 100 Regiments

Inquisitorial Stormtroopers: 5 Companies of Tempestus Scions

Adeptus Mechanicus:

House Arokon: 61 Knights

House Dorath: 58 Knights

Skitarii: 2 Macroclades

Freeblade Knights

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Cadia Secundus: 12 Battleships, 12 Cruiser Squadrons, 24 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Crimson Fists: 2 Companies

Genesis Chapter: 2 Companies

Hawk Lords: 7 Companies

Raven Guard: 2 Companies

Revilers: 2 Companies

Sons of Orar: 1 Company

Space Marine fleet assets:

3 Battle-Barges, 9 Strike Cruisers, 11 Escort Groups

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Kasr Partox: Fortress World**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 58 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 10 Regional Commands

Orar Grenadiers: 50 Regiments

Agripinaa Home Guard: 72 Regiments

Blitzen Heavy Armoured: 12 Companies

Praetorian Guard: 10 Regiments

Adeptus Mechanicus:

House Draconis: 84 Knights

Skitarii: 3 Legions

Imperial Navy:

Bakka Task Force: 1 Battleship, 6 Cruiser Squadrons, 10 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Brazen Claws: 7 Companies

Space Marine fleet assets:

1 Battle-Barge, 3 Strike Cruisers, 3 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Saint Josmane's Hope: Penal World**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 2 Regiments

Mordian Iron Guard: 2 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 4 Regiments

Saint Josmane's Hope Penal Legions: 20 Legions

Imperial Navy:

Nemesis Task Force: 2 Cruiser Squadrons, 6 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Exorcists: 10 Companies

Space Marine Fleet assets:

3 Battle-Barges, 6 Strike Cruisers, 6 Escort Squadrons

**Kasr Berg: Fortress World; provider of war materials**

Imperial Guard:

Cadian Shock Troops: 40 Regiments

Cadian Youth Guard: 2 Regional Commands

Cadian Kasrkin: 3 Companies

Cadian Internal Guard: 70 Companies

Mordian Iron Guard: 40 Regiments

Orar Grenadiers: 10 Regiments

Vigilant Guard: 6 Regiments

Merovincha Sentinels: 15 Regiments

Valhalla Ice Warriors: 42 Regiments

Adeptus Mechanicus:

Legio Decimata: Demi-Legio

House Du Frain: 48 Knights

House Nero: 20 Knights

Skitarii: 4 Legions

Legio Cybernetica: 3 Cohorts

Imperial Navy:

Battlefleet Obscurus Sextus: 2 Battleships, 5 Cruiser Squadrons, 11 Escort Squadrons

Space Marines:

Howling Griffons: 1 Company

Reclaimers: 4 Companies

Storm Warriors: 9 Companies

Watchguards: 2 Companies

Space Marine Fleet assets:

3 Battle-Barges, 12 Strike Cruisers, 14 Escort Squadrons

Inquisitorial Task Forces: [CLASSIFIED]

**Departmento Munitorum of Cadia**:

Engineer Corps: approximately 150 Companies

Siege Auxilia Corps: 4107 major counter-siege batteries and a total of ten million men under arms

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**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadian Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cadia**

**Kasr Tyrok**

**8.187.310M35**

**Governor Primus Andreas Waldersee**

"And we lost three more Astropaths trying to contact Agripinaa, Governor."

"Do I want to know how they died?"

The Cadian Major grimaced before shaking his head in a silent no.

"With all due respect Governor...no, you don't."

"May the Emperor welcome their souls, for they have done their utmost in His service," he prayed before continuing his walk upon the ramparts of Kasr Tyrok, a reassuring view if there ever was one. "This Warp Miasma is truly one of the worst heretical things I've ever seen in my life."

And a life on Cadia granted you the 'chance' of seeing some really, really nasty stuff. While the rate of mutations and corruption was relatively low given the proximity to the Eye of Terror, the key word was 'relatively'. Not a single year passed without some companies losing their minds and trying to assassinate their commanders, formerly righteous souls beginning to mutilate themselves and speaking to invisible forces, or reavers serving the monsters releasing Chaos Spawn and other abominations into daemonic drop-pods onto the orbital defences.

