**Tyranny 12-4**

**Ashes of Victory**

*Congratulations, Weaver, you won this campaign.*

*You played a key role in the elimination of Lorgar. By your command, the Armada survivors of the Seventeenth Legion perished.*

*In the ruins of the xenos city, it was your blade which ended the Master of Shadows’ existence.*

*It was your prompt intervention which ensured the Chosen of Tzeentch would not be able to claim enough Transmutational Changestone to do more than secure her chief powerbase.*

*I could continue like this for a long time, but the conquests wait for no one.*

*So let’s end it here and now.*

*You broke the King in Yellow without bothering to raise your sword once.*

*A part of me, the slivers which remain of my mortal self, hate you for that.*

*You watched us bleed and be destroyed, Weaver. By supporting the rise of Anarchy, you and the Anathema guaranteed the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star would be inefficient, cataclysmic, and a loss for every side which committed a fleet to this butchery.*

*But I am mortal no longer.*

*The slaughter you were ready to let us accomplish in order to satisfy your strategic goals...it was impressive.*

*It was* ***War****.*

*Glorious, limitless war.*

*And with a few stones of your own, you changed the course of the battle.*

*You broke the ambitions and the might of the King in Yellow.*

*And you didn’t strike when it was within your ability to kill me.*

*I knew it before, and I am certain of it now as I am knee-deep into the ashes.*

*You won, and with your victories, you gave us the ashes of your triumphs.*

*Again, I give you my congratulations.*

*You will have what you seek in the first place.*

*For a few years, you have earned a lull in the Eternal War.*

*However.*

*Don’t think this is a prelude to this absurdity you call ‘peace’.*

*By killing Lorgar and his Legion of blind fools, you removed a major weakness from the Gods’ order of battle. By breaking the former status quo, you convinced my Master will let me forge a Legion which has the potential to drown thousands of worlds into an ocean of blood. We may yet erect more mountains of skulls than the Twelfth Primarch would ever have built.*

*I am the Red Angel, Weaver.*

*And I know that for all your efforts to avoid it,* ***War*** *is coming again.*

*The Bloodthirsters have smelled it. The Angel’s Bane is preparing for it.*

*You feel it coming too, I think.*

*Not a skirmish, not a vibrant but short inferno like the one you made when you set aflame Commorragh.*

*It won’t be a failed campaign of destruction like the owners of the Ymga Monolith tried.*

*It won’t be a ridiculous and predictable assault made by the Seventeenth Legion.*

*The key players won’t be content to stay idle and play the role of spectators.*

*This time, entire stellar systems will be ravaged.*

*Starforts will fall.*

*Cities will be sacked and plundered.*

*Armies will perish.*

*Legions will assemble before the storm of darkness.*

*This is why I will raise a Blood Host unlike those which have come before within my new kingdom of the Calyx Hell Stars.*

*This is why you are going to assemble a new Crusade Fleet, one worthy of the Great Crusade itself.*

*For we know what is coming, Weaver.*

*The Galaxy is going to burn.*

*You won this campaign, Golden Angel.*

*But a campaign is not the* ***War****.*

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperium Palace**

**The Forgotten Library**

Thought for the day**:** Drink deep of victory, and remember the fallen.

**0.965.311M35**

**Primarch Magnus the Red**

For a few seconds, Magnus lamented at the exact sequence of events which had led him to this moment. At the same time, he had a mission. And this horrible rodent was an obstacle.

“You will not have these shelves to sharpen your teeth, horrible rodent! Return to whatever dimension you came from!”

The ‘Atemporal Beaver’ – that the Custodes had nicknamed for its curious resemblance to the animal of Old Earth – sniffed loudly...and then teleported out of existence.

Magnus breathed out in relief. No battle with this...with the *Atemporal Beaver* today. It was a relief, because this psychic anomaly was incredibly quick, in addition to having an urge to gnaw the shelves and all wooden parts of his father’s library. Forcing it to teleport away when it didn’t want to was the kind of ridiculous quest that took hours to complete.

And no, Magnus didn’t know how the ‘Atemporal Beaver’ was managing to enter and leave the library. Teleportation, psychic or purely technological, did not work here. There were Custodes guarding the only entrance.

Of course, this was not the only strange happening in the library. In no less than four occasions, Magnus had been able to surprise an Adjutant-Spider of Weaver tidying up some shelves and reorganising some book collections. And this despite the minor problem that all the arachnids present on Terra had long left to go back to their mistress’ side.

The number of anomalies running in the library had in fact led him to make the theory that one way or another, these animal presences were echoes of the companions the ‘Living Saints’ his father had or would imbue with his power at some point.

If the theory was correct, the flow of time in this domain of knowledge had been seriously altered, to not say damaged.

It also meant his task to tidy up the entire library was doomed to failure.

But it would take more than a theory to stop him.

He was Magnus the Red of Prospero. He was-

An enormous pile of books, about five metres tall, chose this instant to try to kill him.

Only a Primarch’s reflexes prevented him from being buried under a mountain of books...again.

“Magnus! Magnus! Where are you?”

“I’m here, Leman!”

Two more instable piles chose this moment to thunderously crash.

Magnus sighed.

Had he mentioned that his father was an avid reader, but a horrible library user who couldn’t return the books where he had taken them?

Well, the Fifteenth Primarch mentioned it now.

“The reconquest of the Imperial Library goes well, I see,” his brother guffawed when he arrived to see what the ‘carnage’ was about.

“Oh, shut up, Leman,” the crimson-skinned Primarch rolled his only eye. “I felt it took me a year or two to clean up the mess you left on the eastern wings where the Gene-Alchemy books were hidden.”

“Magnus, that was three days ago.”

It didn’t look like a joke...it wasn’t a joke.

“Really?”

“Really.”

Magnus grimaced.

“This would support my theory this library is in a time anomaly or has been the target of some sorcery which resulted in it being plagued by time anomalies.”

“An interesting theory,” Leman replied...before shrugging and taking it as an unfortunate of life. Often, Magnus didn’t know if was to be frustrated or relieved by his brother’s ability to let go of his curiosity. “But this isn’t what I came here for. First, I’ve heard news of your sons.”

The total lack of smile or any positive emotions were a good hint that if there was good news, they were going to be outnumbered by the bad ones.

“Ahzek?”

“As the first messages from father suggested, your First Captain sacrificed himself to make sure ten thousand of your sons could escape. The greater abominations of your former slave-master are busy torturing them so they can enslave again the Fifteenth Legion’s survivors.”

Knowing Ahzek...Magnus wasn’t surprised. His exiled son had done exactly what he had done millennia ago.

“If they can escape the Eye of Terror, they have a chance.”

“Yes.” Leman grunted in approval. “And the problem is that this vile mass of Maleficarum knows it. Now that the devastating war of the Calyx Hell Stars is over, the majority of the surviving Malfian sorcerers have been committed to hunt them down. Something called the Mirror Cage has apparently been cast.”

Magnus scowled angrily. He had been more than familiar with that cursed ritual...it was really something bad.

“If they are determined and skilled enough...they may be able to escape.”

But it was going to be a harrowing race against Tzeentch and all the Hosts sent in pursuit.

“Yes. And that’s why Inquisitors in the Cadian Sector report an increase of agitators proclaiming some red-armoured and blue-armoured Traitors will be the next assault wave against the Imperium.”

Damn you, Tzeentch...

“Thank you for the unpleasant news. I will just have to hope the patrols the escapees meet doesn’t fire without giving them first the chance to surrender. Any other problems I should be aware of?”

 “I am going to leave, Magnus.”

This at least pushed a chuckle out of his lips.

“Punishment time is over for you?”

Leman growled, an amusing sight as always when he was grumpy like this.

“No. It’s just that the Captain-General feels I have to return in time for the Conference which will take place there.”

“Will take place there? Isn’t it already over? I was under the impression it had to take place as fast as the Warp vagaries and delegations’ arrivals allowed. Or do you intend to arrive fashionably late?”

“If everything had gone according to plan, I would have arrived late,” his brother admitted. “Negotiating everything for the repairs of my sons’ naval assets and then the military requirements of transforming each Great Company into a Chapter took more time than I thought, and I had to oversee each of the squadrons leaving for Macragge. In addition to that, I had to be...very vocal about some things in what was the Fenris Sector. This was a big mess, and some of it predated the last war.”

“Ah.” Leman must have really, really hated all of it, like he hated reading a pile of administration books.

“Yes, ah. Fortunately for me, Weaver was delayed too. Some imbecile of Governor decided that after everything had happened, it was the right time to rebel, and since he controlled a key system in the Eastern Fringe, someone skilled had to teach him the error of his ways. As she was close, the Imperial Guard sent our good Mistress of Spiders.”

“The stupidity of these Imperial Nobles is truly something astounding,” Magnus shook his head, before watching again the book-covered floor in front of him...it was going to take him hours to remove the result of three piles’ collapse, that was for sure.

His gaze went further away. Piles after piles of books were waiting for him, a chaotic mess that no sane librarian would have tolerated for long. There were books everywhere. And since there were several levels offering themselves to his eyes from this observation point, Magnus had an excellent view on different sections, which had to contain tens of thousands of books and other works where human authors had distilled their wisdom and their knowledge.

All of it was priceless. Most of them weren’t unique, but they on average could be described as ‘incredibly rare’.

And they were piled up in a library like it was a bazaar of no importance.

Had Magnus mentioned his father was a horrible librarian?

“What is the name of the planet, for the sake of my curiosity?”

“Ichar IV,” his brother answered. “Hive World, important population and industrial centre, not far from the Imperium’s borders in the region.”

“Never heard of it before today,” Magnus honestly said. “But I almost pity the rebels. They really don’t have a clue of the blade about to sever their fingers...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Goryeo Sector**

**Ichar System**

**Ichar IV**

**Hive Incheon**

**Holy Basilica of Martyrs**

**4.967.311M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Terran Berlin Chimera**

When Berlin landed, the rebellion was already over.

The Lord Inquisitor Terran couldn’t say he was surprised.

If the shocked expressions of the PDF soldiers now being escorted towards prisoner camps were any indication, the majority of Ichar IV rebels couldn’t say the same.

“Our Acolytes report Supreme Marshal Kim surrendered with close to forty million men when the Scorpions broke through his command bastion,” Katharina Greyfax told him, her distaste obvious when she uttered the name of the treacherous PDF commander. “Though many of his men had already begun throwing their arms down when the spiders encircled his elite armoured battalions.”

“And Governor Pak?”

“Dead. He apparently decided to take his own life before the Space Marines reached him.”

“Good.” Berlin replied impassively. “I would have preferred this traitor to be executed in public, but the speed this rebellion was crushed and the purge of treacherous elements is an adequate substitute.”

And in the end, the Traitor Governor was dead. Lady Weaver had shown in a clear and non-ambiguous manner that breaking your oaths to His Most Divine Majesty carried fatal consequences for all who tried.

“I almost can’t believe she destroyed this entire rebellion in a single Terran month,” the younger Inquisitor whispered.

“Technically, by the standard of the Terran calendar, she did it in twenty-six days,” Berlin allowed himself this small touch of humour before frowning, “but I understand what you implied with your words.”

Ichar IV was so vital in the Sectors of the Eastern Fringe because it was rare: a true Hive World which provided both the manpower and the equipment for several Sectors. It was a key industrial planet, one which provided civilian and military parts for an uncountable number of Imperial souls. It had a population of over three hundred and fifty billion...or so the latest census of the Administratum said. From what he had seen, the Lord Inquisitor was more inclined to think the real number was about four hundred billion.

It was an ugly world, no doubt about it. The skies were filled with acidic smoke, and the hundreds of Hives were visible from orbit, separated by the desert that many centuries of endless exploitation had made. Rebellion had added battle-scars to the problem, of course.

A world like Ichar IV, with the sheer defences it was able to maintain, the endless amount of manpower at its disposal, and the gigantic Hive-fortresses themselves, could hold on for centuries if you couldn’t starve it out. And even if you did starve it, what waited you was still a ferocious amount of fighting.

The rebellion of such an important world ending in days bordered on the miraculous...which to be fair, was exactly what had happened.

As their footsteps led them to the entrance of the Basilica, the flow of captured soldiers faded before vanishing entirely, replaced soon by the more familiar sight of red power armours and silver banners.

The Templar Sororitas were patrolling, escorting tank-sized spiders...unless it was the contrary, and the giant arachnids escorted the female warriors of the Ecclesiarchy.

“But it is the Lord Inquisitor!” One of the eight-legged insects immediately rushed forwards. “I presume you want to meet the Webmistress?”

“I do.”

The next minutes were spent confirming Katharina and him were indeed who they claimed to be, being politely escorted from checkpoint to checkpoint inside the Basilica. While at first it was the Templar Sororitas who did the screening, the troops slowly began to include more and more guardsmen, with many armours and banners belonging to regiments of the Nyx Sector.

A few minutes later, it was their turn to be scarcer on the ground, though the Fay guardsmen remained...but now they were accompanied by Space Marines.

It took fifteen more minutes and an adventure into a maze of narrow corridors, but Berlin Chimera soon arrived into one of the vast halls of the Basilica. The Lord Inquisitor could immediately say he didn’t like the decoration.

It was...obscenely outrageous, decadent, and gaudy...everything looked like the decorators had decided to add more and more wealth until they decided it could be some ‘artwork’.

“Disgusting,” Katharina said out loud.

“I am in the mood to raze the Basilica, personally. It is an insult to the God-Emperor,” an amused voice answered.

The Living Saint was waiting for them, seated on a rather monastic wooden bench. As the neighbouring objects were covered in precious metals, incredibly expensive neo-leather and all sorts of luxury items, finding this one must have been difficult.

There were many spiders and Space Marines around her, though an honour guard of guardsmen and sisters leaned against the walls, ready to intervene should she give the order.

“Razing the Basilica? Really?”

The black-haired agent of the God-Emperor huffed.

“Governor Pak was so humble most of the statues supposed to represent the God-Emperor have his face on them.”

“These are statues which are supposed to represent the God-Emperor?” Katharina Greyfax said aghast. “I thought they were gargoyles!”

The Victor of Macragge coughed violently...as did several Space Marines. Other people cleared their throats loudly, by a strange coincidence.

“Anyway, the rebellion is over, what is left is to find the last supporters of the defunct Governor. A new Governor will be named soon, and Ichar IV will once again be a loyal and prosperous world of the Imperium.”

“You are the planetary commander in charge of crushing the rebellion,” Berlin Chimera answered. “Since you discharged your duties in such an excellent fashion, I see no reason to change anything you have decided so far.”

“Thank you for the confidence,” the Living Saint smiled, “of course, since you’ve done this no doubt long journey to meet me again, I don’t think you came here just to say ‘well done’.”

“I didn’t,” Berlin admitted easily. “It is about...our mutual friends which played a decisive role in a recent critical affair. They reported success, but so far, they are really, really tight-lipped on the details. And the post-battle report has yet to be written.”

“I understand. Gamaliel, Gavreel, you stay. Everyone else, leave us.”

The hall of the Basilica emptied rather fast, all things considered. Berlin knew that on Terra, this celerity would have never happened. The military forces of Weaver were efficient...and dedicated to their Lady, one could easily see the protectiveness in their eyes.

Once the golden doors closed, the star-eyed Angel didn’t waste any time.

“We were extremely lucky the King in Yellow’s plans were discovered too soon, forcing this hellish bag of bones to bet everything on a single cataclysmic battle.”

Cataclysmic was truly accurate. The Inquisition had seen what was left of the Granithor System. It was nothing more than ruined planet after ruined planet, and debris clouds after debris clouds.

Berlin would love to say it was a graveyard, but all the corpses had been burned, ground to dust, or cast away by sorcery.

“We were. Yet the danger is not completely over. And other threats have been created by this battle.”

“Yes. I would have preferred for there to be no Red Angel at all...or saving that, for the Traitor Primarch to keep its title.”

“But you didn’t kill her.” On that, the Grey Knights had not been tight-lipped. They had also told him it was necessary...but had stopped short of a true explanation.

“Someone had to destroy the ambitions of the King in Yellow,” the golden-armoured servant of the God-Emperor said with her eyes closed, “and it couldn’t be me. It couldn’t be any loyal Primarch, or anyone with a loyal soul. The risks were too great, our...friends of Titan...were very clear about that. That left two outcomes: either I let a second Red Angel rise, or it was her rival the sorceress who emerged the great victor. The latter option was judged to be far worse than the former.”

There were a few seconds of silence...and then the ruler of the Nyx Sector began to calmly give a retelling of the Exterminatus-level battle which had decided the fate of the Calyx Hell Stars.

It was a tale of horrors and abominations.

It was a tale of evil against evil, with the Imperium giving only nudges here and there to make sure the King in Yellow didn’t achieve his unholy ambitions.

It was a warning the Ruinous Powers, disunited and weakened for now, still represented the greatest moral and spiritual threat when it came to the Imperium’s survival.

“They will come back.”

“Yes. They are chest-deep in the ashes of their so-called victory, with the Calyx Hell Stars only a fraction of the kingdom they hoped to conquer...and most of the survivors had to retreat in catastrophe to the Eye of Terror to save their skins. But they’ve learned. They will return. And this time, they won’t do it the stupid way like the Traitor Seventeenth did.”

“Agreed. How soon do you intend to return to Macragge?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Civitas**

**The Latium Plaza**

**2.200.312M35**

**Chapter Master Aeonid Thiel**

“The tales about Macragge regularly praise its beauty. They don’t mention the cold, though.”

Aeonid smiled at the words of High Marshal Barbarossa.

“Our winters, as some of my predecessors said, are excellent to forge the heart and the courage of a true Ultramarine.”

“No true Space Marine will disagree,” the Chapter Master of the Black Templars assured him. “Though I think a few of Her Celestial Highness’ spiders and insects might.”

This time, the Ultramarine veteran had to control himself to not laugh.

The Adjutant-Spiders and the various insect species present in Magna Macragge Civitas had answered the call, of course...but they had come with a lot of blankets, furs, and winter clothes they had somehow managed to acquire. One could say a lot of things about Weaver’s servants, but they were quite resourceful.

A resourcefulness which apparently applied to their willingness to avoid the cold too. Their highest and biggest ‘emissary of the Swarm’, Lisa, had gone even further and ordered the arachnid auxiliaries to transport her to Laphis...and her ‘insistence’ had been crowned with success.

“No military force can be eager to fight in every weather condition this galaxy can throw at us,” Heinrich Barbarossa stated philosophically. “And I will admit, without our Power Armours, the waiting period would likely not pleasant for us. Her Celestial Highness’ campaign of Ichar IV unfortunately made sure the Bacta Conference will take place in the middle of winter.”

