Teaser – 08 February 2024

**Legacy 13.2**

**Legacy of Decay**

*Decay.*

*It is such a simple word, isn’t it?*

*It doesn’t sound very dangerous.*

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

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

*No matter. It is still Decay.*

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

*It is the disintegration of Order.*

*It is the maw which does its utmost to rot the foundations of civilisation.*

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

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

*But is it really the case?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Should we speak of the Eldar?*

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

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

*And of course, there is the Imperium.*

*My creation.*

*My greatest failure.*

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

*Look at what it has become.*

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

*It was never supposed to be like this.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*They have not walked knee-deep into the ashes of the Federation’s capital, and cried the death of trillions, while the laughter of the pestilence parasite echoed across the Warp.*

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

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

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

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

*Chaos can be defeated.*

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

*In the mean time, I will just have to settle to listen to its shrieks of fury when it will discover how badly it underestimated Taylor Hebert.*

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

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

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

**The Hope Beacon – in construction**

**2.912.312M35**

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

**Liandra of Caledor**

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

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

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

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

It wasn’t the size of a Webway City.

But it wasn’t for lack of trying.

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

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

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

It was likely an underestimation.

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

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

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

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

“I’m impressed, my Empress. I didn’t think you would be able to keep something of that magnitude a secret from everyone.”

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

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

“Yes, though the factor I had to find a way to transport all the food here to feed my Swarm played a more important role at the beginning. We planted some mega-cacti, but for a project of that size, Catachan-ants and the Ambulls would rapidly starve if they had only a diet of cactus juice to replenish their strength.”

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

For this admission, she received a snort.

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

“Yes, Webmistress! The Custodes just departed-“

“It is fine. This is more inspection and...preparatory work today.”

“As you say, Webmistress! Hestia is on her way...but you already know that.”

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

Then there were the adamantium doors.

Liandra felt respect for the insects. Bringing here the gates must have been a tremendous chore by itself.

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

And at last they were introduced to the ‘Ring’.

The name was appropriate, in a way.

The large tunnel, once ‘poked’ via a psychic probe, would indeed form a magnificent ring into the depths of the planet once it was complete.

It was not the case now.

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

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

As for the purpose of the whole project?

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

“You are building an Aetheric Engine.”

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

“Your Empire has already a lighthouse.”

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

On that point, Liandra nodded.

The pretense was discarded, and the former Blood Muse watched the ‘Ring’ with determined eyes.

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

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

No, there was something else-

Ah.

“You need Wraithbone to ‘connect’ the different Pylons.” She didn’t even pretend it was a question.

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

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

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

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

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

“She did.” Liandra said defensively. “And I have to say, without modesty, that I am very good at it.”

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

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

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

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

“This is, naturally, assuming you work alone.”

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

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

Liandra blinked and considered the matter for a long period of time.

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

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

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

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

“My spiders have started to call it the ‘Hope Beacon’. I think you can mention it to the Herald of Atharti...but only to her.”

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

 **Basileia Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

She could only pray it wasn’t going to change.

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

“I have another problem I want to use your expertise for.”

“I’m all ears, my Empress.”

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

The Angel of Sacrifice sighed internally.

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

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

The next facial expression was definitely smug.

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

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

The Muse did not take long before her lecture to reach the ‘interesting’ points.

“The agents of the Hungering Maw are here. Lovely.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes.” Taylor said curtly. “Is it possible?”

The answer came just as fast.

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

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

It was...bloody terrifying.

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

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

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

“It is.” There was no purpose to turn around the problem, after all. “This is the only lead we have so far to eliminate the Tyranid vanguard scouts so far.”

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

“Bad news first.”

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

“This,” Taylor grimaced inwardly, “will not be a problem.”

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

“Cold, my Empress.”

“And the good news?”

Liandra bared her teeth.

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

This time, Taylor returned the smile.

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

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**The Stark Redoubt**

**5.913.312M35**

**General Vincent Sharp**

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

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

General Vincent Sharp snorted very loudly.

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

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

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

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

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

“This is just scandalous!”