There was a reason that Cadians learned to fire a lasgun before they were able to walk, and it wasn't just to prove to the rest of the Astra Militarum how superior they were.

"At least the effect's spread is lessening, Governor." One of the Colonels of his staff seemed to need to find a silver lining in every situation.

"It doesn't need to reach further," the second highest-ranked commander of the Guard present in the Cadian System replied. "The Warp Miasma is so advanced it would have swallowed Vigilantum if the planets' configuration wasn't favourable to us."

Indeed, by a good turn of fortune, Cadia was on the side facing the Gate at this time of the year, while most planets were on the other side of the sun, so to speak.

"The heretics have severely decreased the distance they need to travel before confronting our defences."

"But we had many days to redeploy the minefields and the other static platforms, Governor. It is not a minor advantage."

Andreas Waldersee didn't answer, though he made a note to seriously re-evaluate how promising this Captain was. Anyone who couldn't recognise that winning between five and ten days of deployment from the Cadian Gate wasn't worth the combat losses didn't understand a single thing about the value of time in warfare.

"Any news from the planetary shield the Tech-Priests are busy installing?"

"No, Governor," his chief of staff gave him an apologetic smile. "I received the usual platitudes from the liaison-Magos...who doesn't look like he knows more than I do, I think."

God-Emperor protect him from his allies. No Cadian was going to insult the Adeptus Mechanicus, not when their military contribution was worth more than twelve million Skitarii and of course the formidable war machines of the Titans, the Ordinatuses, and the Knights oath-bounded to their tech-religion.

But...the relations, while better than they'd been a decade ago, remained far from the unity of the Cadian Guard Command. Their hierarchy was completely opaque to him, and any General or senior officer's authority was insufficient to direct the massive engines' tactical moves. The Adeptus Mechanicus was an allied force, but it was not coordinated with the other Adeptuses...they were even more insular than the Space Marines in that regard.

Andreas Waldersee forced himself to see the good side. Integrated or not, the planets of Cadia had been able to count on these resources to fortify the System beyond his pre-muster dreams. Kasr Tyrok, military capital of Cadia, gave a good example of what awaited any traitor eager to challenge the Imperial Guard.

Pre-Commorragh, the Kasr had been able to rely on three standard walls and ten military districts to stop any invader cold. Now it had five and twenty respectively. The anti-air batteries had been doubled. Immense fosses to break the assaults of traitor Titans and Daemon Engines had been dug up. Complex patterns of minefields had been emplaced, with less than ten officers having seen the overall map depicting the full defensive system. Plasma and Melta weapons had been prepared by the thousands to destroy any armoured spearhead. Any location which could serve as an improvised spaceport was a camouflaged bunker, an anti-air redoubt, or some nasty surprise which would incinerate the first thousands of beasts and scum to land.

Not that reaching Cadia would be easy for them, oh no. Right above his head was the Starfort of the Black Consuls, an ancient relic of the Great Crusade thirty percent bigger than a Ramilies. The new 'planetary shield' of the Tech-Priests may not be online, but the five layers of killer-satellites and the defence grid certainly were. Battlefleet Cadia Primus was also standing vigil with them.

Little more than a decade was not sufficient to transform a planet into an unending series of kill zones and military defences where every move revealed three more traps...but at least a third of Cadia right now fitted this description.

No, as always, it wasn't military strength which was the problem. It was ignoring what sort of devilry the heretics would bring to defeat the five hundred million Cadians garrisoning this very planet, and the tens of millions of non-Cadians and comrades-in-arms erecting Kasr and defences as fast as they could on the other worlds.

"Governor, may I remind you that you have a meeting with the Warmaster in thirty minutes?"

And here was another problem.

"I have not forgotten," the senior officer of all the Cadian military retorted.