“It’s not as bad as it could have been, since we are welcoming only a warrior or two per Chapter, save a few exceptions,” Aeonid reminded the son of Dorn. The Black Templars, of course, were among those, as there had to be around four hundred Astartes of them here. They had just finished an Ork purge, tracking the remnants of the greenskins which had survived Stalingrad, annihilating their shipyards and their secondary bases. “And it gave Lord Russ the time to return.”

Heinrich Barbarossa grumbled.

Aeonid smiled again.

There had been more and more ships of the Wolves arriving around Ardium...no, Nova Fenrisia, he was going to have to take the habit. There were hundreds of Astartes who could boast descending from the Great Wolf, and unfortunately, the Black Templars were not exactly looking at them with a pleased eye. The customs and ways of life of the sons of Russ weren’t exactly anathema to the religious credo of Sigismund’s swords, but the cultural clash was definitely important.

“And Her Celestial Highness didn’t say why she ‘requested’ so many of us to be present today?” The High Marshal asked for the tenth time.

“No,” Aeonid replied patiently. “She didn’t say.”

Aeonid, however, could make an educated guess. While all the Chapters the Lady of Nyx was aware of had received an invitation to attend the Bacta Conference, the Imperial Fists had received a private request to attend in Company numbers, and so had the White Scars. And there had been certain events at Commorragh...

But he wasn’t going to spoil the surprise, assuming he had guessed correctly.

The next minutes were spent in relative silence, before at last, the roars of aerial engines was heard.

Unsurprisingly, several Thunderhawks and Guard Landers disgorged first a consequent Honour Guard, which went to stand side by side with the hundreds of Astartes already present. The second wave included the red-clad Sororitas, with some jumping hundreds of metres high and activating their jump packs to finish the descent.

After that, there were many enormous beetles, all of them presenting a shade of blue-white. They certainly were a new asset to deploy in winter conditions.

And finally, the core of the Dawnbreaker Guard landed, and the Light of the Emperor shone again on Macragge.

Out of the golden-painted Thunderhawk – the paint and all the decorations looked brand-new, Aeonid noted – Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, Lady of the Nyx Sector, Destroyer of Commorragh, Saviour of Macragge, and many other titles that would take a full day to recite, walked out and breathed out the freezing air of the Ultramarines’ homeworld.

The sound made when hundreds of Space Marines struck their fists in salute felt like it resonated over and over from the streets of Macragge Magna Civitas to the highest peaks of their Mountain World.

And then after a couple of steps, Lady Weaver sidestepped to the right and paused.

Aeonid stopped breathing, all the while he listened to murmurs of surprise.

And then one of the other Thunderhawks which had landed opened, and a giant came out.

The Ultramarine Chapter Master recognised him, of course.

There were far more scars on his face than there had been the last time, and a lot more flesh looked like it had been recently healed, but the presence was unmistakably the same.

“FOR THE KHAN AND THE EMPEROR!”

The White Scars had been caught by surprised, but only for an instant. Now they were raising their fists and roared their battle-cry.

The enthusiasm was...contagious. Soon enough most of the Space Marines here were proclaiming their joy, striking their fists against their armour...or outright taking mugs filled with some alcoholic beverage proposed by the Adjutant-Spiders, in the case of the sons of Russ.

Jaghatai Khan, returned from the dead, tried to speak, but no matter how healed he had been, his voice was evidently a bit too weak...and the ruckus the Space Marines and all the troops were making on the Latium Plaza was simply too much for anyone to be heard.

“I admit,” High Marshal Barbarossa shouted next to him to be heard, “that the request was well-deserved-“

The words of Sigismund’s spiritual successor died in his mouth, for another giant came out of the same Thunderhawk.

But this one wasn’t in white armour painted according to the traditions of Chogoris and respecting the traditions of the steppes. It was not a flowing sensation making you believe the owner was going to ride the winds themselves.

No, the new Primarch was magnificent and indomitable golden armour, standing like a rock...or a wall. He was like a fortress, an elemental force which would not get out of the way if a hurricane slammed into him.

“DORN LIVES!”

The Imperial Fists stopped gaping first, while the Black Templars were still in shock and most of the Seventh Legion’s Successors were still trying to shake themselves out of their stupor. “DORN LIVES!”

The sons of Vulkan were perhaps going to be a bit miffed their battle-cry had been so shamelessly copied...

Aeonid turned his head...

Nah, they were already beginning to party with the rest of the Astartes Companies assembled here.

“For a surprise, it’s a surprise.” Aeonid gave a sardonic grin to the Living Saint as the discipline of the parade broke up, the sons of Jaghatai and Dorn unable to stand in line for a single second longer.

“My latest message did say I would not come empty-handed to this Conference.” The mischievousness was definitely not the fruit of his imagination here and now. “And besides, everyone tries the game of ‘let’s surprise Weaver’. I thought I could turn the tables, just for today.”

“I have to say...you did.” Aeonid cleared his throat. “I hope you have brought a lot of supplies, because I think the celebration-parties are going to last a long time tonight.”

“I did...though I will say you’re very optimistic, thinking certain Astartes will stop feasting and partying in less than twenty-four hours.”

It was...an incredible accurate statement, and the future would confirm it.

**Fortress of Hera**

**Library of Ptolemy**

**2.209.312M35**

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert**

“I was told the wolfish sons of my brother were horribly disappointed your spiders filled their mugs with a non-alcoholic beverage.”

Taylor decided an innocent expression was the best gamble before Guilliman’s gaze.

A gaze which had gained some strength, since they had seen each other for the last time. Obviously, there hadn’t been time to test on him the same medicines her Hospitallers and Magi Biologis had tested on the Khan, but the Lord of the Ultramarines was looking far better than he did when she left Macragge the last time.

This had resulted in him being ‘only’ having his Power Armour today.

It was still a little weird, for the library around them was an oasis of calm and peace, isolated from the outside galaxy, with no chance to hear the multiple fireworks being launched or the other celebrations happening. But it was a reminder this galaxy was indeed a violent one.

“My spiders thought, with my express approval, that the hot chocolate we recently began to brew would be perfect for the freezing conditions we’re ‘enjoying’ on Macragge.”

“Hmm...and where did you find this delicacy?”

“It was part of a batch of plants that were supposed to be all giving medicinal supplies, but with the quirk that outside of the world, said plants couldn’t be cultivated without turning toxic for human life.” Taylor shrugged. “In the case of the cocoa plant, which gives us chocolate in the end, I think the nobles were simply too selfish to share with others what they ate and drank every day.”

“I see.” Roboute Guilliman nodded. “But when Russ-“

Loud footsteps echoed, as if an army of giants was on the march in the library...which was somewhat accurate, when you thought about it.

One by one, the Primarchs arrived and took their seats around the round table which had been there for countless centuries.

Taylor knew diplomacy wasn’t her strong point...but given the large missing intervals, she could easily guess this table had been meant for twenty Primarch-sized seats once upon a time.

There were only ten of them today, and three were several metres away from the table, all draped in austere shrouds of black.

Sanguinius, Hanzo Hattori, and Ferrus Manus had perished, and unless the Emperor was somehow able to resurrect them, they would never set foot upon Macraggian soil ever again.

There was another large seat set aside, one which was almost disappearing under the columns of books placed upon it. This felt like a joke at the expense of the Thousand Sons’ Primarch, and the insect-mistress decided, wisely in her opinion, to not comment about it.

Her own seat around the table was a new addition, obviously. A bit higher, and she would have to use her wings...and it wasn’t a joke.

Fine, it was a joke, Guilliman hadn’t created a table and chairs *that* high.

The result, ultimately, was a table where the chair to her immediate right was empty, as the Salamander seat remained unoccupied and would stay that way today.

And to Guilliman’s left, the same was true for the seating arrangement which had been reserved to Lion El’Jonson, Primarch of the Dark Angels.

It was Jaghatai Khan who opened the meeting. As always, Taylor did her best not to stare. No matter how many scars she had removed with the new medicines, it always felt astounding the Fifth Primarch had managed to survive the tortures of the Drukhari in the murder-arenas of the Webway.

“Hanzo stayed loyal, and I went to pay him my respects. May his memory be preserved for all the sacrifices his son and him did.”

One by one, the Primarchs and Taylor repeated the words, followed by the Space Marines chosen to be their security detail here.

“But while our brother stayed loyal and true, only being forgotten due to the abominable consequences of his defeat, the same can’t be said about someone else. *Nagash* is back.”

The name was uttered like an insult...and to be fair, it was perfectly justified. There wasn’t any power behind it. The Veil between the realities didn’t shiver. There were no dark omens to make the ground shake.

And yet, the name tasted like poison.

Taylor cleared her throat.

“He’s going to be a problem in the years to come.” The Lady of Nyx admitted honestly. “But we can’t exactly hunt him and slay him like he deserves. Unless I am reading it badly, the King in Yellow abandoned the demonic sword he had stolen and many other prizes before fleeing so he could not be tracked by conventional or sorcerous means.”

“There are other ways,” Leman Russ bared his teeth, “to hunt someone.”

And Taylor didn’t want to learn of them, for her peace of mind if nothing else.

“Perhaps,” the golden-winged Lady General Militant conceded. “But I am very wary about the idea of cornering someone that managed to bleed and cripple between seventy and eighty percent of the forces the Ruinous Powers arrayed against him. Yes, he lost most of his forces in the process. But most of them were built to be expendable, like his cursed battalions of skeletons. Those he will rebuild easily.”

The galaxy, alas, had hardly a shortage of ancient battlefields where millions of skeletons could be collected.

“I agree with Lady Weaver here,” Corvus Corax had arrived during the party...when exactly, she couldn’t say. Today he had chosen to attend in a very simple black toga with the silver raven of the Raven Guard for sole ornamentation. “The traitor has fled somewhere he will feel safe to plot and regain his strength. Cornering him there could lead to a great victory, but more likely it will result in the forces committed trapped and killed, before being raised to be enslaved in death when they refused to obey him when alive. And let’s not forget that while some of his Space Marines were permanently dealt with, some of his lieutenants were dispersed, not eliminated.”

“The theoretical is still we will have to face the King in Yellow once more,” Guilliman said at last, before looking at her. “Unless the other Traitors will do us a favour and get rid us of him while we watch the spectacle?”

Taylor shook her head regretfully.

“I would love to believe they can, and the Four Ruinous Powers and their slaves certainly have the motivation. Alas, I don’t believe it prudent to base any plan on their ability to do it. I must note that the Traitors needed several times our indirect assistance to prevent the rise of the King in Yellow as an ungodly abomination of Eternity. They could have failed. Wisdom suggests we prepare for the worst: that they will fail to stop the undead Lord...or that they won’t bother, if Nagash’s next plan doesn’t threaten Chaos directly.”

“Then I will lead the Extermination Force the next time,” Leman Russ growled. “He managed to trick me once, I will make sure he won’t walk out of our second battle.”

“I advise you,” Rogal Dorn spoke, his tone akin to a block of granite being granted sentience, “to not make the mistake to think Nagash will be the same opponent as before. While he is not Magnus, his sorcery and his vicious schemes make him incredibly redoubtable.”

“I will bring the Anathema Psykana with me, brother. I am eager to sever his skeletal head from the rest of his bones; I am not going to do it in a stupid way.”

“Good.” The Primarch of the Imperial Fists said bluntly.

“Or not so good, given the old and new enemies we’re now facing,” Jaghatai Khan of Chogoris commented with a slight smile. “The Tyranids. The Necrons. It seems we were really optimistic at the Triumph of Ullanor saying we would not fight against anything more dangerous than the Rangdan and the Orks.”

“We were extremely lucky,” Dorn told them, as always in a voice devoid of nonsense. “If the Necron Dynasties had risen up in large numbers while the Legions were busy with the Orks, be it during the last years of the thirtieth millennium or the War of the Beast, the Imperium would have lost extremely badly.”

“You are right,” Corax approved. “And let’s not speak of what the devouring the Tyranids could have done while we were distracted by Horus’ treachery or some other conflict.”

“The Eastern Fringe would have fallen,” Roboute Guilliman declared bluntly, “and then they would have launched their attacks deep inside Ultima Segmentum, opening a war on a thousand fronts.”

Assuming the Great Devourer didn’t try to bypass all their major strongholds and rush towards Terra for a decisive battle, of course...Taylor winced internally. Still, it was better to not overestimate the enemy, so far the Tyranids didn’t show macro-strategy skills on a galactic scale, or a capability to make traps involving thousands of fleets dispersed across a hundred thousand light-years.

“This is why I defend the idea we must remove the poisons that are slowly but surely killing the Imperium from the inside.” Taylor began to develop her point of view. “My new economic advisor gave me a long and detailed financial analysis of the Imperium in general terms, and the reality is that Terra is bleeding us dry. It is a black hole in terms of food, military firepower, and so many things I can’t possibly count them in a single meeting. At the same time, the Imperium has to guard the frontiers of the Eye of Terror, the Maelstrom, and maintain its vigilance on other quarantined zones. No matter how many Battles of Macragge we win, we’re slowly reaching the limits of the Imperium’s logistical abilities when it comes to wage war against greater threats.”

“And what kind of military operation would you have in mind, if the means were available?” Corax asked her politely.

“The Maelstrom,” the stars-filled-eyed parahuman replied. “I want to close the Maelstrom, and erase the threat it represents to the trade and military logistical lines of the Imperium forever.”

**Fortress of Hera**

**Temple of Correction**

**2.212.312M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

If one wanted to see a sign of how high his Lady had risen, Gavreel knew there would have not been a better sign of a thousand Space Marines standing and applauding as the Lady of Nyx made her grand entrance.

Obviously, this was not a thousand Chapters cheering and manifesting their support; while the Sergeant of the Dawnbreaker Guard had not a full account, there had to be around four hundred of them represented in the Temple of Correction.

“Thank you, swords and shields of the Adeptus Astartes.” Today, their Lady had not come in power armour, but in a long winter robe of red and gold. For this summit, it seemed to embellish her smile and presence even further than it already was.

There were a few greetings, salutations, and presentations...and then the Shield of Angels went directly on the offensive.

“While the First Bacta Conference, organised directly under my aegis at Nyx, ended in a satisfying manner, I would be lying if I said there weren’t potential sources of trouble waiting in the shadows.”

A lot of transhuman warriors suddenly did their best to not look in the direction of the Ultramarines and Space Wolves who occupied a good part of the assembly.

“Yet we are all servants of the Emperor,” Lady Weaver continued, “and the consolidation of the Imperium is far too important to lose it in petty grudges. As such, I am officially voicing my support to make Macragge one of the Bacta Depots of the Imperium.”

There was no loud sigh of relief, but there was a lot of applause and plenty of smiles.

But as Gavreel knew, this was far from the entire proposal.

“Don’t mistake me,” the mistress of the Adjutant-Spiders said calmly, “with the High Lords giving their support to the Weapon Depot which will be based here, and the importance of a system now hosting two Chapters of the First Founding, Macragge is destined to be the anchor of all military efforts in this part of the Eastern Fringe. And in case there is any doubt about what I’m warning you about, yes, I am convinced the Tyranids will make another attempt to devour this system.”

This, naturally, was a strong incentive to return all the Space Marines to a far serious mood.

After a few seconds of silence, an Imperial Fist Astartes stood.

“The principle is sound. But one Depot is nonetheless going to result in a...dispersion of the logistics.”

“The dispersal is, unfortunately, inevitable,” their Lady agreed quickly. “But it is necessary. And it won’t be one Depot, but two.”

This time, there were definitely whispers of surprise.

An Imperial map was summoned into existence, and one by one the stellar location of the current Depots appeared.

“As I said before, the First Bacta Conference proved satisfying in many regards. But as compromises added to compromises, several flaws on the strategic level have become evident. For evident reasons, Mortikah VII and Talus IV have been forced to supply their stocks to the Chapters operating against the Traitor Marines and the rest of the heretics unleashed from the Eye of Terror’s pits. It is exactly what the Emperor and I expected from them. But it leaves Segmentum Pacificus, recently reunited to the Imperium, with a lot of problems. This must change. And this is why I propose the Adeptus Astartes Homeworld of Sanctum, fiefdom of the noble White Templars, be granted the honour and the duty of guarding a new Bacta Depot.”

Naturally, Thomas, the White Templars battle-brother serving in the Dawnbreaker Guard, was the first to cheer, followed by nearly all Imperial Fists and Black Templars.

Actually, looking at all the sons of Dorn, Gavreel wondered with amusement if his Lady wasn’t trying to make the sons of Dorn as loyal to her as the sons of Sanguinius and Vulkan...

After several minutes of improvised celebrations, it was the turn of the Dark Angel representative, as was proper, to damper a bit the enthusiasm.

“I have no objection to Sanctum playing this role,” the Captain of the Unforgiven spoke, “the Formidyre System is a crucial bastion which is connected to half a dozen major Warp routes allowing Crusade-level expeditionary forces to rapidly deploy into the depths of Segmentum Pacificus. However, I question how the stocks will be allocated. As the recent Black Crusade proved, the existing stocks were absolutely vital to return our battle-brothers to their fully operational status.”

“A completely rational question,” the golden-winged insect-mistress nodded, not even giving a glance to Guilliman and the other Primarchs watching the spectacle from their seats behind her. “And one which will be answered by two measures. The first is going to be the increase of the Bacta production. Several interesting measures have been proposed to me, and they will be implemented once I return to the Nyx Sector. Obviously, the production increase will not happen in a single day, but I believe that within a decade, not only the pre-Black Crusade levels will be restored, the Imperium Bacta Depots will be able to count on more Bacta doses to sustain the pace of Astartes operations.”

“But the percentage granted to the Depots won’t vary?” While one couldn’t say the tone was anxious, the grim-faced of the representative of the Deathwatch was betraying a certain...nervousness.

“It won’t vary. As an exceptional gesture, and in exchange of several favours that the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Adeptus Astartes will be oath-bound to, Nyx will decrease its part from twenty percent to twelve. The noble Chapter Masters of Nocturne and Chogoris have also agreed to decrease their stocks of Bacta to six and seven respectively.”

And they were all going to receive a bounty of weapons, raw resources, schematics, and other valuable things for it. Gavreel knew Baal had proposed to decrease its part too, but given how far the home of the Blood Angels was from the other Depot, it simply wasn’t wise to decrease the Bacta strategic reserves of the Blood.

“That measure will free ten percent of the Bacta production for these two new Depots. The strategic importance of these locations being fairly equal, I suggest Macragge and Sanctum being granted five percent each.”