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent Sharp cleared his throat.

“Ah, you noticed, Adjutant-Captain?”

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

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

Somehow, the old pun of ‘we Jungle Fighters are really bad at maths’ wasn’t going to work this time.

No, it was better to go with the truth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Duly noted. I will begin the selection process immediately.”

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

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

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

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

Laughing at that moment would be completely unprofessional.

General Vincent Sharp did it anyway.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**High Orbit over Holy Terra**

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

**0.919.312M35**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

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

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

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

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

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

“In which way, Lord Admiral?”

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

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

“I’m sure my brother has *excellent* reasons.”

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

Damn it, Xerxes.

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

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

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

Rudolf von Goldenbaum watched him like he had thrown mud on his pristine uniform of Battlefleet Solar.

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

The far younger man shook his head.

“I am willing to listen to certain industrial priorities, Lord Vandire. But I am not willing to close my eyes when the problems of a Battleship class. I want to win void battles with that Battleship. As it stands, I would rather choose to build Von Kisher’s Combustibles again.”

“Err...weren’t the combustibles...err...the Battleships which exploded after a few shots during the Battle of Commorragh?”

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

Xerxes was not going to like that at all.

Nicephorus had not many certainties in his life, but he was sure of this ‘minor fact’. It would be best to make sure he was far away from anything valuable and expensive when he gave them the news.

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

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

“Your brother don’t want a few,” Goldenbaum interrupted very rudely, “he wants forty of them to be built in the next thirty years!”

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

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

“It might be one of the new brand-new innovative designs of the Zion shipyards,” Nicephorus, trying not to show how much in the dark he was about it.

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

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

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

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

“I will deliver the message, Lord Admiral.”

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

**Holy Terra**

**Merica**

**Mega-Hive Cajun**

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

**0.921.312M35**

**Adept-Primus Joost Harpagon**

There were days when Joost was very relived to be alive. Let it not to be said that the Living Saint wasn’t respecting her promises.

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

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

But there were more important preoccupations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Though Joost had to admit he had his doubts if really someone could kill this monster. In four thousand years, no one since the Emperor’s Champion himself had come close.

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

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

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

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

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

“The Seventh is Gluthor Skurvithrax the Ferryman, yes.”

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

But there had been some defeats too.

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah. The Ninth is the Destiny Unwritten, isn’t it?”

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

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

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

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

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

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**2.932.312M35**

**Regina Wei Cao**

“And so I’m not saying my nobles want plenty of Agri-Hives built on Wuhan itself.”

Her wife groaned. Loudly.

“But you’re implying it very strongly.”

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

“Is it that evident?”

“Yes. And I suppose you blackmailed one of my poor Adjutants into looking at the numbers. Just to know if the industrial production numbers supported the theory.”

Wei grinned. Taylor knew her *very* well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She received a mock glare for her words.

“They have agency, you know, Wei.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What changed?”

“I suppose the whole point of the audience is to discover it.”

The Regina of Wuhan huffed.

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

“Duly noted, oh Regina.”

**The Red Strategium**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

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

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

“The so-called ‘Hive Fleet’ the Tau faced in their future timeline was a mere vanguard.”

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

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

And unfortunately, Overlord Imotekh did.

Oh, he did.

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

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

And Imotekh’s logic was flawless.

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

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

“Hive Fleet Gorgon was playing with the Tau. It was playing with them the very moment it encountered them.”

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

“For Gorgon, I understand,” Taylor frowned. “But for an hypothetical Hive Fleet sharing Behemoth traits, what-“

“What is Behemoth’s specialty, Lady General?” The Stormlord asked imperiously.

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

Overlord Imotekh nodded.

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

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

“If there are two Hive Fleets, there are more out there.”

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

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

“And the other hypotheses I formulated to Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten?”

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

“Assuming it can’t be both.”

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

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

“Assuming it can’t be both.” Imotekh repeated before changing the subject. “Captured specimens would be appreciated.”

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

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

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

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

“I trust you understand the value of the information I delivered to you.”