How could he? Andreas had really thought the High Lords would let him take command of the entirety of the Guard present near the Cadian Gate while Lord Admiral John von Bismarck did the same for the Imperial Navy. Lord Commander Militant von Oberstein had appeared to be in support of leaving him with his hands free, as long as he could show results – which was done with several probing raids annihilated and cult-suppressions as soon as they showed their ugly heads.

The High Twelve had disagreed. Cadia was incontestably now the second-most heavily defended system of the Imperium – Holy Terra always beat any aspirant to that title – and it deserved more than a Lord Militant – the rank equivalent a Governor Primus of Cadia's title gave him the authority of.

So they had sent him Warmaster Ender Trevayne of the Armageddon Steel Legion, Victor of the Puerto Crusade, favoured champion of Hydraphur since he had returned over two hundred of their vassal worlds to the fold in a single campaign.

Andreas wished they had sent him someone else. Aside from the obvious fact the man wasn't a Cadian – which several of his senior officers had not taken well – anyone aware of the Warmaster's career knew he was under a death sentence of the Commissariat, a sentence only the presence of two Custodes by his side prevented from being executed.

In addition to this, the Governor despised the title itself. 'Warmaster' was too often heard on Cadia when uttered by traitors and heretics. If anyone was to be granted such authority, it was better to associate with it the title of 'Lord Solar', which was a very respectable name, for had it not been taken by the Primarch Rogal Dorn himself while He walked among them?

"I think we can make a detour by-"

This was the moment the Warp Miasma around the System coalesced into a tempest of violet lightning far above their heads. Whispers assaulted his ears, and then loud voices. It ended in a formidable shriek, and two shots resonated as a Commissar used his sidearm to blow off two troopers' skulls.

The whispers ended after a few seconds. The maelstrom of eldritch energy raging around Cadia didn't.

"So it begins," Andreas Waldersee coughed before beginning the series of orders which would see billions of men rushing to their stations. "General alert to all commands! General alert to all commands of the Cadian Gate! They are coming!"

The next order was not hard to understand, though it would be far from easy to accomplish.

"Everything which comes out of the Eye must die."

**Primus** **Line of Defences of the Cadian Gate**

**Light Cruiser *Last Dawn***

**Captain Erwin Knox**

"What in the name of-"

Erwin only barely had the time to draw his power sword and parry as his First Lieutenant – well, his ex-First Lieutenant now – tried to murder him. Fortunately, duelling had always been a class he was gifted in, and three seconds later, the traitor was impaled dead upon his blade.

Then the Captain of the *Last Dawn* turned his attention to his bridge. It was a warzone, as stations and devices were soaked in the blood of his men, and some began to sprout the most awful mutations it had ever been given to him to observe.

"For the God-Emperor and Holy Terra!" He barked while defending himself from a horror of green pus sprouting several awful yellow tongues. "Defend this bridge! Death to the traitors and the heretics!"

The melee was furious, and though it felt like hours, it was most likely over in half a minute.

And then it was over. The corpses stopped twitching, and all those who remained standing were kissing their aquila medallions and murmuring prayers to Him on Holy Terra.

"Report."

"The Tech-Priests have repelled an attack from the Enginarium. Two port flak turrets have been sabotaged; one is still in enemy hands and an assault party is trying to force its way in. Compartments 5-D and E-36 are contaminated and must be considered lost. Request permission to open them to the void," the petty officer who had immediately stepped forwards to assume the duties of his treacherous second enumerated.

"Granted. Get these infected spawn out of my ship!"

"We have been boarded! Reaver boarding party on J-22! They are gunning down everyone in the Lander hangar-"

"That's...how the hell were they able to board us in this-"

"ARCHENEMY SHIPS DETECTED! ARCHENEMY SHIPS DETECTED! FIVE HUNDRED- NO! SEVEN HUNDRED...NINE HUNDRED...OVER A THOUSAND RAIDER-CLASS HULLS!"