This naturally resulted in more applauds and cheering. The party – which had already been lasting several days aside – was showing all signs to resume here and now.

“I will also discuss in the next several days the opportunity for all Apothecaries of each Depot to be trained in the handling of new medical substances I intend to introduce. As the first ‘tests’ have been successfully concluded, per the agreement of Primarch Jaghatai Khan...” the Fifth Primarch made a sign towards the astounding number of wounds which had been fading away with every day here, “we will supervise more tests with the benediction of the Archmagi Biologis of the Adeptus Mechanicus and Lord Guilliman of Ultramar.”

At this point, it was a good thing the Temple of Correction was built very solidly, because a minor earthquake rumbled as an overwhelming majority of Space Marines manifested their joy.

**Assassin Elena Kerrigan**

The ambiance was rather festive when Elena arrived and began to move on the periphery of the great transhuman groups listening to the speech of an Imperial Fist about something that sounded like a doctrine of stronghold fortification.

Of course, the Angel of Shadows wasn’t fooled.

There were over a thousand Space Marines in the Fortress of Hera, and more waited outside, manning the rebuilt fortifications and the anti-orbital defences, supported by millions of men. For the celebrations and the good humour, the agent of the Officio Assassinorum was sure that if an alert came, the crystal glasses would be cast aside, and the lethal fury of the Adeptus Astartes would turn on the suicidal enemy who dared challenging them in the heart of Macragge.

That didn’t count the twelve massive Adjutant-Spiders. The giant arachnids were all pretending to discuss the merits of hot chocolate, tea, and other drinks, but Elena saw their eight eyes and the radiance flowing from them to their mistress.

Anyone that didn’t belong here would be stopped by them...or by the many insects waiting out of side behind the marble pillars and the reinforced arches.

Elena prepared herself as she took the empty seat to Weaver’s left.

One could only hope-

“So...nice tattoos, Elena.”

The shadow-wielding parahumans rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“This is war paint, not tattoos!” she retorted defensively. “And they weren’t my idea in the first place!”

“So you say...”

“I was forced to prove myself in a series of challenges to the...population of Kush. The contests were about proving my worthiness to defend Kush...and when I changed to this appearance,” which was to say, dark-skinned and dark-haired to have better camouflage in the dark jungles of Kush, “they painted my body with this white paint! I didn’t think of it at first, but the next time I changed my appearance, the paint didn’t fade away! It must have had a psychic component, because it isn’t getting away once you try to remove it with soap, water, and anything I tried.”

And of course, Taylor Hebert giggled.

“Stop laughing!”

Naturally, the other servant of the Emperor didn’t make a pause in her giggling...

“Were a few clowns present at any point, by sheer curiosity?”

“Yes,” Elena grumbled before shaking her head. “Wait, do you think-“

“It is certainly having all the characteristics of one of their jokes, yes.” The golden-winged parahuman made a sound of gloating that gave Elena to punch her before giving her an expression of amusement. “When you leave, I will ask Artemis to escort you. She will lead you to the *Enterprise*, I should have a few things that should make the paint fade away. In case it isn’t a joke and the...the local population expects you to return with white ‘war paint’ applied, my Adjutant will give you a copy of the...not-tattoos so you can reapply them quickly.”

“Thanks,” the simple word made her grit her teeth...but she wasn’t going to walk around with that, it would make stand out in crowds, and that was something an Assassin had to avoid at all costs!

“You’re welcome.” Of course, a baby Frostlion having been covered in Umbralshroud chose this moment to jump on Weaver’s lap. The goal was absolutely to obtain food and caresses, and it was successful...though the big spiders hissed and grumbled at the sight. “How did things go with Arranoc?”

“The Umbralshroud Veil is in place.” Elena reported formally before shifting to a more ironic tone. “And it has been done without the Imperium being involved, by the way. Some old psy-automatons will do the mining and send it to an abandoned world where the Mechanicus will wait for the deliveries.”

“I was a bit too optimistic.” There was definitely a twinge of embarrassment in the Angel of Sacrifice’s voice. “Or rather, I underestimated how much Anvillus wanted to exploit these worlds. I had to give them...I had to exchange a few precious things to keep them happy. Still, the Cromarc Wyldyr System is protected by Umbralshroud, and we get the Noctilith we want from the Night Hawk moon. This is the optimal outcome, no matter how long the negotiations I had to endure.”

Elena didn’t argue against that...and she didn’t want to say she would have done better: for all her attempts to learn the Eldar language, she didn’t have even the basics so far. Plus they were the Eldar, which one day could pass as your best friends, and then one second later talked to you like you were their mortal enemy...

“The projects?” the Angel of Shadows asked.

“Dragon is in charge of them,” the other Living Saint shrugged. “From what her latest messages reported, this is going well, especially since some Raven Guard Techmarines arrived to support her Tech-Priest Artisans. The Power Armour for your ‘Umbra Sororitas’ is the most advanced project, of course. For the rest, we’re very much at the preliminary stages.”

“Of course,” as much as she wanted to command brand-new gunships, a brand-new void ship for herself, and everything with undetectable stealth to make sure the Enemy never saw her coming... Elena knew the weapons and assets weren’t ready, and wouldn’t be ready for years to come. It took years to build the smallest Warp-capable warships, and most of them were of relatively simplest designs compared to what the Officio Assassinorum had commissioned the Nyxian shipyards to build. “And the Ecclesiarchy?” Elena asked hopefully.

“Sorry, for this one, you’re on your own.” Suddenly, the golden-winged parahuman was very, very interested in caressing the feline on her lap...

“Coward,” the assassin grumbled.

“I wouldn’t want to deprive you from the joy of negotiating with the Synod and its Cardinals.”

If the smile was more vulpine, the ex-vigilante was going to wonder if Tattletale, this infuriating bitch, had not reincarnated immediately in her friend’s body to infuriate the entire galaxy...and she.

“Coward,” she repeated.

“And more seriously, the Ecclesiarch has to meet with you. We Living Saints are extremely different from each other. Our respective roles are, politically and militarily, very much opposed. And astropathic messages are poor substitutes to meeting someone in person.”

“I...I don’t like it, but I understand.”

“Good. Now stand and smile, I have to present you formally to the Primarchs.”

Elena Kerrigan, Angel of Shadows, killer of Word Bearers and various Traitor Marines...groaned loudly.

“Can’t I stay in the shadows?”

“No.” The little mewling feline was given back to his large mother who was waiting patiently in front of the Adjutant-Spiders. Weaver must have felt her deep reluctance, because she decided to add more carrot. “And I will present you to the representatives of the Obsidian Jaguars after that. They are a Chapter descended from the sons of Guilliman, but you will like them, I think...”

**Nova Fenrisia (formerly Ardium)**

**The Fang**

**Hall of the Great Wolf**

**2.221.312M35**

**Wolf Lord Olav Direbear**

The feast had been both joyous and sorrowful.

Joyous, because all the sons of Fenris who had not yet gone to the Halls of the Allfather were gathered here, before their father.

Sorrowful, for soon one Great Company would leave them forever.

But it wouldn’t be said the Vlka Fenryka shied away from throwing a proper farewell feast.

Mjød barrels had been opened by the hundreds. Honey and many sugary goods had been bought by the tons to transform the soft Macraggian wine into something properly drinkable. A lot of groxes and other prey animals had been acquired, prepared with traditional Fenrisian cooking, and then roasted before arriving on everyone’s tables.

For several hours, the sons of Russ didn’t think too much about the end of the feast, and more about savouring the present instant, with the spirit of Fenris and their Primarchs looking fondly at them.

But the hours passed too fast, and soon the fires dimmed. The barrels were totally emptied, and the bellies were so filled even the biggest eaters of the Vlka Fenryka stopped savouring lest they be told to run to lose a thousand kilometres in the snow to lose some weight.

And the Lord of Wolves rose.

“Dragoneye! Come forwards! Don’t force me to drag you here before everyone like a stubborn pup!”

Wolf Lord Erik Dragoneye immediately abandoned his conversation with his brothers and rushed under the cheers and the bombastic hurrahs.

His Great Company followed in good order...nah, Olav was kidding. It was an undisciplined column, with the Blood Claws reminded to take their place behind the Grey Fangs by vigorous blows upon their heads.

Judging by his grin, their father was not going to train them hard to correct this. The pups and the Long Fangs had no idea what they had been chosen for...

“We stand ready to depart for Hishrea, father!”

“Keep this stupid smile off your face, young pup!” Leman Russ growled. “The greatest merit I found to choose you was that your Great Company had near one thousand sons of mine!”

It was sudden and unpredictable...it was like they were facing a mountain of *Death*, the blade of frost and primal winter.

They were standing in front of the Emperor’s hunter, and he wasn’t pleased with them.

“Thanks to Lady Weaver, the Imperium graciously accepted to let us resettle Hishrea with the brave families of Midgardia and the refugees of the now dissolved Fenris Sector. The Heiress to Sanguinius also used her administrative miracles to transfer most of the bounties earned at Cadia into the resources we need! You will not endanger this stable and secure situation, antagonise the Governor of the system, or refuse to defend your future Einherjar! Are my words difficult to understand?”

“NO JARL! I UNDERSTAND!”

“Good,” Leman Russ growled, and the aura of death and danger decreased, his anger visibly...not forgotten, but almost expended...for now. “I will be ruthlessly fair: by the time this conference and all the political shenanigans are over here, I will visit Hishrea and make sure you follow my recommendations. Don’t make me return choosing you...my son.”

“Yes, my Jarl...father!”

The son of the Allfather looked at the entire Hall with an emotion Olav wasn’t able to decipher.

Then he returned to staring at Dragoneye.

“And of course, don’t try to build your Chapter to Legion numbers! I’ve heard enough complaints from the bureaucrats in a lifetime! One thousand Blood Claws, Grey Hunters, and Long Fangs! Five hundred specialists; Rune Priests, Iron Priests and Wolf Priests plus all the others I am not going to list there!”

“Yes, father!”

“Take your mutt out of there, and prepare your Axemasters to ride like the sky chariots of our legends!” Leman Russ howled. “Let’s hunt together a last time!”

“FOR RUSS AND THE ALLFATHER!”

And all the sons of Fenris howled, followed by the thunderous acclaim of all the Fenrisians who would see them sally out of the Fang.

By the time the sun would set again over Asaheim, one Battle-Barge, three Strike Cruisers, two Nova-class Frigates, an entire Squadron of Hunter-class Destroyers, along with the nine hundred and eighty-four members of the Tenth Great Company had left Nova Fenrisia behind them.

The bards would sing of it in their sagas. It was the day the great saga of the Winter Sharks of Hishrea began.

**Macragge System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.224.312M35**

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert**

Taylor didn’t have the seer abilities of the Emperor, and she was glad of it, to be honest.

Every time she had met a Dark Angel Space Marine lately though, the Lady General Militant had thought it was a good thing to not have precognition powers...just to avoid knowing how big a disaster the sons of the Lion had been busy digging for themselves while the Imperium wasn’t watching them.

Alas, saying it out loud would certainly be a bit...undiplomatic.

And it took her a good minute to prepare a question that wouldn’t ring like an accusation.

“You told me there was some good news. Something about discovering how the Night Lords were able to infiltrate the *Rock*?”

“Yes, Lady Weaver,” the Captain, who had presented himself as ‘Master Imamiah’, answered. “It appears the Traitors somehow were able to infiltrate the construction workers teams when the Rock was transformed into a proper void fortress, and commission a tunnel that would figure on no maps. Then they placed a blasphemous xenos artefact near the exit, one which would mentally compel even a member of the Adeptus Astartes that this corridor’s section had been already cleared. And to make sure our technological instruments wouldn’t find the problem, they used a relay of augur-befouling systems that provoked temporary glitches in our defensive system.”

That was definitely...interesting. It wasn’t the kind of thing the Night Lords were famed for. Assuming these piratical Astartes had the will to use artefacts like those, they assuredly didn’t have the means.

“The Alpha Legion was involved in this operation from the very beginning, it seems.”

“This is the opinion of the Supreme Grand Master too, Lady Weaver.”

“What a pity we weren’t able to capture the important officers,” Isley and Pierre together may have been able to extract some extremely vital information from them...but since so many had been eaten by Tyranids or reduced to bloody paste, all remained was hypothetical and guesses. “But at least you have closed this avenue of infiltration. I don’t think they would be so naive as to come back to repeat their crime, but it’s better to remove that weapon from their hands.”

“Yes,” the Dark Angel officer approved. “If they want to attack the *Rock* again, we will be glad to welcome them with all the batteries at our disposal.”

You didn’t need to be a General to know that the welcome was going to be explosive...and deal with the Traitors in a very permanent fashion.

“If they are so stupid as to try, I will request you send me the vids of their annihilation.” Taylor frowned. “But it doesn’t solve the main problem.”

“No,” Imamiah acknowledged. “Luther is gone, and we don’t have a single idea of where he could have fled to.”

“The same is true for myself,” the insect-mistress replied honestly. “Truthfully, with the databases and other sources of information available to my forces, we really believed Sevatar had been the only of your prisoners to successfully escape. There were no Space Marines of the Great Crusade-era aboard the ships involved in the Cataclysm save those who had already been there for centuries or millennia. It’s always possible he was aboard the Heavy Battleship of the Dark Mechanicum or the Alpha Legion vessel, but those hulls were too far away from the Rock to receive a Thunderhawk in so little time, and you would have noticed teleportation flares.”

And now Luther, the very knight who had been the Lion’s adoptive father, was free.

Unlike the Night Lords, the Imperium didn’t even have a general direction to investigate his disappearance.

“It’s always possible,” Master Imamiah said slowly, as if he found his very words unconvincing, “that one of the ships which stayed in the Fenris System managed to rescue him before making a desperate Warp jump.”

“Most of said ships were reported annihilated, some by the guns of your Chapter,” Taylor reminded him politely. “That’s why I am thinking there is a far worse possibility. One which would work with very well with this Traitor’s apparent ability to trick anyone into believing he’s saying the truth, while staying alive for so long, stasis field or no stasis field.”

“And this possibility is?”

“Luther of Caliban is, in all likelihood, a powerful Sorcerer, sworn to one or more of the Ruinous Powers of Chaos.” The Lady of Nyx declared. “One powerful enough to escape through the Warp or some other malefic method.”

“You...you may be right, Lady Weaver. But if it is true, then he might be in any Segmentum at the time we’re speaking. And no battle-brother of the Dark Angels has any idea about his ambitions.”

According to the stories Gavreel had told her, the ambition four millennia ago had clearly been to build his own Legion.

But the Dark Angels had been thrown across space and time, reuniting them was certainly going to be the next best thing to impossible...

And ambitions changed. People changed. It was entirely possible the ambitions of Luther would change in accordance with the loss of his powerbase.

Nonetheless, having such a high-ranked Traitor unleashed across the galaxy was not a good thing at all...

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Civitas**

**Secundus Hall**

**2.227.312M35**

**General Nikolai Rokossovsky**

For the life of him, Nikolai didn’t understand why everyone was so bothered by the Macraggian cold. On Vostroya, this would have been considered lukewarm, and anyone who covered himself or herself in furs would have been laughed at for weeks!

Unfortunately, the Vostroyans were largely outnumbered, and though some Macraggian citizens and military personnel shared his amusement, it was maybe not a good idea to laugh out too loud. Not when one of the souls miffed by the Macraggian winter was Her Celestial Highness Lady Taylor Hebert, Lady General Militant of the Imperial Guard.

“Congratulations for your superb encirclement at Ichar IV, your Celestial Highness,” the Vostroyan General began as a column of spiders made noises of relief as they entered the Hall of Scipio and began to remove a small mountain of furred clothes from their large bodies. “The reports I’ve read makes for impressive reading.”

“It helped that the opponent had not read the *Tactica Imperialis* and practically invited me to do an encirclement of his forces,” the Mistress of the aforementioned spiders huffed, “I’m not going to complain, it considerably made it easier to end this campaign. But I’m sure that if you had been there in command instead of me, you could have achieved the same.”

“Possibly,” Nikolai said before making a significant addition to the assessment, “in all likelihood however, I would have needed a lot more time to arrange the conditions by which said encirclement became possible.”

It was the panic that spread thorough the PDF troops of Ichar IV after they encountered the first Scorpiads and Baalite Scorpions which had created the first decisive rout. Optimistically, elite Guard regiments could have created the same effect, but not in so little time.

“Hmm...on one hand it was good news for this campaign, but it is also bad news using a long-term perspective.” A concerned expression appeared on the Lady General Militant’s face. “Just imagine what a Tyranid invasion would have done to the defences of Ichar IV if it had been said xenos instead of my Swarm.”

Nikolai grimaced. That was a scenario that he would prefer not to imagine, by the God-Emperor and all his Saints.

“But let’s not discuss of dark possibilities for now. I was told the Primarch of the Ultramarines gave you some homework while I was away?”

“Yes, Lady General.” Nikolai smiled, glad to be back in his environment of predilection. “As one can expect from the Auxilia’s performance when the Word Bearers attacked, the Lord of Macragge was unimpressed by their exploits...or rather how few of them there were for the absurdly high casualties they suffered. Therefore on his recommendations, we conducted several real-life grand manoeuvres and major exercises.”

“And the outcome?”

The Vostroyan General shrugged.

“Pretty much what I expected. Any regiment of the Auxilia which had not fought on a true battlefield with its current batch of officers and enlisted personnel had regressed to the level of PDF troopers. In no particular order, I would say the officers were scandalously passive, they had a complete underestimation of modern artillery’s lethality, and they had a dire need to learn what a parade uniform is and the differences with a proper warfare uniform...just to begin with.”

The stars-filled eyed showed no sign of surprise.

“Continue.”

“Chapter Master Valens and his officers supervised the manoeuvres for several military districts, but the Auxilia regiments chosen for this honour were often the same. While in the districts the sons of Guilliman weren’t watching, the great yearly manoeuvres were utterly unrealistic. The war games on hololithic boards were so rigid they had no practical value. Most of the officers consequently never developed the tactical thinking the Guard considers to be absolutely necessary, the warrant officers left their regiments for more competent formations, and of course most of the sub-par training they did was done with understrength companies, rarely mustering the reserves except in times of emergencies.”

Needless to say, this had made sure the Traitor Astartes were able to inflict devastating casualties upon the Ultramar Auxilia. A Chaos Marine was already a formidable opponent, but when the opponent in front of him had on average a couple of weeks of inadequate training per year, it couldn’t have been worse than the events which destroyed most of the Pharsalus Auxilia regiments.