“Yes. Numbers aren’t the solution to deal with the Tyranids.”

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

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

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

Blood of Terra, what were they at war against?

**Azkaellon Stadium**

**2.944.312M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

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

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

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

Take today, for example.

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

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

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

It had a core of truth, but Gavreel didn’t think it was the *only* truth.

“Unlucky,” the Basileia remarked when one of the competitors was disqualified from one of the one hundred metres qualifiers because he anticipated the orders of the judges.

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

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

“Which means that practically, it is an entirely different story.”

The shrug confirmed Gavreel had guessed right.

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

The way the sentence ended made him unconsciously chuckle.

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

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

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

“Probably,” the veteran Sergeant admitted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And these had been merely presents from the Planetary Governor.

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

The insect-mistress chuckled.

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

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

“And how did his family came to earn such a fortune?”

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

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

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

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

“This is the Imperium of Mankind, Gavreel. Cultures were already really different before they left the Cradle, and thousands of years of separation made very unique differences.”

“Yes.” Gavreel smiled. “So what did he want?”

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

“Am I wrong?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Janissaries?”

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

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

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

**Hive Athena**

**The Chapel of Hope**

**2.999.312M35**

**Chapter Master Michael Yarhibol**

The ceremony had been simple, yet beautiful.

The singing voices had been soft, yet sincere.

The melodies had been mournful, yet filled with courageous.

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

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

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

“Walk with me, Chapter Master.”

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

You could feel it.

You could hear the song.

The Chapter Master was thus unsurprised by the next words.

“I have a mission for you, if you’re willing.”

“We are.” He answered automatically this time.

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

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

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

“Catachan.”

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

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

They were not souls to be easily impressed.

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

“I wasn’t aware there was a rebellion of anything of a...rebellious nature,” Yarhibol said slowly.

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

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

“Good.” Lady Weaver replied, and resumed walking. “You won’t be alone, of course.”

“The Brothers of the Red?”

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

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

On a battleground like Catachan, a Raptor Astartes was easily worth a hundred guardsmen.

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

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

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

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

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

“I...I don’t know what to say...”

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

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

“I am a strong believer in the theory of ‘victory investment’, Chapter Master.”

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

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

**Nyx System**

**Ruby Harvest**

**The Manor of Red Leaves**

**2.005.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

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

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

The insect-mistress meant by ‘extensive modifications’ that over ninety percent of the ancient infrastructure had been destroyed and replaced. And the ten percent remaining was limited to the gardens.

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

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

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

For the audience of today, though, the isolation worked for her purpose.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And she didn’t like him.

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

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

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

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

Nothing more, nothing less.

The bonding didn’t turn them into better persons, and it assuredly didn’t transform them into reliable and pleasant partners.

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

That was all.

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

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

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

“You stand in violation of the Himalayan Accords!”

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

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

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

**Sacrifice** sang.

**Sacrifice** shone.

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

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

“The High Lords...will...impose...sanctions...”

Taylor sighed.

“The High Lords already know.” Adding ‘stupid’ was really tempting for a moment. “The Fabricator-General informed them himself.”

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

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

“The Ansibles are not proscribed technology, otherwise the Mechanicus of Mars wouldn’t have several ones functioning as we speak in several parts of the Solar System.”

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

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

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

“You understand quickly! Now be-“

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

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

And his screams became shriek.

For long seconds, the psyker truly felt agony.

Then Taylor did lower the intensity of the pain.

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

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

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

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

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

“You...are...”

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

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

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

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

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

“You-“

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

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

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

“It is a good thing, then,” the Basileia replied softly, “that there will be no ‘we’, then.”

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes.” The Chosen of the Omnissiah grimaced. “I’m sorry Archmagos, but I lost my temper.”

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

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

“Nonetheless...well, what is done is done. I hope you bring good news on your part.”

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

“And the distance between the two Ansibles?”

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

“Really?” Lady Weaver immediately smiled. “That’s very good news!”

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

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

The Chosen of the Omnissiah shrugged.

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

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

“I agree completely.”