Erwin gaped. One thousand raider hulls sent directly at their throats? It was...it was absolute madness! Vessels of Raider tonnage were lighter than a Destroyer on average, but they weren't that expendable...

Except the Archenemy clearly thought they were.

And now they were coming straight at him, leaving him no choice.

"Activate the minefield! Activate the minefield now!" Knowing there wouldn't be any time to confirm anything in a serious attack, the powers-that-be had given him the authority to exercise his own judgement, and at this moment he thanked whichever officer had the idea. "Execute command detonation Kappa-Alpha-Kappa!"

The *Last Dawn*'s void shields began to receive a torrent of fire, but they held...held long enough for the minefields to be activated and tear reality apart.

A roar of joyous fury echoed through the ravaged bridge as hundreds of Raiders flashed out of existence, perhaps as many as two-thirds of them in five seconds. And as other minefields of the Cadian defences blasted the heretics out of existence, war became truly apocalyptic. The macro-batteries of the *Last Dawn* accounted for two more Raiders, before Erwin saw more lightning and an even greater storm coming.

"Stop firing."

"Captain?"

"These were fire ships," he articulated with difficulty as pain pierced his fingers and a heartbeat later, his ears and every part of his body. "These...Raiders...all...suicide...hulls...sacrificed."

This had just been the prelude, he was certain of it. The real assault was going to begin now.

As if the Archenemy was listening to his thoughts, the Eye of Terror pulsed and the Traitor armada emerged into reality.

First came eight behemoths of doom, greater than the greatest Battleship ever built by Mankind in its ages of glories.

Eight Space Hulks, dragged from the Empyrean, transformed by the heretics into harbingers of devastation and apocalypse.

"Priority message to Lord Admiral von Bismarck," the Cadian-born Captain spoke to his last communication officer. "Vanguard of the enemy strength sighted. Eight Space Hulks, Apocalypse-strength. At least fifty Battleships, Infernus-class. And...over four hundred Cruisers."

"Message sent, Captain." The officer reported after several seconds. Usually, they would have waited for the confirmation of reception, but today there would be no such thing. The equivalent of a Warp Storm was raging around them, and even if the message went through as he hoped, the *Last Dawn* would never survive that long.

Not against the multitude of squadrons the Archenemy was bringing to the fight.

A last glance at the crackling hololith told him only one other loyal Light Cruiser was still here, out of the five which had been patrolling what had been the first line of Cadia's defences. None of the ten Destroyers with them had survived.

And the enemy continued to pour in more and more warships with every passing second. God-Emperor save them, how many fleets had the Traitors built?

No, it didn't matter. It wasn't worth asking oneself the question. Their void shields were now dead, and no Light Cruiser could truly manoeuvre in these conditions.

"All available power to the weapons," he ordered, knowing it was certainly the last order he would ever give his men. "Fire at will and remember your oaths! For Cadia and the God-Emperor!"

The world shook in fire and the screams of daemons.

Hell had come to Cadia.

**Outer edge of the Cadian System**

**Depths of the Abyss-class Super-Battleship *Trisagion***

**Deathmistress Mikaelatch Shadowdagger**

The face of the brute-thing when it realised it was going to fall-plunge into the furnace below was really nice-funny.

Mikaelatch Shadowdagger saluted him to drive the insult deep-deeper.

"Praise Malal!"

"Your God is unborn and before long-"

The tiny pathway crumbled and dropped the brute-thing to its doom-doom.

Good-good riddance, the leader of Clan Eshin – what was left of it – thought.

Slowly and methodically, the Deathmistress returned to safe-safer ground. Much as she didn't say-say it, this brute-thing had been quite the test-challenge. Everything was dangerous-testing aboard this Battleship, yes-yes. Every level was filled with daemon-things, mad slave-things, cultist-things, and of course brute-things, some of them belonging to the more lethal-heretical category of the sorcerer-brute-things.

It was a lot of work-work when Mikaelatch had less-fewer than one hundred tails to spy, sabotage, and murder-assassinate.