“Well,” Her Celestial Highness commented after a few seconds of silence, “at least the Guard regiments we trained do not have that kind of problems.” Not any longer, went unsaid.

“We’re certainly not at the point the ‘stay on the road, no matter what happens’ is heard,” Nikolai approved with a smile, before sobering up. “This is not to say I have not discovered flaws. There was a certain amount of...arrogance I had to eliminate, especially for the forces which fought here. Fortunately, the events on Ardium against the Tyranids were of a big help deflating some heads.”

“That’s all?”

“Not quite...there’s sometimes a...an unacceptable amount of aggressiveness, from your Swarm to the Nyxian guardsmen, and from the Sororitas to the other special detachments. While I agree with the principle that in the correct conditions, proper offensive mindsets and some bloodshed will spare more blood later, it requires perfectly organised combat operations and a good idea of what you’re facing. And sometimes, in the fires of battle, some of our officers tend to forget that...and because they lead from the front, they tend to suffer properly unacceptable casualties.”

“Hmm...we have to encourage the offensive spirit, though. Too often, an army that doesn’t have the mental strength to go on anything but the defensive is rarely going to hold for long.”

“Agreed.” Nikolai answered. “But further training will have to make some of our stubborn men and women elite infantry and cavalry is a precious resource, and attacking at the correct moment is important. We will also have to retrain some people, because last time I checked, bayonet combat is for close-quarters, and we don’t need to use it every time an officer wanted to try his new chainsword.”

“Yes...yes, that we must absolutely discourage. Anything else?”

“That’s it for the bad points. On the good news, the overwhelming majority of the regiments we committed showed initiative, rarely panicked more than a few seconds despite facing elite xenos armies, and the officers used the terrain and the resources allocated to them with maximal efficiency. The war games with your Adjutant-Spiders and the Space Marines of the Nyx Sector proved an excellent investment; while many regiments had never seen fire before, they were quite often capable to inflict devastating casualties to an enemy possessing far more experience and tactical knowledge than them.”

The golden-winged Lady General made a thin smile.

“I’m almost hearing a ‘but’ coming...”

“But,” Nikolai obliged her, “we need badly some new equipment if we’re trying to decrease the killed in action’s numbers we took against the Necrons, the Tyranids...and the heretics. For sure, these are just the preliminary recommendations-“

“You have earned my trust, General. Speak frankly.”

“We need to protect better our reconnaissance regiments and all the scouts we have,” the Vostroyan began bluntly, “the Sentinel is just a death trap against the Necrons, the Tyranids, and other serious enemies. Too many times good soldiers did everything right and yet got slaughtered all the same, bringing back the information we needed at a cost that they shouldn’t have paid. The Salamander scout vehicle has proven better in that it can scout and run away, but it is way too loud and too easily detected.”

Nikolai took a deep breath.

“We need to give better armours and weapons to the Guard infantry in general. The morale stayed high from Volga to Macragge, but too often the men had to use the more weapons of the armoured vehicles alongside them because what they had couldn’t put down a Necron for good. New model of grenades, for examples, would be a must-have for future campaigns. The men also need better communications, the enemy too often was able to jam them or cause vox-distortions that caused major issues. On the side of the good news...we correctly identified that self-propelled artillery is the future for our batteries. No matter how fast you are able to take a cannon towed by a truck from Point A to Point B, the static guns are way too vulnerable to counter-battery fire unless they’re protected by shields or some heavy amount of armour.”

“That’s encouraging, given what I’ve heard about the new ‘Archers’...though I will remark no one seems to find grace to my naming conventions.”

“Different cultures, different names for the favourite weapons, your Celestial Highness!” Nikolai admired his superior, but he wasn’t going to tell her out loud, and in presence of a dozen Adjutant-Spiders, that often her name choices were...poorly inspired. “But having reviewed the main battles of Operation Stalingrad, I am sure of one thing above all.”

“And this thing is?”

“We need drones for our regiments. Thousands of drones, and preferably far more than that.”

Nikolai received an ironic smile immediately.

“You’re not the only one to think so...”

“Really?”

“You might have missed the announcement Archmagos Lankovar arrived this morning. Under my authority, he made the first exhaustive inspection on the Tau military manufactorums.”

**Macragge**

**Fortress of Hera**

**Library of Ptolemy**

**2.230.312M35**

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar, Roboute admitted, was a typical member of the Nyxian Mechanicus on two key points: his loyalty to Lady Weaver was absolute...and he was instinctively annoyed by Cawl’s presence.

Still, the high-ranked Tech-Priest was enough of a professional to answer when Cawl asked a question, unlike some Magi and Archmagi the Primarch had met since his return.

“Yes, we gained the knowledge of creating this alloy from the Tau. Obviously, Mankind had already discovered it before as ‘Type IR-101011111001’. But the secrets of the alloy and the STC itself describing the process to create it were lost long ago in troubling circumstances. It was only by the Omnissiah’ will we were able to realise the strong similarities between Type IR-101011111001 and the alloy used to build the Battlesuit XV8-02 ‘Crisis Iridium’.”

“And the process does not involve any particularly problematic or proscribed metallurgy operation?” Lady Weaver asked neutrally, but the Thirteenth Primarch was sure she already knew the answer. The Lady of Nyx wasn’t going to gamble in front of an audience of hundreds of Tech-Priests and potentially lead one of her followers to be accused of tech-heresy.

Heresy. It was always a word which left ill at ease, a reminder how much the Imperium and the Mechanicum...the Adeptus Mechanicus had changed since the Great Crusade.

“No, Chosen of the Omnissiah. The metallurgy and the chemistry processes can largely be done with the existing infrastructure of Nyx. The main problem to verify the Tau’s words came from the high quantities of pure iridium and rare resources involved in the project. But as the Nyx Power Armour Project is of utmost priority, I thought the acquisition process was more than justified.”

“It was, and you did well to take the initiatives you did, Archmagos.” The insect-mistress approved, taking a data-slate handed by one of her spiders. “Does anyone have other questions?”

No one did, and thus Roboute cleared his throat.

“I think no one does, so let’s turn the next subject of importance...drones.”

In the aftermath of the battle, it had been a really lesser concern, but then some Tech-Priests and guardsmen had begun to ‘play’ with what they called ‘long-range extended servo-owls’ and a few of the heavily modified xenos toys that had been ‘borrowed’ from the blue-skinned xenos, and this time, it gained its utmost focus.

“The tactical benefits of introducing drones in our order of battle are obvious, Lord Primarch,” Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar said laconically, “and once you make sure not to include an Abominable Intelligence like these reckless xenos did, building a drone is really simple. When it comes to it, a drone is just a servo-skull or a servo-owl used for military purposes, but with more range, cogitation capacity, and of course more information-gathering capacity technology. All the processes to create one are well-known to the Mechanicus. The chief obstacles to a drone being used have always been the logistical support needed to keep the drones in the air for a long campaign, the reparation and maintenance needs in high-intensity operations...and doctrinally, the concept of sending machines ahead to spare more flesh dying on the battlefield.”

Roboute didn’t need to be an Archmagos to know which of the points had made sure that in the dimension the Tau had come from, the Mechanicus had blocked them from reaching the Guard regiments in significant numbers.

“The commands to pilot such a drone?” Belisarius Cawl asked, not hiding his excitement.

“There have been several enthusiastic attempts which are currently investigated...” Lankovar’s voice trailed off, and Weaver coughed a single name...’Leet’. “But for the ‘tactical drones’ that would be deployed much like the xenos did, the first approved patterns will be at worse months away.”

“The proper safety measures have been taken?”

“The proper safety measures have been taken, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” Lankovar assured his benefactor and mistress. “I myself personally delivered the draconic fire-extinguisher foam, the helmets and the other equipment the Tau seemed to have disregarded completely in their mad insistence their ‘Greater Good’ would protect them.”

There was some fierce grumbling from different Nyxian Tech-Priests wondering how the blue-skinned xenos had managed not to blow themselves up for so long...

“I am very impressed,” the Thirteenth Primarch admitted out loud. “Congratulations, Lady Weaver, you seem to have gained a rich reward of technological bounty, though of course all of it will need to be properly analysed and monitored before it can be fully reverse-engineered to its full potential.”

“Thank you, Lord Primarch.”

Yes, Guilliman was impressed...and while he wasn’t really worried per se, there was the not-too-comforting feeling that even with Cawl and thousands of other gifted Tech-Priests obeying his commands, Nyx was soon going to have one or two generations of advance when it came to operational battlefield technology.

“Would be willing to consider a technology transfer?”

“It would depend on the price and what the exchange of technology would look like, Lord Primarch.” Yes, in hindsight, it was not a surprising answer...at least it was better from what he would have gotten from Mechanicus-only sources. In the last year, Roboute Guilliman had learned the hard way how secretive and uncooperative many Archmagi and Magi could be.

And the Primarch of the Ultramarines winced internally, because both his personal funds and Macragge’s treasury were not in a good state these days.

“Assuming the price would be dealt in one way or another,” he said diplomatically.

“Assuming that,” Weaver glanced at her spiders, who clearly gave her some information via telepathy, “the answer will be yes, there are only so many projects Nyx can develop and allocate funds to at any given time. What use would you use said technology transfer for?”

“An APC program,” Guilliman replied without hesitation. “I don’t know how much your own officers insisted about it, but my sons’ after-battle reports convinced me we must protect our well-trained infantry, and to do that, the solution is simple...better personal armours...and better armoured vehicles. The production of Rhinos is too low to my liking. It will be increased, and many thousands of them will find their way to the Macragge Depot, after the holes in my sons’ Chapter arsenals have been filled.”

“Please continue, Lord Primarch.”

“The Rhino, alas, is only a stop-gap measure.” With him no longer strapped to various medical monitoring devices, Roboute could use some measure of his charisma and leave his seat, and he did exploit it. “The merciless battles fought in the Eastern Fringe and elsewhere proved that without Ion Shield, the survival of a particular military unit very much relies on luck. I dislike that.”

The Mechanicus audience agreed with it, he could see that. They all believed in the law of probabilities, not luck...but it made no difference on the battlefield in the end.

“It is my opinion that the future of the APC for Astartes, as a consequence, needs a significant increase of its capacities...with Ion Shields, of course, but also an anti-gravity capability to move.”

The Lady General Militant in front of him stayed silent and immobile for about ten seconds, before turning her head and nodding once at Desmerius Lankovar.

“And the old Rhinos? If the program is successful, that’s potentially tens of thousands of Rhinos that the Adeptus Astartes won’t need anymore.”

“If the program is successful,” Roboute promised, “I will urge my father to repeal this millennia-old Edict allowing only the Adeptus Astartes to use the Rhino assault transport.”

Though in many ways, the Edict had always been ignored by the Ecclesiarchy, courtesy of it not existing at the time and thus not included in the list of organisations which was forbidden to deploy it. Many Sisters of the Order of the Silver Rose had fought with red-painted Rhinos at Macragge and Ardium.

“That would be a powerful move, one which would earn you the support of the Imperial Guard,” the Lady of Nyx didn’t mince her words. “I suppose Archmagos Cawl will be the chief coordinator of the project?”

“He will.”

Many Tech-Priests were...not exactly enthusiastic, to say the least.

“There will be a Martian and a Nyxian overseer to this project,” the Lady General Militant faced Cawl, and her voice made clear it was non-negotiable. “And you have a deadline of twenty years to propose a prototype with the resources and the technology transfers which will go for the program...you have a name for the program, Archmagos?”

“I have, Lady Weaver. I intend to name it ‘Project Gaius’.”

Seeing the visage of the young woman soften, Cawl’s choice had been good...when he tried the Archmagos was surprisingly good at gaining support when and where he wanted.

“As for the conditions of the transfer mentioned earlier...one of my economic advisors is mere days away. I think we can wait until she arrives to open the negotiations on that subject.”

**Fortress of Hera**

**Library of Ptolemy**

**2.245.312M35**

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

“I will make you pay for that, *your Celestial Highness*. Vengeance will be mine.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, *Lady Vicequeen*.”

The innocent tone didn’t fooled Marianne. Besides, the Lady General Militant had not even bothered trying to lie convincingly this time.

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t know why you’re so unhappy...I can inform you there are people who are waiting for months to have an audience with the Primarch these days...and they don’t get one in private.”

“And you did make sure it would happen the moment I landed just to see the expression on my face,” Marianne replied without anger. “Here I thought you appreciated my body...”

Her lover kept her eyes directly towards the entrance guarded by two Ultramarines. There was a large smile on her face, though.

“I appreciate both your body and your intelligence...Marianne. And I wouldn’t have done it if I knew you couldn’t handle it. Or if my Adjutant-Spiders hadn’t assured me you were over-prepared.”

Marianne huffed. Of course the dedicated arachnids had warned her telepathically...

“Vengeance will mine nonetheless.”

“I’m shaking in fear.” The Living Saint said drily as they entered the Library.

Instantly, being admitted in such a beautiful monument to books and written documents of Mankind forced a respectful silence.

The Library of Ptolemy had been built on a simple but beautiful Macraggian style, with long and large avenues, distinct marble statues and High Gothic numbers to orient yourself, while above you and on the walls, there was a profusion of mosaics.

It was a combination of the old and the new: ancient rolls of vellum were protected by brand-new stasis fields which must have been replaced this year.

It was, in many ways, an old souvenir of the Imperium-that-was, a time where the human species was reunited rapidly and the Master of Mankind walked among his subjects.

And as if thinking it made him appear, the Primarch appeared at the end of an alley, with two Ultramarines carrying large pile of books. The Astartes were smiling in resignation, that much was evident.

“Ah Lady General Militant Weaver, Lady Vicequeen Gutenberg...” the Primarch’s expression looked like he had been lost in his studies, but his blue eyes proved this was a dangerous false impression. The Emperor’s son was a dangerous negotiator. Good...it would be boring otherwise.

“Leave us.” The Space Marines bowed, and left...maybe with some relief, for while the books wouldn’t be heavy for someone with transhuman strength, studies on the other hand may be a chore the Space Marines were glad to avoid.

They took each a seat around a desk that had to be a copy of a Terran creation she had seen in the Imperial Palace once.

It took...quite a few seconds to adapt. Even staying immobile, the Primarch was the kind of magnificent presence which made you feel so small and tiny...fortunately, while the sensation was different from a Living Saint, it had its similarities, and Marianne Gutenberg adapted.

The courtesies were murmured, and the real business could begin.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I agreed so fast to Lady Weaver’s request to bring you here, Lady Gutenberg?”

“No,” the Speaker for the Chartists Captain replied truthfully. She had been told bluntness would be appreciated, and all her instincts were screaming to not play games with Guilliman. “Macragge is in a bad state economically, and you probably can’t pay everything so it is rebuilt and regains the technological and military superiority it took for granted in the last millennia.”

There was a flash of...not surprise, but it was difficult to describe it...

“Indeed.” The Avenging Son admitted. “I’m not going to pretend the situation is catastrophic, because it isn’t, and exaggerating would serve no purpose. Thank to Lady Weaver’s ants and other...auxiliaries, the work to remove the Word Bearer’s destruction will be fully completed by the end of the decade. But the ability to project military power and rebuild the logistical system I feel will be necessary for future military operations...it is an entirely different thing. It requires a significant amount of resources...and these resources aren’t there. I rule over thirteen systems, not five hundred...and I was told that politically, rebuilding my old kingdom would not be appreciated by the High Lords of Terra.”

Judging by the direction of the stare and the amused expression, it was a certain insect-mistress who had warned him...Marianne’s respect for Taylor grew further. Saying it to a Primarch required courage, no matter how many exploits you did before that...

“I let my brother’s wolves have their Nova Fenrisia,” Guilliman continued with a shadow of...not anger, but perhaps sorrow? “Unfortunately, the world of Shiloh is far too young to play the same role, assuming it eventually will become a Hive World in the future. And of course, the Inquisition has ordered the Illyrium District is to stay permanently empty for a thousand years. I agree with their decision, but it was a significant blow, combined to the destruction of Pharsalus.”

The Primarch could have continued for a long time, but evidently he wanted to test her.

“You also lost most of your shipbuilding capacity at Ardium and Macragge, with only Mortendar remaining intact. Laphis made sure some of the old families were dealing with considerable problems of their own...and of course, the pilgrimage’s importance did not abysmally collapse, but you still lost a large percentage of the income associated with it.”

When your capital was in ruins anyway, you could hardly in good conscience let religious men and women rush into a war zone.

 “Yes, those are indeed the practical facts Macragge...and I, are forced to deal with.” The Avenging Son watched her like a...prey bird, or something incredibly inquisitive...and it was hard not to shiver. “And so I am searching for creative solutions.”

“I presume *conventional* creative solutions are out of question?” the Vicequeen said after clearing her throat. “For I don’t think you need House Gutenberg or anyone from the Chartist Captains to demand loans and other financial expediencies.”

“Correct,” Guilliman replied with a nod. “Obviously, I could do it, but if another war comes soon to the gates of Macragge, I will have saved the present of the Ultramarines only to bankrupt their future.”

Yes, no wonder the Emperor’s son didn’t want to go down that road unless there was no alternative.

Well, unconventional solutions it was. Thankfully, she had come prepared.

“I see. Since one of the problems is linked with Macragge...attractiveness from a Segmentum’s perspective, I believe there is a solution, one which would be playing with Macragge’s strengths, and would likely involve less religious issues than the one involved with the Shrine of a dead Primarch.”

“And this solution is?” the Primarch asked with evident amusement at her choice of words.

“You allow House Gutenberg and House Weaver to finance the creation of a modern winter sports resort on Macragge.”

This time, Marianne knew, she had definitely managed to surprise the Primarch.

“A winter sports resort...I admit it is quite a novel idea that didn’t occur to me.”

“But it would solve quite a few of your problems.” Marianne insisted. “Let’s be honest, Macragge is covered in mountains, and the climate is cold. No matter how many money you invest into it, it will be difficult to turn Macragge into an Agri-World. If you want to preserve the beauty of the world, heavy industry is out of the question if it’s not in orbit. And economically, plenty of worlds have that anyway. But visiting the home of the Ultramarines and be able to spend money in winter physical resort for entertainment and health reasons? This is an idea with a strong economic potential.”

Clearly, as parties involved in the project, Marianne and her golden-winged partner would also earn a lot of money in the process, which was always useful and would give them influence in the Macraggian System without being rudely obvious about it.

“I suppose you have at least thought about a potential location?” If Guilliman had made a decision, he hid it well.

“The District of Alpae Sequania,” the Vicequeen replied. “The main mountains are covered in snow all year, though obviously when the climate is extreme, the upper mountains are extremely dangerous. But one only needs to invest in a transport axis straight from Macragge City, and the average aircar can reach the theoretical station in three hours.”

“Plus the creation of a major bridge,” the Primarch amended, but he was now thoughtful. “Yes, the idea has merits. The beauty of Macragge would have to be preserved, however. I wouldn’t allow the great mountains to be sculpted or any of the ridiculous things I’m aware the Ecclesiarchy and secular Planetary Governor do on too many words.”

“You are the Lord of Macragge,” Marianne replied with all the courtesy she had.

The Avenging Son chuckled.

“So I am. I suppose you have other surprising ideas to propose?”

“Yes, of course. One of them involves the insects of Her Celestial Highness here. You see-“

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.247.312M35**

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert**

“You think then Roboute Guilliman will accept the winter sports resort proposal?”

“I’m almost certain he will, yes,” Marianne gave her an amused glance as she dealt with all the bureaucratic duties which seemed to pile up no matter the efforts and the Adjutant-Spiders assigned to it. “Let’s face it, everything that includes releasing some of the Lord of Macragge’s privileges to organisations tied with the Adeptus Ministorum, like a fortress of the Templar Sororitas on Laphis, was never going to be accepted this year.”

Taylor considered the Vicequeen’s point...and then shrugged.

“You’re certainly right about that. As for the other proposals...well, the idea of letting my ants ‘colonise” Thulium would certainly deliver a lot of medical supplies and resources, but it would be an unacceptable loss of sovereignty.”

“Even with your Adjutant-Spiders sworn to obey his orders in your absence?”

Taylor gave the daughter of House Gutenberg a sarcastic smile.

“There’s a difference between obeying someone’s orders, and having the undying loyalty of someone, Lady Gutenberg.”

“I suppose this is true. But yes, I think he will go ahead with the idea of winter sports resort. He needs the resources, and unlike other proposals, it is a purely economic exchange, with no military clauses involved. And once the fifty years are over, the government of Macragge will own it, though our share in the affair will remain, meaning considerable benefits all year along.”

Marianne gave her a large smile.

“I will, of course, give you a detailed plan of the winter sports resort I have in mind.”

This felt like the beginning of one of those ‘let’s surprise Her Celestial Highness!’ things. But since the Lady of Nyx admitted she hadn’t the faintest idea what ‘tourists’ would like to have in a winter sports resort beside the incredibly obvious, well...

“I delegate this particularly important plan to you, if you’re so willing to tackle it.” Taylor paused. “And I note you didn’t ask the Space Wolves to host this grand plan of a winter sports resort.”

“Of course not,” Marianne shook her head. “While the Angel of Shadows appears to have tamed the Frostlions, the rest of the Ardium-that-was is now filled with incredible lethal fauna, big and small. Unless your chief goal is to eliminate the people visiting the winter sports resort, I don’t think ‘Nova Fenrisia’ will ever be a place you want to spend for pilgrimages or holiday reasons.”

For a couple of seconds, Taylor contemplated the idea of sending some annoying highborn there to teach them lessons in the guise of a ‘winter sports holiday’...regretfully, she rapidly abandoned it. The political consequences weren’t worth the source of amusement, no matter how tempting it was to throw a Vandire or two against a ‘Fenrisian wolf’ for a tragic accident.

“Besides, they don’t really need it. They got part of the bounty of Most Wanted Sixty-Four, Drecarth the Sightless. Sure, the four planets they got are all Ice-Death Worlds which will be used to settle their Successors, they got one orbital defence grid instead of two luxury stations, but Adept Harpagon released a cash reward of about one hundred and ninety *Trillion* Throne Gelts. They also got some lesser traitors like Apostle Kor Daradan, so once you add bounty after bounty, the sons of Russ got largely enough to compensate their losses and make the break-up of their Legion a clean progress. It is going to take some time, because Mars won’t build Battle-Barges in a day and creating Space Marines is a consuming process, but they will be able to do it on their own terms.”

Although naturally, the Primarch of the Space Wolves owed her one big favour, because she had accelerated the bounty reward process considerably for him. If she hadn’t, the Wolves would still be busy waiting for the first Throne Gelt one hundred years from now.

“This is really a profitable business you’ve set up here.” The Vicequeen of Solingen whistled in appreciation.

“I think the word missing here is *dangerous*.” The Queen of the Swarm snarked.

“I’m told certain bounties were claimed by your Adjutants while you were millions of kilometres away.”

“True,” the Lady General Militant admitted, “but that’s why I made them formally part of my command staff; as they’re directly acting per my will, it stands to reason I am their commanding officer. And there were limits even to that. As the internal fighting between the Traitor factions was intense, I certainly got no reward when the heretics slaughtered each other.”

Which was certainly a pity, because Kor Phaeron’s bounty had been bloody enormous, as befitted his title of Thirteenth Most Wanted. It would have also settled the problem of discreetly transferring several assets to the Ultramarines.

But Lorgar had killed Kor Phaeron in front of many, many witnesses, and the Adeptus Almitas was not going to reward her for being in the same system when it happened.

“And?”

Taylor finished dealing with her last bureaucratic duties before looking up.

“And I got the reward for the Vile One: five Quadrillion Throne Gelts. Of course, since I didn’t do it personally, a good part will be spread across the entire order of battle of Operation Stalingrad, but as its commanding officer, I earn a significant percentage...and most of it will be invested in Mechanicus creations, rare resources, and everything I need for Nyx and the Sector around it.”

The only thing she yet to find a solution for was the ‘Sector Overlordship’. Taylor certainly didn’t need it, one Sector was already enough work, thank you very much.

“Obviously, the Assassinorum got a lot of bounties, partially or totally too.” Paristur, Mothac, Ekodas...the Angel of Shadows had really been a busy bee during the battle of Macragge. “But Ancient Rylanor got the bounty for Lucius the Eternal, meaning the White Thunderbolts will be able to request a lot of resources for their expansion. And of course for Operation Stalingrad as a whole, Lisa’s bombardment killed Jarulek, and the trench fighting outside Macragge City killed Vorrjuk Kraal. That’s *trillions* of Throne Gelts I’m going to place in the Pension Fund for my Guard regiments.”

A Pension Fund which had not finished delivering significant amounts of money to Fay, Wuhan, and every world which had troops involved in Operation Caribbean...well, at least, this time, the number of troops to be rewarded was far larger, and spread across many famous Guard recruitment centres of the Imperium. The Vostroyans had certainly been ecstatic about the amount of money they would be able to send home.

“If everyone is getting so much money, why did the Ultramarines were so concerned about dwindling resources?”

“That’s the problem, the ‘everyone’ does not include the Ultramarines. Most of the bounties were earned by Operation Stalingrad’s forces, acting on behest of the Imperium. It naturally doesn’t involve the Space Wolves and the Ultramarines. If the sons of Guilliman had been able to kill a big bounty by themselves...well, Guilliman kind of did, but Lorgar’s bounty was cancelled around the 32nd millennium, when the Inquisition was sure he was an unholy abomination impossible to kill.” Taylor shrugged. “Guilliman and his sons got some Throne Gelts and resources with the bounty rewards, don’t get me wrong. But nowhere near the amounts they really needed to rebuild and launch a modernisation program at the same time.”

“Unlike you.”

“Unlike me.” Taylor huffed. “Don’t get me wrong, I would not have a big problem funding Macragge’s rebirth, but...politics.”

“Politics,” the High Lady’s daughter approved. “Giving so much when the Ultramarines did nothing to deserve it before Operation Stalingrad came to Macragge would be seen as a sign of weakness.”

“Yes. Whereas the creation of a winter sports resort which will earn a lot of Throne Gelts in exchange of a technological transfer will be seen as good trade opportunities.”

“I feel there’s more to that.”

The insect-mistress grunted.

“I did not lie to you or anyone when I said that Nyx doesn’t have the billions of Tech-Priests it needs to work upon *all* the military and civilian programs the Imperium needs. In fact, I’m not sure *Mars* has all the Artisans and other specialised Archmagi and Magi that Dragon would have been given in an ideal galaxy. Some things have to be delegated...and Cawl, for all his radical ideas, is certainly competent enough to successfully complete a program of that complexity. His chief problem is that he tends to never end a project as long as he’s not satisfied...”

“Thus the deadline you gave him.”

“Thus the deadline I gave him,” the female parahuman agreed, before sending away the last data-slate in a cloud of beetles before sighing in relief. “There. Done. I’m free for a few hours. Do you have something in mind to visit on the world below?”

“No, but I’m sure we can arrange something,” the blonde-haired beauty purred while moving around her desk.

And on the other side of the door, Gamaliel knocked.

“Your Dawnbreaker Guard has a gift to knock at the worst possible moment,” Marianne complained.

“For once, they can’t be blamed. An emissary with long-ears and a sense of humour I don’t find funny chose this moment to arrive unannounced.”

**Somewhere in the Eastern Fringe**

**Craftworld Iyanden**

**8.250.312M35**

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert**

Unlike what had been promised, when she stepped out of the Webway Gate, Taylor saw no one to welcome her.

“This may be a trap, Webmistress!” Artemis immediately declared as she followed on her heels.

“I doubt it,” Taylor was using her ‘Aeldari Empress’ persona now, and she wasn’t able to see or hear anything looking like a trap. “No, it just feels...empty. Majestic, but empty.”

The hall her two Adjutant-Spiders and she had arrived in was clearly a nexus for Webway Gates. It was also monumentally tall, with the pillars and everything supporting it sculpted like trees, in a splendour even the members of the Blood interested in the art would struggle to copy.

It was radiant and filled with flowery Aeldari Runes. There were many real trees seemingly randomly placed in the different alleys, though when taken as a whole, they formed a pleasant flora sigil.

“At least we are in the right Craftworld, Webmistress,” Solaria said to her side. “The Rune of Iyanden is everywhere. But so much empty space...”

“This isn’t like Nyx, I will admit. It isn’t like Macragge...or Baal.” And the less said about Commorragh and the dark pits of the monsters the armies of the Imperium, the better. “It feels more like the world of Arranoc I recently visited. But ancient...and empty.”

On that world, everything had been bird songs, Eldar songs, dances, and, well...there had been life everywhere.

What she could see of Iyanden was beautiful, absolutely. But it was also devoid of any life presence. Yes, the Craftworld was immense, but not a sound of life was...unusual.

“Where to, Webmistress?”

“Since no Webway Gate is activating to show us the way to our real destination...there are large golden stairs in that direction, and I think I’m hearing something like water in the distance. Let’s go see where it leads.”

“Yes, Webmistress! We’re going to explore the lair of the long-ears!”

“You realise, Artemis, that for today, I am one of these long-ears, right?”

“This isn’t the same, Webmistress!”

They walked away from the Webway Gates, and the impression confirmed itself: Iyanden was ancient, really ancient. Thank to her improved vision, Taylor could also see it had been repaired several times. It would have been impossible to distinguish for a mortal eye, but the psychic materials employed in the tree-like pillars, the walls, and everything that was the Craftworld had clearly received several cycles of repairs and redecoration. Half a dozen times in different eras, though it was only a guess of hers.

After several minutes, they were able to hear sounds of life again. First, there was indeed the unmistakable sound of crystalline water flowing. Then there were bird calling their companions. Insects, big and small, began to answer her call, giving her extended vision, though the Queen of the Swarm decided to let them work on their daily activities.

Soon enough Taylor entered a vast structure which made her Nyxian palaces look ridiculous small, and it was apparently a mere gateway to an immense plaza...or perhaps not a plaza, for it was half-submerged in water, as a river looked like it had its riverbed there. It was clearly artificial, for there were two cascades flowing over the walls in some ethereal feat of architecture, and everything had clearly been superbly arranged to merge the ‘riverbed’ with its green surroundings.

And unlike the rest of Iyanden seen so far, it was filled with life.

There were clearly animals living the good life in this paradise, but the river was filled with scenes of joy where...sixteen Eldar souls were playing with each other.

And not just any Eldar.

They were all children, and though Taylor couldn’t say how she knew it...they ‘tasted’, for lack of a better word, really, really young.

They were young, joyful, playing with resin-made balls that made them look extremely similar to any children of their age...and no matter the colour of their hair, be it black, white, red, golden, blue, or green, they had a common point.

They were all golden-skinned.

“Webmistress, they are trying to copy your magnificence!”

Taylor chuckled.

“No, Artemis...let’s just say Sacrifice imbued them with a measure of my protection, as long as they stay...innocent.”

This explained too why the Queen of Blades’ ex-apprentice had taken its golden appearance when Khorne released her soul and she had to patch up the scarred parts. When the Asuryani and their cousins were corrupted, their skin would reflect this. When they swore themselves to Atharti, it was red, blue, or green, reflecting if they wanted to go to Passion, Moderation, or Harmony.

What would happen when a soul was too young to make a choice or unable to make up his or her mind yet stay...loyal, for lack of a better of word, however? It had been an interesting question she had discussed with Dragon before she left Macragge.

Today, it seemed she had her answer.

“But Webmistress, we can’t protect all the long-ears for eternity!” Solaria grumbled. “As long as we don’t scour the impurities of the soul, at least, like you did with the red-haired menace Bellona is busy watching...”

The golden-winged parahuman laughed.

“You’re completely right, Solaria. The protection of *Sacrifice*, my protection, fades away in time unless an Eldar swears himself or herself to me completely, so that the purifying power the Emperor gave me can burn everything. But that’s why a certain Goddess of Symbiosis exists. Before they can succumb to temptation, they have another protection shielding them from the evil of the Four. All it requires is a choice.”

Evidently, the sixteen children playing in the river were very far from that choice. Years, at the very least, and this made Taylor didn’t realise she didn’t know how long it took for an Eldar to grow into adulthood...

“Look up, Artemis! There is a furball ruining the moment!”

Taylor closed her eyes while grinning.

“This is a Gyrinx, Solaria.”

The resemblance with the cat species was impressive. This one, save the gem just below the neck and the shape of the ears, really wouldn’t have raised an eyebrow on Earth. It could have passed effortlessly as a ginger cat. A lazy, large ginger cat.

The children noticed it soon, and in a heartbeat, they began to shout their joy, and their acclamations were clear: they wanted the psychic feline to play with them.

The ginger-furred Gyrinx, who had stayed at a reasonable distance from the cascades and water in general, did of course nothing of the sort.

Camped like a Sphinx of Antiquity, the Gyrinx looked at the Eldar children like they were unworthy of his – or her – time.

“By your will, Webmistress?”

Taylor sighed, reading effortlessly the intentions of her loyal Adjutants.

“Let’s be clear, you are utterly forbidden to do that with the Mainz Cats. They are not psychic, or as resourceful as a Gyrinx.”

“Of course, Webmistress!”

One might have believed the Craftworld-born feline would be able to perceive the approach of a tank-sized spider, but Artemis and Solaria were really discreet when they wanted to be, having taken lessons from Pierre recently.

And they had also received new silk-throwing launchers.

The Gyrinx was utterly surprised, mewled in confusion when it was captured, its particular pathetic escape attempt failing in a heartbeat...and then of course Artemis threw him from the top of the nearest cascade.

Naturally, the children below all cheered and communicated their joy, before swimming and rushing to play ‘Capture the Gyrinx!’

Despite a desperate resistance, the ginger feline, looking pitiful, betrayed, and offended at the same time, was captured and...properly received the ‘attention’ of sixteen enthusiast children.

Bah, it would survive.

Maybe.

“Mission accomplished, Webmistress! Oh...and the High Priestess is behind you...”

“I know. I heard her coming while you were busy with your ‘mission’.” Taylor replied serenely.

“You seem to have a gift to please the children, my Empress.”

**High Priestess Aurelia Malys**

“You seem to have a gift to please the children, my Empress.”

When she had heard of the clown’s latest joke, it had been a miracle Aurelia had not strangled Cegorach’s emissary.

Sending their Empress to an unknown Webway Gate when nothing of the sort had been planned was just asking for unprecedented trouble and devastation.

Atharti be praised, for the moment the joke did seem to have backfired...or Cegorach had a grudge against Gyrinxes. One did not exclude the other, damn the Great Trickster and his inscrutable plans.

“They are young...and innocent. Let them enjoy their cycles of childhood while they can.”

The Aeldari tongue was spoken orders of magnitude better than Aurelia had hoped for. The symbiosis between Muse and Empress had been visibly a success.

“Webmistress, she’s trying to seduce you and convince you to lower your guard!”

“We have,” the High Priestess of Atharti sweetly replied, “many extraordinary meals and drinks prepared for this audience, and those are always available for the servants of the Empress.”

The golden spider’s many, many eyes stared at her with suspicion...and Aurelia stared back without flinching.

“Refreshments would be lovely!” The great arachnid was the first to break, “sending the furball in the water made me quite thirsty!”

“Your desires will be fulfilled,” Aurelia didn’t gloat, it would be behaviour unworthy of the High Priestess of Atharti. “Since the circumstances have changed, my Empress, where do you want the meeting to proceed?”

“If it’s not too much trouble for the representatives of each Craftworld and the other emissaries,” the eyes filled with star looked fondly at the children playing in the water while...taming the Gyrinx... “here.”

“I’m sending immediately the summons.”

Fortunately, the Hall of Long Rivers and Young Souls was rather well-situated to move both servants of Atharti and the Iyanden-made food and drinks.

In less than a thousand heartbeats, the majority of the invitees had gathered, all the while Eldrad had cast a Veil of Silence to make sure the children continued to play, remaining blissfully unaware of the magnitude of the events playing out near them.

For it was a Council the likes Iyanden had never seen in all the cycles of its existence.

There were fifty-five delegations of Craftworlds, and yes, for all that five was the sacred number of Atharti, Aurelia was often feeling it was a dream that they had been able to agree so many of them to come.

The delegations of their cousins who had chosen to bond with the World Spirits until recently were even greater in importance. One hundred and fifty-five Kings and Queens had sent ambassadors...or come in person. The sovereigns of the Ybaric Cluster, proud allies of Iyanden, accounted for thirty-three groups alone.

And of course there were fifteen Corsair Fleet Princes and Princesses...though of them, five had not sworn their oaths to Atharti, and as a result had been escorted by several prestigious warriors.

But it wasn’t towards the latter that the Empress moved fluidly once the presentations were done.

It was Iyanna Arienal, representative of Iyanden, who had most of her attention.

“My Empress,” the prodigy of House Arienal kneeled, “I-“

“You have sworn yourself to the First Temple, didn’t you?” there was no accusation in the Angel of Death’s voice...just fascination. Fascination...and a bit of sadness.

“Yes...this was a dream more real than all the dreams, and I was clad in armour-“

“That felt more real to you than any armour.” The Empress finished. “You have not chosen an easy path. So close after Atharti’s birth, I influenced it without intending to. There will be **Sacrifice**.”

Aurelia shivered, and many of the representatives did far more than that.

“Iyanden is my home, and Atharti is my Goddess.” If anyone here needed it, this was the confirmation that for all the ‘gentleness’ and ‘tolerance’ of Harmony, the green-skin of those who embraced this Aspect of Atharti were certainly not fragile or afraid to fight. “If I have to walk this Path of War and Peace, so be it.”

“Then rise, daughter of Iyanden. Rise and become a *Spellsinger*.”

Iyanna Arienal seemed to become taller. No longer were her robes yellow or blue, but indeed a verdant green, trimmed with imperial gold.

A heartbeat later, she vanished. Atharti had called her to her Temple.

“My apologies for this unplanned *choice*,” the golden-winged Empress took the seat which had been prepared for her, flanked by her two enormous spiders, who were busy sipping red-coloured drinks with small sounds of satisfaction. “As I’m sure all the delegations have many questions, let’s not wait any longer. The delegation of...Mymeara can begin.”

A great warrior of teal and blue advanced, and saluted the Empress.

“Everyone heard your command, oh Angel of Death Burning the Cycle of Entropy. But there have been many rumours which spread in the tunnels of the Webway anymore. So many whispers and contradictory sentences the Spectres of Mymeara know not what to believe. We learned by the wisdom of Irillyth to stay away from other races. Will you change it, Empress of War and Death?”

“No,” Weaver replied immediately. “If you know what I have accomplished, you know I do not need the armies of your Craftworld to accomplish my will, be it in times of war or peace. I do not need involuntary warriors for my campaigns, be they short or long. What I want is for the sons of the Emperor and the spiritual descendants of Eldanesh to stop the bloodbaths between the two species which profit to no one but the Primordial Annihilator. You do not wage war against the Imperium of Mankind. I in return do my utmost to keep the Imperium away from the Craftworld and all the worlds where worship of Atharti protects you from the baleful power of the Enemy. I also can initiate channels which will let you acquire the Umbralshroud to hide your homes from the predations from potential enemies. High Priestess Malys and King Adanhu will confirm this is within my power to provide. And yes, I will still be able to see through the Veil of Umbralshroud afterwards.”

The message was as pure as crystal: do not think about reneging on an oath once you had what you wanted.

“And in the case it is humans who succumb to the lies of the Primordial Annihilator?”

“An embassy will be opened on my home of Nyx exactly for that purpose,” the Empress answered coldly the semi-accusatory tone of the representative of Alaitoc. “Construction began recently, and the High Priestess and Atharti herself are personally overseeing the work, I was given to understand. Should a Craftworld or any Atharti-loyal force encounter a problem which involves the Ruinous Four, you send a message explaining the problem to your ambassador, he or she requests an audience, I learn of the problem, and I do my best to correct it before it blows up in two species’ faces. The reverse course can of course happen if I am informed by Inquisitors, Space Marines, and other parties that there is a problem with the followers of Atharti, naturally.”

“But...” quite clearly, for a follower of Passion, the representative of Alaitoc was vigorously searching for excuses. “The Primordial Annihilator isn’t the only threat. There are the old enemies, the Yngir’s slaves, the-“

“Call them the Necrons, please.” Weaver rolled her eyes in annoyance. “This is their race’s name, let us do a courtesy of using it, even if none of them are here. Yes, the Necrons can be a problem. But I have an accord signed with the Nerushlatset Dynasty. All the Dynasties obeying the laws and rule of Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten will ignore the worlds and forces obeying Atharti’s edicts and mine, as long as you do the same in return.”

“Those are not the entirety of the Dynasties. The Stormlord-“

“Overlord Imotekh, the dreaded Stormlord, has been placed in charge of a researching group whose goal is to prepare all races for the coming Tyranid threat,” Weaver interrupted the Alaitoc representative again. “As long as you do not do something so stupid like attacking the worlds he’s visiting in order to kill him, or besiege the worlds of the Sautekh Dynasty, who now under Phaeron Zahndrekh is pledged to the Nerushlatset Phaerakh, you will be fine.”

The powerful eyes filled with stars felt like they were all piercing the heart of every follower of Atharti present...and more.

“I am not making fun of your fears where the Necron threat is concerned, Ambassador. The Nerushlatset Dynasty is reasonable. There many other Necron Dynasties which are definitely insane, nihilistic, and bent to exterminate all life. The increasing and worrying trend the shattered Star Gods to return to an active state is something I do not like either. But as long as we fight each Dynasty smartly, and we keep them disunited, I believe the threat is manageable. Whereas the Tyranid threat is something that will annihilate us all if we aren’t prepared for it. While we can’t negotiate with all Necrons, there are some we can talk with, forge accords that will be respected. There will be nothing of the sort with the Great Devourer. The war against this unending tide of monsters began at Fenris and Macragge, and there will be no negotiations. There will be no surrender...because *we are food for them*. We will win, or we will be devoured.”

No one opened his or her mouth to tell the Empress she was exaggerating. Everyone among the different delegations had been given psychic flashes of the tides of fangs and claws that the humans had had to fight against with some minor help from Cegorach’s Harlequins to redeploy their armies. If more Tyranids were coming, it was going to be a fight to the death.

On this point, there would be no arguing-

“This is all harmonious and moderate,” an arrogant voice broke the silence, “but what about our freedom to sail across the stars?”

“Princess Saarania,” the Aeldari Empress replied to the blue-haired Corsair Princess who had decided the moment was right to steal all the attention. “No longer of the Void Dragons, I see.”

“I decided,” the unbelievably arrogant void commander drawled, despite a certain Lugganath Autarch making brief panicked movements behind her, “to follow your suggestion: the Void Dragons have been thereby renamed the *Sky Serpents*.”

Aurelia Malys groaned. She was only one of many to do so.

Oh Atharti save them all...she had decided to reuse the Corsair Fleet’s name of *Sliscus the Serpent*?

Was Saarania aware that...oh, who was Aurelia kidding? Obviously the Princess knew Sliscus had met his end by the blade of Weaver...

“Because he was your genitor?” The Empress asked.

Wait...WHAT?

Even Saarania blustered and suddenly grew far more hesitant.

“I don’t know-“

“Please,” this time, the Queen of the Swarm was definitely amused...as were her spiders, which had stopped asking for refreshments and were chatting excitedly. “I met Sliscus. If you think dying your hair blue and adding some tattoos is enough to hide the resemblance, I can assure you it’s not. While I didn’t meet him for long while he was alive, my forces recovered a lot of images and videos from the ruin of the *Empire of Sin*. Some of it was destroyed and never watched, but there were enough to have a good idea of who he was and how he disguised himself.”

“You destroyed him, him and his entire fleet.”

“And I would do it again without hesitation to open the gates of the Port of Lost Souls and do what I did.”

Saarania...exploded in laughter.

And to the shock of practically everyone, she kneeled.

“You are my Empress. And my **Passion** will be my oath.”

It was like a raging fire and waves of lust focused in one great blast...and when it ended, the daughter...no, let’s not think about that...the Corsair Princess had changed. She was now red-skinned, and with long black hair.

To Aurelia’s amusement, the glance Saarania sent Ulion Lakadieth, Hero of Lugganath, was really...ahem...hot. That promised...a lot of amusement...for everyone.

“The Sky Serpents will follow-“

“Yes, yes, everyone heard your pledge. Now go seduce someone else, there are important negotiations going on here.”

Usually, anyone who would have spoken to the Corsair Princess like that would lose his head before the next sunset.

But Saarania was the first to turn her head, and it was an expression of fear which appeared on her face.

It was totally justified, for the lethal voice belonged to a crimson-haired monster currently playing with some berries. Berries she ate arrogantly like they were her due as a Goddess.

There were only two daggers in scabbards tied to a black belt, and she had no come in armour today.

But everyone knew her.

“Her Supreme Excellency Aenaria Eldanesh, also known as Lelith Hesperax, Supreme Mistress of the Arenas, the Queen of Blades,” exceptionally and only once, it was the Empress herself who played the role of Herald. “I hesitate to ask, but I have to know: is my arena irreparably damaged, or there is some hope I can salvage something?”

Incidentally, the fact Weaver was not panicking like many delegates did was giving her quite a boost of adoration from certain ambassadors and Corsairs...

“The arena is fine,” the old monster assured her. “You might have to close it a bit for...minor repairs?”

The insect-mistress wasn’t convinced. Neither were her spiders, to be honest.

“Bellona is going to need a bigger budget for the next decade, Webmistress!”

“Next decade, Solaria? Webmistress! We must plan for a triple increase of the Arena Fund for the next millennium, period!”

“Your spiders’ ridiculous assertions aside,” the Queen of Blades purred, and the arachnids went immediately silent, “I just made a detour before going back training the new generation to inform you I have decided not to kill *her*. There were some painful moments for *her*, but she will have recovered enough to serve in your Imperial Guard once your return to your capital...my Empress.”

And then the Ancient Aeldari vanished once more.

“One has to admit,” an Ambassador murmured, “she really knows how to make an entrance.”

“Absolutely.” Weaver approved out loud, making said emissary take an expression of humility. “Thank you for the pledge, Princess Saarania. Now we must speak of a greater issue. We must speak of what happened during the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star and the effects if will have for the galaxy as a whole.”

**Macragge**

**Fortress of Hera**

**2.259.312M35**

**Primarch Leman Russ**

There was a saying on Fenris that you should beware boasting about your survival from a Wrath-badger attack as long as one year and one day had passed since the incident.

Like most Fenrisian proverbs, it underestimated the danger of Wrath-badgers, which were perfectly capable to inherit grudges from generation to generation and ambush you five years after you ‘offended’ them.

And no, Leman wasn’t going to say how he had learned that piece of wisdom.

The morale of the story, however, was obvious: don’t count on something until you are really certain of it. It applied to your safety as well as military agreements, apparently.

“Rogal,” the Lord of the renamed ‘Nova Fenrisia’ world growled, but in a restrained manner so it was more of a small grumble, “please help me convincing her.”

“No.”

“Please help me...brother.”

“No.”

The Great Wolf of the Vlka Fenryka sighed.

“I am serious.”

“I know.” Dorn, for once, was smiling. Given the precedents, Leman knew he wasn’t going to like the reasons behind this expression. “But Lady Weaver has good points. Expecting the Forges, manufactorums, and other artisans’ creations of Nyx to deliver Volkite Blasters and Power Armours for the Depot is common sense. One is already produced in respectable numbers, and the other will be when the armour project will be successful. Expecting her to give you Thunderhawks and other heavy weaponry because you nicely asked is delusional. And so is asking her to help you circumvent the restrictions the High Lord placed around this ‘Armament Depot’.”

“I wasn’t asking her to lie! I just wanted her to...creatively interpret was could be sent to Macragge and Nova Fenrisia. And to not inform Terra of certain weapon deliveries.”

“Yes. That’s why I called it lying.”

Leman Russ huffed.

“You haven’t changed, brother.”

“I return you the compliment...brother.”

It wasn’t a compliment, and they both knew it.

The two Primarchs watched the scenes in the vast hall below their observation lodge in silence for long minutes. The atmosphere was...loud. There were a lot of debates and vigorous exchanges of point of view. It was very different from the celebration ambiance which had engulfed everyone when the Bacta Depots had been discussed...

Obviously there weren’t quarrels and demands to settle this in duel of honour, but the festive times were really over.

“With the benefit of hindsight,” the Sixth Primarch said in a meditative voice, “the eagerness of Lady Weaver to cede a significant part of Nyx’s stock capacity several days ago makes much more sense now.”

Leman’s eyes found her easily in the crowd, despite the numerous Space Marines of Jaghatai’s gene-line who surrounded her right now. The Lady of Nyx had come today in a simple golden dress, without the pomp she would have perfectly the right to add to her clothes, but it made her stand out even more, in the middle of the fierce sons of Chogoris.

“Ah, you noticed.”

The wolfish Primarch scowled.

“I can play the game of politics when I want, Rogal.”

“I know. But you’re not that good at it.”

“Funny words...for someone who is worse at it than I am.” If there was a loyal Primarch which was guaranteed to fare more badly than Leman did in the great game of political intrigue, then this Primarch was undoubtedly the Lord of the Imperial Fists.

For some reason, trying to never lie on a constant basis was really, really not something the politicians and the bureaucrats liked. Not when his brother did his utmost to encourage the same for all his interlocutors...

“The difference, Leman, is that I never tried to play the games you did.” The Praetorian of Terra retorted. “I know I’m horrible at it. Everyone knows it. So I don’t play the game.”

“Even if it’s in your best interest to play?”

“Is it?” Rogal asked seriously. “I owe a lot to this young woman, brother. My life, to begin with. A rather refreshing perspective on how much the Imperium fell from the hopes and dreams everyone had for it, for another. Weaver also didn’t abuse the authority I entrusted her after we met at Commorragh, if anything she was...extremely cautious with it. And to come back to the subject at hand...*Phalanx* already serves as an Armament Depot in addition to a Bacta one for my sons. We just didn’t make it official. For all these reasons, and many others, I don’t really have any interest in ‘playing the game’, as you described it.”

Leman growled...again.

It didn’t help his mood that as the sons of Jaghatai temporarily stepped aside, Dorn’s crusaders and fortress-builders replaced them. By the sounds of it, there were discussions on an extremely interesting range of subjects...Including the topic of fortifications to protect *Depots*.

“I suppose the meeting we agreed to, and which is supposed to begin in a few hours...it is going to be more interesting than I expected.”

“In other words,” Dorn remarked mercilessly, “your hopes your sons would be able to solve this with a cup on their hands and riding their furry companions is doomed. You’re going to have to properly negotiate in their name...again.”

“You really intend to have fun watching my goals being thwarted, don’t you?”

**Library of Ptolemy**

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

There was something extremely funny, Roboute would admit, about someone telling Leman Russ ‘no’ ten times while all his brothers around the table did their best not to laugh or show their hilarity...and failing.

“But you told me yourself your spiders reported the corruption on Terra is appalling and that you were displeased by it!”

“It is, and I did. But it has no importance for the next decades, and I have allies among the Senatorum Imperialis. I am not going to break my word to them.”

“And the Imperial Navy? It is-“

“No.”

“The High Lord is not of one of your allies, and never will be.”

“But I need Kar Duniash’s support,” Weaver replied neutrally, “and their delegation should arrive soon. I am not going to begin a conversation with them by saying I have decided to cancel all my engagements.”

“You’re missing several great opportunities.”

“I don’t think so. Besides, Nyx remains a very local shipbuilding centre for now. Why are you so insistent asking me when there are plenty of other big shipyards in Ultima Segmentum which can do the job?”

The question was voiced in a tone that proved the Lady of the Swarm knew very well the answer beforehand.

Most of said shipyards were Mechanicus or Navy-owned, and would alert their respective High Lords the moment a Space Wolf arrived for ‘negotiations’.

“Practical:” Roboute decided to intervene, as his raven brother was having difficulties controlling his hilarity, “we have spent enough time on this subject, Leman. Lady Weaver was courteous enough to let you give your point of view, but if she does not want to send aerial assets and starship parts to the Depot or the Chapters of your sons, we will respect her choice.”

Leman, of course, grumbled. In a way, Guilliman understood the problem his brother was facing. Unlike his Ultramarines, who had the yards of Mortendar and *Galatan* repurposed for the building of brand-new Strike Cruisers, the Wolves did not have any alternative but to ask Mars for capital ships’ reinforcements, and the Red Planet’s *Ring of Iron* was very busy these days, unable and probably unwilling to give too much of an industrial priority to the sons of Russ.

It meant in return that the enormous pre-Black Crusade fleet of the Sixth Legion, active and mothballed units all taken into account, was really a thing of the past, especially as each new Successor Chapter created would take void assets before leaving for a new home.

“I agree,” Jaghatai went on to voice his support. “I am more interested in the idea the Adeptus Astartes should have a representative on Terra.”

Yes, Roboute wasn’t surprised by that opening...and it made him wince for a lot of reasons.

“Theoretical: the Space Marines not having a seat among the High Lords ensure that they are removed from the legion of intrigues and political machinations that the upper classes of Sol live for.”

“Oh, please,” the Great Khan of Chogoris rolled his eyes, “this argument was stupid during the Great Crusade, and it is even stupider today. The Council of Terra didn’t have a single Space Marine among it in the old days. That didn’t stop us from sending several of our sons to the Imperial Palace to make sure our views were listened to. Malcador and his subordinates didn’t always listen to our pleas and suggestions, but at least they knew when he encountered problems, like a war we couldn’t finish with a single Legion alone.”

“As far as I could see from my spider’s eyes,” the golden-winged heroine who had saved Macragge explained calmly, “the Space Marines might as well don’t exist...well, save the sons of Russ guarding House Belisarius of the Navis Nobilite. But the High Lords were never happy about their presence...and they still aren’t happy, because many stayed to this day.”

Leman was really, really satisfied for once by what Weaver told them...which was not really a good thing.

Roboute turned his head towards Rogal...and the Primarch of the Imperial Fists had his emotionless face ready.

“The War of the Beast, the Pale Wasting, the Black Crusades,” the Praetorian of Terra listed the disastrous conflicts which brought the Imperium to its knees while the Primarchs in this room were not here to defend it, “the Adeptus Astartes is not an Adeptus, but tiny isolated lights in a galaxy far too big for them. How can they send the alert, when their strategic vision is often limited to the Sector they protect and a few other worlds they’re oath-sworn to defend when the enemy rears its ugly head?”

Roboute grimaced deep inside his mind.

“I understand, and your analysis of the problems this brings is correct. Yet I would prefer absolutely for no Space Marine to be elevated to a seat among the highest levels of the Senatorum Imperialis, unless it’s a question of life or death. Father wanted humanity to govern itself, I won’t go against his wishes...and honestly I believe the High Lords would use all their influence and might to prevent that in the first place.”

The pause after his words clearly proved none of the participants of this conversation thought him wrong.

“This isn’t the only thing that needs to be changed,” Leman of course resumed his charge on the political battlefield, “the Chapters are too small!”

“Divide first your sons into several Chapters, brother,” Corvus drawled sarcastically, “then you will have the right to complain.”

Both Weaver and Jaghatai chuckled loudly at the Ravenlord’s remark.

Leman growled...but no one came forwards to support him.

“More practically, what were you thinking about brothers?” Roboute asked with curiosity. “For obvious reasons, I don’t think stationing a representative of every single Chapter in existence on Terra would be a good use of the existing resources granted to the Adeptus Astartes.”

To say nothing of the fact the Throneworld and the Sol System were already so massively fortified that keeping the equivalent of a Company of Space Marines felt like a monumental waste. The Imperial Palace had already the Custodes, and reinforcements could be dispatched in mere days, courtesy of the Astronomican.

Many eyes stared at each other.

“A theoretical,” Corvus suggested, “would be to select a badly understrength Chapter having accomplished great deeds as the representatives of the Adeptus Astartes. That way they are able to rebuild their numbers, courtesy of the prodigious industrial and genetic support offered by Sol. And we make it clear it is for a limited number of years, say twenty or thirty. This will ensure we don’t have a Chapter staying idle in the heart of the Imperium.”

That...could work. The Chapter being selected for past deeds, along with Aethergold testing, would indicate the Space Marines would be chosen for their actions, not for their ambitions. And when they were rebuilt to their Codex-approved strength, they could let the High Lords know they were ready for new deployments, leave, and let another Chapter take the ‘seat’.

“Of course you would have to somehow pass it through the High Lords,” Leman added perfidiously with a large grin.

Weaver snorted.

“Unlike some Space Marines I won’t name, the new representatives will certainly be busier training their Neophytes and rebuilding their Companies rather than devastate the taverns every week.”

Even Rogal smiled...

“It is in many ways not that different from what the Imperial Fists are doing with *Phalanx* right now,” the angelic-looking Lady General Militant continued. “We’re just asking for a representative component to be added to it.”

Evidently, there were a lot more details to discuss, and most of those would have to be debated by all the Chapters who had currently a representative on Macragge. But it was a framework they all could work with.

And now for the last point, one had had to do a lot of research before today...

“Some of you,” Roboute looked at Jaghatai and Leman, “have made clear how much you think my ‘generalist approach’, as you called it, weakened Chapters of your gene-lines. The argument, I believe is that if the foe is hyper-specialised in one domain, it might be able to completely surpass and annihilate a Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes incredibly quickly.”

“This is correct,” Corax answer for them all.

“In that case, my practical proposal is that we...we force an evolution of the Astartes doctrinal strategy, by amending the Codex so it recognises three great sub-categories. The numbers of battle-brothers stay the same per Chapter, but the equipment will be adapted to suit the specialty. Using the past wars on Old Earth, there would be the Limitanei, the Comitatenses, and the Jovian Chapters.”

“Continue, brother,” well, Roboute had all the full attention of the Khan, at least...

“The Limitanei, as their name indicates, would be the troops on the walls, at our frontiers. They would guard the Fortified Worlds we can’t afford to lose at any cost, with the zone of protection extending from a few planets to an entire Sector. Practically, they will require a lot of siege weapons to fulfil their duties. The Comitatenses, by contrast, would be rapid and mobile, not assigned to any world. Theoretically and practically, the Imperium has already innovated in this domain: there are many fleet-based chapters which are fighting their wars from the bridges of Battle-Barges and Strike Cruisers. What we need is a recognition of status in their case, and adapting the equipment to their needs. They don’t have to defend a particular Sector, but they must react to Alpha-class threats across the galaxy to support them in their campaigns. And the Jovian Astartes...in many aspects, these Chapters would secure Sectors as recruitment bases during times of relative peace, but would muster in significant numbers when a threat too powerful for any single Chapter attacks the Imperium as a whole.”

Many of his brothers appeared...thoughtful once he stopped talking. Which was...well, to be honest, better than Roboute had hoped for. Weaver’s meditative expression was not bad news either.

And then Leman, of course, broke the silence with a howl of laughter.

“You realise you’re going to need a lot more of Weapon Depots for that, *brother*?”

**High Orbit over Macragge**

**Victory-class Battleship *Brünhild***

**2.267.312M35**

**Lord High Admiral Reinhart von Lohengramm**

“Smile, husband, the Living Saint is not going to eat you.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Reinhart answered truthfully. “I know Her Celestial Highness has her spiders and other insects for that.”

One had been playing the role of Logistician for the little reception that they had just left temporarily, and the Lord High Admiral of Kar Duniash would lie if he said that he wasn’t impressed. The arachnid was huge, to the point she had required her own transport to arrive aboard *Brünhild***.**

Yet more important than the size was the intelligence in the eyes.

The ‘Adjutant-Spider’ was incredibly smart, and there was zero doubt that anyone not considered loyal would be eliminated before he or she became a threat to the Living Saint.

“I was more worried about what our daughters were up.”

“You will be able to threaten this roguish young man when we return to the reception, don’t worry.”

Reinhart sighed.

“You too, Siegfried?”

“There are two Primarchs and plenty of Admirals,” his childhood friend and chief of staff replied with amusement. “The chances of inappropriate things happening are quite low, I think.”

Fortunately, the private conference room he had prepared wasn’t far from it, meaning this depressing conversation came to an end quickly.

His guest, obviously, was waiting for him.

“Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm.”

“Your Celestial Highness...or do you prefer Lady General Militant?”

“Since we’re going to speak about military matters, I think a ‘Lady General’ will be sufficient.” The Chosen of the God-Emperor spoke courteously but with steel under the surface.

“As you wish...Lady General.” This enormously simplified things, for at least with these ranks, they were both extremely important figures of different Adepta, contrary to the Living Saint which involved the ‘divine’ status and...it made everything more complicated. “I read your reports about the different tests of the new devices ready to be installed on your new class of Battleship. They seem to be promising.”

“Archmagos Sultan is considered a genius in this field for a reason,” eyes filled with stars stared unflinchingly at him, “and we tested as many systems on ships taken from our mothballs to be certain of their reliability. It took several more months than last years’ schedule allowed for, but the construction will officially begin at the end of this year. Construction schedule is that the ship will take between thirty and forty years to be built.”

Reinhart frowned.

“Are you sure, Lady General, you’re not rushing things? As you may know, there was an Admiral so recently who decided to ignore that haste in naval construction planning is paid in blood later.”

“I am aware of von Kisher’s stupidity, Lord High Admiral. That’s why I requested overseers from Mars and Ryza, along with all the manpower and resources I negotiated for with them. And they gave their support last month. Obviously, it is a very conditional support, and they will be quite loud if the problems emerge. But they agree with Archmagos the construction of the first new-model Nyxian Battleship can begin at the end of this year.”

The message was quite clear: Mars and Ryza were willing to wait and see if the Battleship construction held its promises, and if the answer was positive, build their own patterns of this Battleship class a decade later down the line.

“I see. And how many do you intend the construction of this decade?”

“The current fund allocation is enough for four, including the lead ship of the class. It is entirely likely Samarkand will provide the funds for one more.”

Five new Battleships. Even by the standards of Kar Duniash, that represented an enormous amount of tonnage and firepower.

“I presume you will answer as whether the Segmentum shipyards support you or not before this year is over.”

“That would be preferable.”

“Any other...significant requests?” Reinhart asked, counting deep inside how many Admirals he was going to have to convince, assuming the latest set of documentation and vids on the Battleship Program lived up to its high promises.

“One, but it has nothing to do with the Battleships themselves...more a new strong and polite request to guard the mothballed fleets of the Imperium.” For once, something like displeasured flashed on the visage of the young woman. “I have spent enormous efforts destroying the Traitor Armada, and so did billions of loyal souls. I would be very angry if the Traitors were allowed to rebuild their strength because the Navy didn’t protect its old hulls.”

A request that was perfectly legitimate...but which was facing some difficult obstacles on its way.

“I will do what I can, Lady General. But I have to warn you, my authority may not be enough to neutralise this potential threat. The principal mothballs of Kar Duniash are in the same system, and those are heavily guarded. Evidently, the heretics didn’t steal warships from them. The same was true of the primary reserve fleets, like Ryza and other key shipyards. The Traitors are dangerous and serve evil powers, but they’re not devoid of brains. I await further report, so it is only based on guesses and intuition, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the ships committed for the last Black Crusade were stolen on secondary and tertiary mothballed fleets, maybe some as old as the Scouring. Kar Duniash won’t admit it, but we too have suffered catastrophic losses of archives in the last millennia. And of course...the job to guard mothball fleets is hardly a glamorous duty. If the deactivated ships are within an inhabited system, it can be tolerable...but it hardly *pleasant*.”

Worse, even if he generously acknowledged there were some dedicated individuals among the watchers of those fleets, their loyalty wouldn’t be enough if the assault force which came to steal the warships included Chaos Marines.

And looking at the Living Saint of the God-Emperor, the blonde-haired Admiral could see that she had thought of it too.

But the problem had to be raised...a solution had to be found. But as he had said seconds ago, it wasn’t going to be easy.

“Speaking of lighter subjects, your Admiral Reuenthal told me you wanted more observers for new weapons about to be tested.”

“Yes, Lord High Admiral. As you’ve no doubt heard, we fought against new enemies and discovered plenty of xenos races which don’t believe in the Imperium’s naval doctrine.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Reinhart commented laconically, taking great care to not look at Siegfried Kircheis. His friend had been very amused by the refusal of the Tech-Priests to give him ships able to deploy Kane Particles. “You intend to develop more starship programs?”

Nyx was a world which was rewarded for the many exploits of its Lady, but there had to be limits...

And as if to answer his doubts, the golden-winged officer of the Imperial shook her head.

“Not as such, no. For the time being, all my Admirals are trying to assimilate the lessons of the Black Crusade and Operation Stalingrad, while working on tens of thousands of tactical simulations with many Magi and Archmagi. The launch of the new class of Imperial Battleship was decided first, given the time it takes to build one...and the reality that sadly, many of our current classes are not up to the job.”

If anyone else told him this, Reinhart would likely have labelled him a defeatist...but this was the Victor of Macragge and Commorragh speaking. Weaver had won these battles...and the butcher bill justified her conviction the M34 and M35 Battleships were not enough.

“But I’m sure you have a few ideas.”

“I have,” the commanding officer of the Battleship Enterprise admitted. “One measure we’ve taken is to stop temporarily the construction of several Hecate-class Heavy Cruisers.”

“A curious choice.” Siegfried decided to intervene. “It is a good class. It has no great strengths, but no significant weaknesses either.”

“We’re studying the possibility of transforming them into an all-Railgun warships.”

“Ah.” This wasn’t all day someone managed to silence his friend with one sentence...

Soon enough the time agreed for this private conversation arrived to its end after a few other updates on what the Nyxian shipbuilders were up to, including void-capable drones.

“There is one another matter,” the Lady General mentioned idly, “though it isn’t urgent: the Aeronautica Imperialis.”

“I really hope,” Reinhart said drily, “it is not an attempt to suggest the Aeronautica must be transferred to become part of the Imperial Guard. My lord Admirals won’t tolerate it...and the answer will probably the same as it was every past millennium: if the Guard wants fighters and bombers so much, they have to train the pilots and assume all the expenses.”

“No. Based on my own battle-experiences, my personal, professional opinion is different. In terms of efficiency, priorities, and recruitment, it would likely be better for the Aeronautica to become independent.”

Hildegard chuckled next to him.

“I like very much your proposal, your Celestial Highness...did I mention I am a former pilot?”

How quickly his own wife was prompt to abandon the Navy’s honour...

“Yes, the name of Imperial Air Force would be absolutely fantastic!”

Siegfried had the gall to betray him too. Traitors, traitors everywhere...

**Admiral Miranda Lawson**

If she was to be honest, Miranda had hoped to make a remarked entrance once she arrived at Macragge.

But as it had turned out, her luck was not that good. Her ship had experienced several problems in the long journey to the Eastern Fringe, and the result was that she had arrived mere hours after Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm.

Between an Admiral in disgrace who didn’t have currently an assignment, and the Lord of the Segmentum Fortress deciding the great deployments for Ultima Segmentum, there wasn’t any contest.

At least it had allowed her to watch as a grumpy father was busy threatening Rogue Trader Lord Wolfgang Bach as subtly as he could in public...which was not very. And though the ‘crime’ had never been mentioned, the two von Lohengramm daughters being present to support the aforementioned Rogue Trader did not require a lot of logic to add one plus one. Or was it one plus two?

It lasted only a few minutes, but Miranda was sure the gossip was going to the entire Macragge System and far beyond.

But it would stay on the level of gossip. Probably. The pretty but fierce wife of the Lord High Admiral escorted all the parties involved to a more discreet environment, and soon enough the usual conversations resumed.

And suddenly everything felt more...luminous, the world seemed to be afire...and there was a lot of radiance.

“Ah, Admiral Lawson. I heard you were asking for an audience?”

“I did, your Celestial...General? I mean-“

“Lady General will be fine, that’s the rank that was written on my invitation letter to reach the *Brünhild* tonight*.”* Eyes filled with stars watched her with amusement. “You seem in need of refreshments? Solaria?”

“Here you are, Webmistress!”

The drink felt good...though after a few seconds, the female Admiral felt she was getting used to the formidable presence of the Living Saint.

“Sorry about that, Admiral. Many people around me are not that bothered about my powers these days that I tend to...not be as cautious as I should be.”

“That...it’s fine.” Miranda cursed her temporary moment of weakness, giving a thanks to the enormous arachnid and giving her back the empty glass. “It surprised me. I was a bit too far away during the first hour, and I’m afraid that left me...unprepared for your aura.”

“Some Admirals said the same thing,” the Lady General Militant of the Imperial Guard declared with a thin smile. “So, Admiral, what reasons do you have to visit Macragge these days? By virtue of almost removing a Vandire from this galaxy, I suppose I can give you this short audience.”

Miranda knew Paul von Oberstein had told his subordinate exactly what happened, and the Living Saint knew she knew, but they had to play the game, didn’t they?

“By the fault of this arrogant backstabber named Rudolf von Goldenbaum, I find myself in half-pay as far as Battlefleet Sol and the authorities of the Imperial Navy in the Sol System are concerned. Since von Goldenbaum allied himself with Vandire, and you are one of his enemies, I thought I would use the free time to come here and propose my services.”

“An interesting proposal,” the woman who had attained galaxy-wide fame as Lady Weaver answered, “that said, I have received a significant amount of requests for Battlefleet Nyx lately...Solaria?”

“Six hundred and twenty, just for the rank of Admiral, Webmistress! But none had tried to kill a Vandire! That has to count for something, right?”

The Lady General Militant chuckled.

“Thank you, Solaria. Please go to Isley, and tell him about what we discussed a few minutes ago.”

“Right away, Webmistress!”

It was kind of funny to see all the participants, many of them quite important Admirals, be forced to move aside, for the spider was really, really big...

“So,” a single word, and the seriousness of the matter returned. “You want a position. As my spider said, what happened at a certain court-martial speaks well of you, as it does for the two other officers who spoke in favour to kill this incompetent grox. That speaks well of your honour. It doesn’t anything about your competence when it comes to other battlefields.”

“If you’ve read my career file, Lady General, you will know I’m not requesting a battlefield duty. I have men and women I commanded who left their yards and Navy duties because they refused to obey someone like von Goldenbaum. I could have closed my mouth and stayed out of sight of the great movers and shakers of Terra. But I didn’t. I believe the Imperial Navy must build the best warships it can afford to, and those artworks of weapons and advanced technology must then be commanded by Admirals every crewmember of a Battlefleet will trust with their lives, because their short life-expectancy won’t be wasted in useless political schemes! And that won’t happen if the current imbeciles in charge are allowed to keep doing what they’ve always done.”

Lady Weaver stared at her thoughtfully for a few seconds, though it felt far longer from Miranda’s point of view.

“You realise,” this time the voice was lowered to be barely above the level of a whisper, “that I am not ready to confront Vandire. It will certainly be decades before I’m ready.”

“There is a saying,” Miranda replied, “revenge is a dish best served cold.”

“Yes, though there are other proverbs when it comes to vengeance.” The black-haired woman shook her head. “Warship schematics? Trained ship-builders? Adamantium and other highly valuable metals?”

“They can all be found if the stakes are sufficiently high.”

The Lady of Nyx watched her glass for a second before raising it to her lips and emptying it in one gulp.

“Very well. I’m willing to give you your chance, Admiral Lawson. You will report to Lord Admiral Müller and Archmagos Sultan. They will give you several things to work upon, and the length of your trial period. Prove you are worthy of your rank and your reputation, and the next time we will meet, I will ask you to present me the shipbuilding projects you’re willing to sponsor and how much Throne Gelts it will cost me. If you fail...well, to be honest, I will likely keep you a seat for the day I will deal with Ormuz Vandire and Rudolf von Goldenbaum.”

“I intend to be more than a seat-holder, Lady General. I want to build the future of the Imperial Navy.”

The other woman bared her teeth.

“I always like to have Admirals who don’t lack in competence and motivation. Nyx will welcome you, Admiral Lawson.”

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“What do you think about her, Archmagos?”

“A very driven woman, Chosen of the Omnissiah.” Gastaph replied. “I can’t speak of her competence, of course.”

“Of course.”

“But her willingness to be in competition with other Admirals and naval officers...or should I say her eagerness? Yes, her eagerness is speaking well for her. And it proves she doesn’t lack in confidence.”

“No, she doesn’t. And it gives me hope.”

“Chosen of the Omnissiah?”

“For all the political feuds which led to an Admiral like Miranda Lawson leave the Sol System, there are still a lot of players outside of Mars who believe in worthy goals. No matter how much damage the Vandire Clan and several other greedy and self-interested factions have done, there remain many people who are trying to return the Imperium to its former glory.”

“Yes...indeed a great source of hope, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” the Voice of Mars answered truthfully. “On a completely unrelated topic, I can inform you your commands have been obeyed to the letter. The wrecks of the Traitor Armada have been all thrown into nearby suns, along with as many big parts as we could detect and collect.”

“No problem when it comes to the other Archmagi?”

“There have been a few,” Gastaph admitted, “but in most cases, showing them what the inside of an Infernus-class Battleship looked like was sufficient to stop the protests. Save a few Radicals – who are all under investigation, I assure you – all the representatives of different Forge Worlds agree with you that these...these heretek abominations would be an extremely wasteful way to use your Aethergold.”

“Yes.” The Lady of Nyx said tersely. “I understand why the temptation was here. Though it would likely have cost as much as a brand-new ship to restore each of these void colossi, I can acknowledge the opportunities. But even if purified completely, the Infernus class was imagined and built by souls which had already succumbed to Chaos, and that I will never ignore. No matter how much they’re purified and sanctified, I am ready to bet a few trillion Throne Gelts that the Infernus and the other Traitor patterns have major flaws within their systems or their internal architecture. It might be as obvious as a weakness in their Gellar Fields, or some poison coursing through the hydroponic sections...I simply don’t know. And since I don’t know, I am unwilling to take the risk.”

“As I said, Chosen of the Omnissiah, the majority understand it...though they are eager to study the captured Ark Mechanicus and the damaged Legate-class Heavy Battleship that you didn’t order to be thrown into the nearest sun.”

The groan which came in the next seconds was particularly impressive, with all the respect Gastaph had for Lady Weaver.

“I’m sure something can be arranged for the former. The *Technologiae Potestas Est* has been completely purified, as you well know...for the other ‘prize’ we will see, the Heracles Wardens have done the purification part along with the Brothers of the Red, but there are still many problems to deal with inside.”

The grin which followed was genuine.

“I hope you don’t have too many more of these suggestions today to complicate the political waters, Archmagos. I have already to deal with over-excited spiders...”

“Your Swarm’s Adjutants are on average...in exceptional good humour, Chosen.”

“And today they are in an even better mood. The Tau engineers were so eager to please one of my Adjutants that they forged an armour for her...and it was so successful Archmagos Lankovar was unable to block the move until the enthusiasm was out of control.”

Gastaph Hediatrix thought over the matter quickly, and decided to answer...prudently.

“I am not familiar with the matter, but I believe it makes sense, Chosen of the Omnissiah. In any future confrontation, a future enemy is sure to target the ‘officers’ of your Swarm in priority, like many Traitor Marines try decapitation tactics against the loyal servants of the Machine-God. Armouring your senior arachnids make sense...as long as they’ve stopped growing, at least. No matter how creative the mechanical process, I doubt anyone can afford to build ten different sizes of armour to account for various sizes of growth.”

“I know. And yes, the concept makes sense. If anything, it might convince some enemies to go after my Adjutants while in reality the targeted arachnid is a Helspider. But their excitement is...contagious. And of course, a large majority of Adjutant-Colonels are busy writing a tactical treatise of *How it is necessary to armour the Adjutants* or some other fancy title, and naturally, Ishtar was not discreet enough, meaning the Space Wolves heard it...”

“Ouch,” Gastaph reacted. “I mean, I sympathised with the difficulty of your position, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“I’m sure you do, Archmagos, I’m sure you do. Now what was this issue we had with the Rogue Traders this time?”

**Magna Macragge Civitas**

**The Pavia Gallery**

**2.272.312M35**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

The most incredible part about the Pavia Gallery, almost certainly, was that it existed in the first place.

Especially as it wasn’t a priority to begin with!

When Macragge City was left in ruins by the Word Bearers’ invasion, naturally, everyone who mattered, from the Primarch Guilliman to the simplest soldiers, had other things to think about than artwork paintings and redecorating Macragge.

There were hundreds of thousands of people left homeless, no, millions, and this was on the eve of a season of ‘winter’, that Wolfgang preferred to call ‘frozen hell’ now that he was given the opportunity to ‘enjoy’ it.

The level of the food stocks had also been rather preoccupying, if he remembered correctly.

Order had not collapsed, the presence of a well-disciplined army had helped, but...the situation hadn’t been great by any means.

The devastation had been massive, and when he had looked at the first hololithic pict, the young Rogue Trader’s thoughts was that the homeworld of the Ultramarines would take decades to be rebuilt.

In this aspect, he had been utterly wrong. One year of rebuilding effort, and Macragge rose from the ashes like a...okay, maybe it was good to avoid references to a phoenix here.

But the reconstruction effort, unprecedented and on a planetary scale, had achieved near-unbelievable results.

Obviously, the Macraggian architects and their Primarch master had an endless army of ants to compensate for the construction machines which had been destroyed.

It had progressed so well, and there were so many artists and Imperial propagandists eager to sculpt, paint, sing, or weave the victory of Lady Nyx that naturally something was agreed upon – it helped many of these artists had been involved in the aftermath of Operation Caribbean and were thus in semi-employ of Her Celestial Highness Weaver now.

The final result outside was a tall blue-and-white piece of Macraggian architecture, with rows of five elegant columns, the foundations and the tops sculpted to represent moths, ants, spiders, and various insects.

It was easily to admit it was the less impressive part of the artistic display, for the moment you were deep inside, you were dazzled by the profusion of golden paintings, great battlefield scenes – which had likely never happened, Wolfgang was sure – tapestries proclaiming the glory of the Primarchs, and other artworks.

And since the Macraggian nobles were eager to reward the woman who had saved their planet, there were gifts of all sorts. The Pavia Gallery – which despite its simple name, required a guide and some three hours of free time to visit at a near-running pace – evidently didn’t have all of these presents, but Lady Weaver had decided to showcase here some first-class pieces, from ceramics to silverware between the artworks praising her for the defeat of the Tyranids, Necrons, and Chaos Marines.

One naturally couldn’t miss that the first two enemies, being xenos species, were far more often represented than the latter. Macragge or not, the Inquisition and many organisations preferred to let the heretics fade into oblivion.

“I’m told,” Wolfgang said with a conspiratorial tone to the Rogue Trader by his side, “the offer to include Nyxian architects to build this museum was firmly but strictly rejected by the Architect Guild of Macragge.”

“I heard the same rumour,” Magdalena Orpheus replied, in grand uniform for today’s occasion. “I don’t doubt it has a core of truth. The Macraggian people know that nothing is the same anymore, yet there is a strong feeling of...returning to the previous age of glory by a different path, shall we say?”

The formula was not very catchy for propaganda, but it had the merit of being extremely accurate.

“Congratulations on your survival, by the way. We were not sure you were going to escape with your life this little *soirée* on the flagship of Battlefleet Kar Duniash.”

“It was never going to be that bad, and you know it,” Wolfgang tried to present a brave expression...which didn’t fool the female Rogue Trader. “Any outstanding proclamation which was made in the last hours?”

“None,” the owner of the Star Galleon said cheerfully, “I suppose this summon is about to remedy to it.”

As they passed through more fantastic decorations and war paintings – one of them was superb, with a flight of Dragon Armours tearing apart the distorted but very recognisable reptilian Traitor Titans – Wolfgang conceded it was true.

The hall chosen for this gathering could have served as a throne room or something equally grand...and of the hundred-plus men and women assembled here, the profusion of expensive clothes, military medals, and other exotic objects was so high one could have easily bought a few blocks of Macraggian land effortlessly.

Most of these Lords and Ladies had nothing in common. There were turbans and scimitars next to powdered wigs. There were a few men having donned cow-boy hats that Ancient Pierre would love for his collection, next to women dressed like they were about to go to very unsavoury establishment in scandalous dresses and high-heeled shoes.

Yet there was something that united them: like Magdalena Orpheus and Wolfgang, they were the legitimate owners of a Warrant of Trade, and had a ship to enforce it.

A few more arrived behind, bringing the participants to a respectable number approaching hundred and thirty, and then the doors behind them closed after several Space Marines in crimson armours went to take their positions.

A few seconds later, the doors at the opposite side of the hall opened, and Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, Lady of the Nyx Sector and Basileia of the Nyx System, entered the not-throne room, radiant in her golden Power Armour, equipped like she was ready for war.

“Well,” someone whispered next to Wolfgang, “things are going to get interesting...”

**Rogue Trader Magdalena Orpheus**

Magdalena had not suggested anything to the Living Saint ruling Nyx, but if she had, it would have been to say the evidence: plenty of Rogue Traders never respected anything but military might and the God-Emperor. And in the latter case, it was best to check through the power of Aethergold.

Thus the need today to arrive in battle-gear and ready like you were able to begin a war, flanked by Space Marines.

“Many of you, owners of Warrant of Trade,” the woman blessed by the Master of Mankind began after expediting the courtesies in record time, “desire to serve me in some capacity. Some of you in this hall proclaimed it within the boundaries of the Baal System, while others arrived more recently at Macragge. This willingness to accomplish great deeds, is something that has not gone unnoticed from many eyes. This is why I directly asked the noble sentinels of the Adeptus Custodes to confirm several things that faded away from Imperial memories. It took time for them to direct several Adepts in the libraries containing the lawful precedents, but it was successful. I can confirm that by the will of the Master of Mankind, a Peer of Terra has the authority to write a Compact under his or her own name.”

There were plenty of excited whispers. Most of the Rogue Traders Magdalena saw showed expressions of satisfaction as well.

“However,” Lady Weaver continued while watching all the Rogue Traders like a prey bird staring at a potential dinner, “that the lawful precedent exists is not an excuse to do everything you might fancy and ignore outrageously the consequences. I am not a tyrant, but I believe in *Order*. Bringing you under my protection will give each owner great benefits, as several Rogue Traders among this assembly can attest.”

Magdalena curtsied and nodded with a large smile, as many of her peers turned their head in her direction.

“The shipyard of Nyx called *Jaghatai’s Celerity*, in honour of the Primarch just returned from long and extraordinary adventures, has been dedicated to the maintenance, repairs, and construction of Rogue Trader starships, along with those of the allies that go into exploration duties and other perilous missions with the owners of a Warrant of Trade.”

That was, as the Living Said was known to repeat with her chief advisors, the carrot. The owner of the *Arica Orpheus* had a feeling the stick was not going to wait long before an appearance.

“But as I said before, having been granted the liberty to sail through long-distant and unexplored regions is not an excuse to do reckless and moronic things. I can guarantee to all of you that if someone is stupid enough to try to smuggle Chaos artefacts, allow his crew to be tainted due to idiotic moves which were completely predictable to begin with, or do something that results in corruption claiming loyalist souls by your fault, you will beg to be granted a quick death by the time I am done with you. A Warrant of Trade is a privilege, and heresy is a sin that cancels it. The only reason I would ask the Inquisition to not burn you on a pyre immediately would be because I want to use Aethergold to show you the magnitude of your damnation. The Ruinous Powers are one of the Greatest Enemies of Mankind, and there is to be no alliance with them, no stupid attempt to use their power for your own gains. This road leads to the pits of corruption, and the damnation of uncountable souls. Am I sufficiently clear?”

The statement was heard and understood by everyone, of that Magdalena was sure.

As her wings were unfurled and the radiance was not restrained in any way, the female Rogue Trader acknowledged the long-ears had a good point when they called the Living Saint an ‘Angel of Death’. The servants of the God-Emperor certainly made beautiful figures, great allies when you were able to secure an alliance with them...but you couldn’t forget that all they considered betrayers and oath-breakers were going to *burn*.

“Now let’s speak of a different and more pleasant subject of conversation. Yes, Rogue Trader Guts.”

The other Rogue Traders who had seen him had really not lied: the black-armoured man was truly a giant. How was it possible the Adeptus Astartes had missed him during its recruitment drives?

“A friend who couldn’t be there today,” the warrior-looking giant grinned carnivorously, “wondered if the rewards included planets...and Sectors. He mentioned something about Atlantis not having a ruler, if I heard correctly.”

There were for a few times several chuckles, and Lady Weaver seemed more amused than exasperated.

“You can tell Rogue Trader Griffith,” ouch, being mentioned like that was a ‘touché’ that was going to leave marks, “that first, I don’t believe his excuse for finding himself elsewhere...”

The muscled woman who stood side by side with Rogue Trader Guts giggled loudly.

“And second, that my rewards are always proportional to the services someone deserves. If one planet is a just reward, I have no problem facilitating the bureaucratic measures so that someone can become the Planetary Governor in his or her lifetime. I just want to make it clear that I won’t deliver you a seat of planetary autocrat if I feel you’re utterly incompetent in handling your gubernatorial duties. Wealth, a lavish lifestyle, regular sources of income, all of it can be yours provided the exploits are there and you stay away from heretical temptations. I have just ended a rebellion on Ichar IV where the ruling dynasty accumulated the sins of incompetence, sloth, greed, disloyalty, and undeserved arrogance. I am not going to enforce replacements if it’s to acknowledge a decade later the new Governor is *worse*.”

This was more...problematic, at least from the perspective of the Rogue Traders assembled in this hall. Two-thirds or so of the men and women were completely unbothered; whether because they had no planetary ambitions – many Rogue Trader fleets were in existence since there was an Imperium, they were not going to abandon their void armadas for a mere world – or because they felt they could earn the reward by sheer talent anyway remained to be seen.

Some had such emotionless faces nothing could be determined about their thoughts or opinion. But about a tenth of the owners of the Warrants of Trade were clearly displeased. They had come salivating and anticipating a bottomless purse in exchange of vague promises, and this audience suddenly revealed there were some significant obstacles on the way.

“There are more questions, I see. Lord Draik, the floor is yours.”

“My thanks, your Celestial Highness,” a tall man clad in baroque armour of bronze and gold ornamentation saluted like an old soldier...and he had the scars on his face to be one, assuredly. “I was wondering the policy of the Compact you will enforce when it comes to xenos trade. I am familiar with some old Compacts, due to my family history, and I know they tend to have extremely different approaches when it comes to this...dangerous and profitable trade. Some Compacts utterly forbid it, going so far as to order xenocide following the destruction of all technology ever used by a newly discovered race. Others are more...flexible.”

“A good point, Lord Draik.” The Living Saint owning the *Enterprise* began. “As a rule, I do not allow automatic xenocide unless the species in question is already tainted beyond redemption by the foul powers of the Warp or its behaviour deserves immediate annihilation. As for the technology, while the recovery of STC technology is the priority for evident reasons, I think...”

Magdalena did her best to not show surprise or excitement when a large beetle flew next to her before entering her pocket and throwing there an object. It looked like this audience was not the only important meeting she would be given the privilege of being invited to today...

**Macragge**

**Somewhere in the Pharsalus Military District**

**2.274.312M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

There were many days as an Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus when you felt the galaxy had thrown each and every last horror it could at you, yet you still stood and emerged victorious for the glory of Him on Holy Terra.

It was not one of these days.

In fact, Odysseus Tor wondered somehow if the old Founders of the Holy Ordos had not been exaggeratingly optimistic.

Because there was some optimism the human species and its abhuman cousins were not going to destroy civilisation in displays of raw stupidity!

“Did I just hear,” the old Lord Inquisitor hissed angrily, “that your Bastion’s leader had the gall to *sell advanced weapons to the greenskins*?”

It wasn’t three days he had accepted delaying his retirement after receiving some extensive medical treatments, and this was the first ‘gross stupidity’ case he faced. Heretics would say the God-Emperor was sending him a message. Odysseus preferred to think the Duardin being cut off from the rest of the galaxy had led them on a path which was more and more dangerous the longer they stayed isolated from Mankind.

“Err...that is...they had prisoners. And they were willing to exchange them for weapons.” Side-note: evidently, the average ‘Squat’ negotiator could sweat profusely.

“That position of yours,” Odysseus seethed, “reveals a total lack of intelligence.”

“Duardin life is precious!”

“The Orks do not respect any law save the one of ‘might makes right’,” Lady Weaver intervened in a voice that was akin to the snow storm raging outside the building where this not-so-gentle conversation was taking place. “If the Ork leader had not plunged directly into a wormhole, and this wormhole had not led him outside near the Calyx Hell Stars, I can guarantee you all the Plasma weapons you gave him would have been turned against your Bastions.”

“Ahem...that’s a lot of ‘ifs’...”

Odysseus did not need any coordination to glare ferociously at the stout abhuman who had come dressed like a businessman.

Next to him, Lady Weaver and Rogue Trader Magdalena Orpheus visibly shared his feelings, for their glares were determined...and particularly threatening, even by Inquisitorial standards.

“You are going to go back to your leader,” the golden-winged Queen of the Swarm did not shout, though the words seemed to be chasing away the elements themselves, “and tell him that if dares selling weapons to the Orks again, I will personally come in person to his Bastion with an army of Space Marines. And I will make sure his fate will be whispered across the galaxy in the same fearful tones as what I did to Commorragh.”

“This...Duardin do not...” the golden aura grew, and with it came a furious song. It was almost sad...but it burned. “We do...not like threats.” The Duardin managed to finish lamely.

“This wasn’t a threat,” Weaver corrected coldly, “this is what is going to happen if you repeat this stupidity. The Orks are dangerous enough, we don’t need to increase their war-fighting capacity! He one you just ‘traded with’ has managed to get out a realm of the Damned, steal a Space Hulk transformed into a starship, before sacking several military outposts and disappearing into the Halo Stars!”

Yes, and this was one of the many reasons Odysseus wished Rafaela was still there. This kind of shenanigans should be the duty of the Ordo Xenos...alas, her replacement’s arrival had been delayed, and the junior Inquisitors present at Macragge were very, very busy analysing the Necron and Tyranid threat, two subjects no one had known much about before they blew in the Imperium’s face.

“I will...I will relay the message.”

“Oh, you will.” The Angel of Sacrifice smiled. “Magdalena?”

“Yes, my Lady?”

“Do you think the *Arica Orpheus* can go through the Golgotha Straights and enter the Galactic Core?”

“Of course,” the elegant woman answered, her assurance coming from her long and distinguished lineage coming to the fore. “But I will need a few of the...upgrades we discussed while on our way here. And I would prefer taking two or three new Navigators aboard, the difficulty of the navigation in this turbulent area requires a rotation to avoid exhausting the representatives of the Navis Nobilite.”

“I will discuss it with Chancellor Achelieux. But you think your Star Galleon can do it?”

“Nothing is certain when it comes to such dangerous uncharted paths,” the black-and-white-clad woman told her benefactor, “but provided that the requests mentioned are fulfilled, I believe the risks are manageable...compared to the potential gains.”

“Hey! We don’t like foreigners...err...” in hindsight, maybe the Duardin were just stupidity incarnate...it took certainly a respectable amount of idiocy to make three pair of eyes glare at you in the same second.

“I am going to send Rogue Trader Lady Magdalena Orpheus to your Bastion once her ship will have been modified to her wishes.” Lady Weaver told the abhuman. Nobody could miss it was a command, not a suggestion. “She will act as my emissary, and will deliver several letters and pieces of official correspondence bearing my seal. If your Bastion masters have any sanity left in their heads, they will listen to her.”

No ‘or else’ was uttered, but Odysseus was sure the Duardin could hear it loud and clear. After all, he and his cousins had seen the Space Marines on their way here.

It didn’t take much imagination to have a nightmare or two about what a Battle-Barge filled with Black Templars would do to a Bastion of the Squats, no matter how modern and fortified.

By the Golden Throne, they already were going to have to downplay the weapon sales in public for now, otherwise there would be a lot of angry Battle-Companies charging towards the Core...trading weapons with greenskins was a heavy crime in every Sector of the Imperium, and for good reason.

“Now let’s speak of the so-called ‘rare metals and gems’ you brought...”