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

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

“That...” the Chosen of the Omnissiah hesitated, which wasn’t all common for her. “I wasn’t intending to build it in the Nyx System, we haven’t the free space for it, really. But in only one location?”

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

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

The argument was not without merits.

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

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

“Control?”

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

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

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

“There are politics, I understand.” An Adjutant-Spider brought refreshments, and the Basileia of Nyx drank rapidly half of a bottle of water. “The Ansibles?”

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

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

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

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

**Nyx System**

**High Orbit over Blue Anchorage**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.010.313M35**

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

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

The Astartes were the first to depart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But this was out of his hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Let’s see it, then.”

The old-fashioned folder was delivered, and the Basileia began reading the content.

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

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

“This is exact. There are some additional specifications for Transport and Supply Ships with the new modular standards.”

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

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

“But the Salamanders kept the data, and you felt it answered some of your needs,” Lady Weaver told him with pinpoint accuracy, as usual. “The Cruisers are all Venus-class, I don’t need more clarification about them save one. How many command-pattern among them?”

“Four,” Neidhart spoke. “And we have commands to build ten more Venus Cruisers from other Sectors, including two from your friend the Sultan.”

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

“I don’t know if ‘friend’ is the correct term, Admiral. We have certain ideas in common when it comes to military and economic policy. The Redoubtable-class Light Cruisers?”

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

“And the Katana-class Frigates?”

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

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

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

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

“Lord Admiral?”

“Your Celestial Highness?”

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

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

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

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

**Atlantis Sector**

**Uta Sub-Sector**

**Schubert’s Grave System**

**Approaches of Mothball Fleet Space ‘Sublime Hierophant’**

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

**4.013.313M35**

**Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal**

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

And Oskar von Reuenthal liked to believe he was competent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the Light Cruiser of the Ecclesiarchy is right above them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cruisers. In pirate hands. Or worse.

This day was getting better and better.

“Do we have any indication they’ve already managed to seal some capital ships?”

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

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

Oskar snorted contemptuously.

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

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

What didn’t it reassure him?

“Yes?”

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

This was-

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

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

“Change formation for Spear Three.”

“You want to capture some of them, Admiral?”

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

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**2.018.313M35**

**Archmagos Dragon Richter**

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

Yes, yes, shame on her.

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

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

But this was going to wait.

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

“We’d just begun debating about some tertiary issues,” Taylor waved the matter away. “Minister Sidorakis?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I was under the impression though that the first point was tolerated because of...political reasons.”

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

“If their goal was to make us dumber and dumber, they couldn’t have tried it any other way, your Celestial Highness,” Alexeis Sidorakis promptly agreed with his superior.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sigh after these words proved that yes, Taylor already knew it very well.

“And now the last point. Dragon.”

The Tinker rolled her eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

“Emperor give me strength,” the Ruler of Nyx muttered, “do they realise there are incredibly good reasons why we only give some psycho-indoctrination to the Astartes and some of our elite military units? The mental damage it can cause if done improperly is-“

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

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

“I know!” there, the annoyance was evident. “I know.”

Alexeis Sidorakis cleared his throat.

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

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

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

“Performance?”

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

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

“There is only one big problem. Implant L-N5 is produced on what I consider ‘artisanal scale’. And it is expensive.”

“How expensive are we talking about?”

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

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

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

“Yes, your Celestial Highness!”

**Training Zone Gamma-Three**

**2.022.313M35**

**Sergeant Igor Vichev**

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

Poor bastards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He would still love to have a shower.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What it is, Sergeant?”

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

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

Igor instinctively saluted.

“Colonel,” he grunted. Yes, Weaver wasn’t a Colonel anymore, but she would always be *the Colonel* for him.

“Still a Sergeant, Igor, I see.”

“You know me, Colonel.”

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

And the fun he enjoyed every day would disappear.

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

Igor tried. He rather liked it.

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

This ‘rotary Plasma Cannon’ certainly was lighter and could be transported with them in a Chimera or any transport.

But it was a Plasma Weapon.

“And the overheating problems?”

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

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

“They really solved the overheating problem that way?” he didn’t bother hiding his frown and his doubt.

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

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

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

“Yes, Colonel!”

The procedure was rather simple, and was done three times until they could do it with a blindfold on their eyes.

He aimed.

“FIRE!”

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

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

After the tenth time he fired, Igor stopped.

This was because the target, the ugly slab of metal, had an enormous hole inside it, having carved the ‘chest’.

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

**Nyx System**

***Jaghatai’s Celerity* Shipyard**

**Headquarters of the Compact**

**2.031.313M35**

**Rogue Trader Lady Magdalena Orpheus**

They called it a room, but it had the amount of Palace to be in its own right. It was incredibly lavished with precious things, to the point that it could be considered a good museum by the number of historical objects it exhibited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Any question about the rules about additional signatories for the Nyx Compact?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One by one, they voiced their approval.

After that, the real ceremony could begin.

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

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

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

**Somewhere in the Nyx System**

**The Umbra Mobile Docks**

**2.049.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

There was no adamantium prow. Correction, there was-

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

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

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

Yes, obviously.

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

“Our operatives,” said the man who had only given her the designation ‘Operative U’, “are very resourceful, and the training for the ship crews is...exacting.”

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

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

Not so for the Officio Assassinorum.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I see. Specifics?”

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

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

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

“The Grand Mistress will be pleased.”

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

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

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

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

Or Operative U was that good.

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

The Angel of Sacrifice grimaced inwardly.

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

Yes, it was sarcasm.

“I was under the impression certain backdoors had been permanently shut down when the Grand Mistress earned her current position.”

“She did. In at least one case, we are sure the Eversor agent requested the invitation, not the reverse.”

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

“I heed the warning.” It wasn’t like she could do anything else...for now.

**Approximate location [REDACTED]**

**Date [CLASSIFIED]**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

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

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

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

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

“The map was obtained from the local Necrons, wasn’t it?” one of the new representatives of the Ordo Xenos asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And it was correct.

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

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

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

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

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

No one had a defiant retort for that.

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” Pedro de Moray told him. “And that’s why of all you were invited today.”

**The Eye of Terror**

**The Plague Planet – Death Guard Homeworld**

**Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Primarch Mortarion**

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

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

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

All of it was a lie.

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

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

Then there was only spite and cruelty.

That was the truth of what Decay was.

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

Mortarion had no doubt about it.

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

But not him.

Oh no, not him.

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

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

It was infuriating.

He nursed his grudges, of course.

But there was no victory to be found.

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

“**Magnus’ sons were wrong**,” he grunted. “**All is filth, not dust**.”

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

Now it was impossible.

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

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

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

This was a disaster.

Someone had to pay.

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

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

The answer, he felt, was likely ‘a lot’.

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

And they had built him a throne.

It was an insult, of course.

But there had been no escape.

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

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

But it was more than that.

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

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

Unfortunately, no answer came.

Or was it fortunately?

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

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

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

Typhus heard the words, of course.

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

But the former Herald couldn’t answer.

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

Mortarion knew what the Grandfather had done.

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

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

It was ingratitude at its finest.

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

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

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

And worse of all, Mortarion was almost certain Nurgle hadn’t anticipated it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And not that his own punishment was enjoyable.

The throne where he was imprisoned to was his prison, yes.

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

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

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

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

“But it gives fruits. And in these fruits, a twisted copy of my gene-seed exists.”

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

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

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

Or so was Nurgle’s intention, at least.

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

But, and that Mortarion had not missed, with the number of potential aspirants Gluthor Skurvithrax had returned with, the God of Decay wasn’t going to lack in resources soon.

Nurgle was creating an impressive number of proto-Astartes.

They wouldn’t have the strength and the skill of his sons.

But there would be a lot of them.

“Father,” one of the newborn things croaked.

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

 “**You are not my son. Begone**.”

The servants laughed in the distance.

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

Mortarion heard a name.

“***Malicia***. ***I want Malicia to be brought here***.”