The female Skaven who had taken the title of Shadowdagger sniffed. There were no more brute-things or slave-things – she had made sure-certain of that-that – but there was something...

The leader of Clan Eshin turned and...Malal save her!

"I mean you no harm, servant of Anarchy."

Mikaelatch of Clan Eshin released much fear musk as she contemplated the...immense brute-thing which had somehow managed to sneak-sneak up on her.

It was huge-huge. It was shadow-shadow. It was...it was-was...

And then something change-shifted in her.

The Deathmistress felt something powerful in her heart, in her paws, in her head.

The female Skaven felt-felt her God's presence again, yes-yes! She had been right to keep her-her faith! Praise-

"**Lord of the Ravens**," Malal spoke through her humble maw. "**Shadow of Liberty. Liberator of** **Darkness. Or do you prefer another title...Corvus Corax**?"

The shadows changed to reveal a brute-thing of shadow armour and shadow skin...except large-bigger than a brute-thing. Much bigger...and more mighty-powerful.

"I have many titles and names."

"**Yes, you do**." Her God agreed. "**Nearly as many as the oaths you so imprudently made in your youth, and now, they chain you. They drag you to your doom**."

"The same can be said about you, Lord of Anarchy." Raven feathers fell, but they fade-vanished in the shadows before touch-touching the ground. "This Skaven is the greatest of your servants left. How long, I wonder, until she falls or is captured by the Word Bearers' Dark Apostles? The strength you gathered is imprisoned by the Three, leaving you vulnerable. They did not make the mistake of breaking the planet, dispersing your servants like the sons of the Lion were after the Battle of Caliban."

"**Your brother was indeed wiser than I expected**-"

"He is not my brother." There was no roar-shout, but Mikaelatch felt the silent death-murder in the voice. "Not anymore."

"**Then why do you come to me, Shadow of Liberty**?" Malal asked. "**As you admitted yourself, my servants do not carry the gifts to murder Lorgar Aurelian, they have merely enough to shroud themselves from his slaves' sights**."

"And they also have the blessings to sniff out the rituals done in the name of the Three."

"**Ha! So that is your plan...using my paws to carve your way to your prey one murder at a time...**" Malal spoke. "**Tell me, do you think this...unnatural alliance will be to the taste of your genitor?**"

His interlocutor appeared unfazed and asked-asked another question.

"Who do you think allowed your resurgence, Lord of Anarchy?"

"**Hmm...**"

"And you know very well you have no power over me or over those of my gene-line."

"**The Anathema's son to the end, I see**." The Deathmistress of the Sabotage Claw didn't know if it was-was mockery or compliment. Maybe it was both-both, as always with her God. "**Very well, you have your alliance, Corvus Corax. My last Skaven will be placed at your disposal...until your brother's essence lies at my nonexistent mercy**. **And I will add one last boon, you might call it a...prophecy**."

"That won't be necessary," the immense raven-thing answered as it wrap-shrouded itself in dark-shadow.

"**Oh, but I insist**." Malal laughed. "**Eight fortresses. Eight planets. Eight rituals, to fuel the glory of Chaos Undivided or Anarchy. I see worlds burning. I see light and flame. I see victories without tomorrow, campaigns without future, and hope bathed in bloodshed. I see angels accepting their destiny and paying the price for it. And at the end of the journey...two Primarchs will die, and the throne of the galaxy will be won and lost**!"

There was a long-long silence, and the raven-thing became nearly invisible.

"So be it. Terra stands."

The presence of Malal left-vanished, but not before three-three last words were spoken by the divine power using her-her throat.

"**No**, **Cadia stands**."

**Author's note**: So it begins.

War has begun. It is a conflict which is seriously going to be remembered by this galaxy in every way that matters.

The Escalation preparations took a bit longer than I estimated, but here we are now. From then, events are going to be escalation and war.

The next chapter will be *Black Crusade 10-2 Cadia Stands*.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption