This is not an update – 28 January 2023

**Tyranny 12.1**

**Blood Bath**

*We won.*

*The Ymga Monolith has been destroyed. Macragge is safe. The Black Crusade and the Seventeenth Traitor Legion are no more.*

*But by everything that is good in this galaxy, we paid for it in blood and tears.*

*Eleven Battleships. Three Battle-Barges. Two Grand Cruisers. Six Battlecruisers. Three War Barques. Forty-five Cruisers of all types. Eleven Strike Cruisers. Seventy-one Light Cruisers. One hundred and three Destroyers. One hundred and twenty-four Frigates. One hundred and ninety-six Corvettes. Four thousand three hundred and fifty-one Interceptors. And three thousand eight hundred and four Bombers.*

*And that is just the losses of the order of battle of Operation Stalingrad, my order of battle.*

*Nor does it mention that hundreds of other warships have been battered into impotence, and will need years of repairs, if they can be repaired at all.*

*We won. And the most terrible of all? If I was thrown into the past, and given the opportunity to change the outcome of this war, I wouldn’t.*

*We couldn’t afford to let the Szarekhan Dynasty use its Replicator Forges until their armada was ten times the size of the forces we mustered to end it. We couldn’t afford to let this alien pyramid to get anywhere near the Samarkand Quadrant or any human-inhabited world.*

*It would have been a nightmare made flesh.*

*We defeated the Necrons. We vanquished the Traitor Marines. And we exterminated the Tyranids’ vanguard.*

*And the price, while much smaller than my staff’s pessimistic assumptions, was still bad enough.*

*Nine million three hundred thousand guardsmen mustered for Operation Stalingrad have been killed, wounded so badly Bacta can’t only mitigate the damage, or been declared missing in the multiple battles we fought.*

*For the Skitarii, this number is just above fourteen million, and most of them were killed in action, for they took an insane percentage of fatalities for the Imperium at Mandragora.*

*The knowledge it could have been worse is not much of a consolation in the end.*

*I lost three members of the Dawnbreaker Guard. The Imperium lost many veteran Astartes. The twenty-five specialists lost trying to steal a Replicator Forge were only the beginning.*

*Overall, preliminary numbers are between all Chapters having contributed to Operation Stalingrad, we lost eight thousand and two hundred seventy-four Space Marines. These numbers include the awful sacrifice the Invaders made to stop the super-cannon of the Ymga Monolith from decimating our ground forces on Mandragora...but they do not include the permanent losses of the Ultramarines and their Successors. Only the Howling Griffons and the Silver Skulls, who acted in my name, are counted for Operation Stalingrad’s butcher bill.*

*Over seventy Titans and two hundred and twenty Knights have been crippled or wiped out.*

*We won.*

*Three hundred and sixty-five Cairn-class or equivalent Necron Battleships have been destroyed. More than two thousand Escorts of varying size joined them in death. Many Protocol Artefacts from the Szarekhan Dynasty have been recovered.*

*The true losses of the Szarekhan and Sautekh Dynasty will probably be never known, but the minimal estimate most of my Adjutant-Spiders and the Logis Tech-Priests agree upon is of seventy million Necron warriors rendered permanently inoperable, along with one million war machines, and forty billion Canoptek units.*

*It is a minimum. Some figures estimate the true Necron losses are closer to fifty billion infantry warriors, with a proportional increase for the Necrodermis-made armour and the Canoptek swarms. Many C’Tan Shards have been torn asunder and cast back into whatever hellish dimension they spawned from, with only one managing to escape.*

*Once again, we will probably never know the true extent of their losses, no matter how much Phaeron Zahndrekh wishes us to. The Howling Griffons and several task forces of the Blood were often confronted by fanatical defensive behaviour during their independent duties away from the main thrust of Operation Stalingrad, and several Necron fortresses have only been neutralised after the planet they were built around was destroyed.*

*The only things that have been confirmed beyond doubt are the capture of Replicator Forge Alpha, and the formal surrender of the heavily damaged Golden Crown now that the forces of the Sautekh have ritually laid down their arms.*

*The losses of the Traitor Seventeenth Legion are easier to calculate. We killed approximately thirty thousand Word Bearers at Macragge. According to the data coming from the Wolves and other sources, the estimates Lorgar began this Black Crusade with two hundred and eight thousand Chaos Space Marines, two Super-Battleships, and one hundred and eight Battleships, most of them of the cursed Infernus design.*

*The overwhelming majority are busy explaining their failures to their fell masters now. And I doubt the abominations are very pleased.*

*Losing an entire Astartes Legion along with most of the Gore Crows, the dreaded Chaos Titans of Legio Vulturum, must sting fiercely. And between the lesser ships lost at Cadia and all the Traitor regiments of the Volscani Cataphracts, the hosts of the Lost and Damned have been severely weakened. The Master of Shadows being defeated and permanently killed will just add insult to the injury.*

*We haven’t properly estimated the losses of the Orks and the Tyranids yet. They are in the billions, and they make the idea of counting the Necron losses positively easy by comparison.*

*We won.*

*I think...I hope all the sacrifices will be worth it.*

*They will be worth it.*

*And now I am going to sleep.*

*Return to the abyss, old horrors.*

*This galaxy is not yours, and if Mankind has something to say about it, it never will be.*

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Sophano System**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate dating is 310M35**

Thought for the day: Blood is the key.

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

The xenos had been ruthless and embraced the power of the Warp.

When they had landed on this world after a long exile across the stars, the six-limbed beings’ first decision had been to massacre the species who had preceded them there, before enslaving the survivors so they mined the mineral bounty in their stead.

But they had committed a huge mistake.

Those xenos had been the eighth living species to settle in this very system, and their arrival here had been due to Khorne’s answering their prayers.

As a result, when the green-skinned aliens had continued to worship the Four indifferently, they had angered mightily the Blood God.

And so, the moment she had returned from Macragge, Lotara had been ordered to enforce the punishment.

The *Conqueror* along with seven lesser capital ships had charged to these stellar coordinates, and the one-sided massacre had begun.

It had been glorious.

By then, the six-limbed xenos had believed there was nothing for them to fear in this region of space, and their ships had been empty in high orbit, when they had not been crash-landed on the surface to form the foundations of proper cities.

Since Lotara had brought eight hundred and eighty-eight Space Marines with her, supported by tens of thousands of mortal warriors, the outcome had never been in doubt.

Eight gigantic mountains of skulls had been gathered from the tens of millions of dead aliens – if there was something notable about this vermin, it had been how fast they could breed – and rivers of blood had flowed, satisfying the will of her Lord and Master.

The altar had been built on top of the greatest of those skull mountains, and there Lotara had placed a massive Haematia crystal as tall as she was.

Then the Khornate expeditionary force had withdrawn to the *Conqueror* and the other ships, and not a moment too soon: between the Haematia and the dedicated act of butchery, the planet – which she had not even bothered discovering the name of – was swallowed by the Warp.

For eight hours, there was nothing to do but waiting. The followers of the God of War being what they were, boredom was extinguished by an absurd number of deadly duels in the arenas aboard the Conqueror and the other ships.

Lotara didn’t participate, though she savoured with the *Conqueror* every blood spilled in the arenas and the corridor.

And after eight hours, like the commanding officer of the *Conqueror* had known it would, the Warp Storm which had devoured the planet returned its ‘prey’.

It was...impressive.

“It looks like Hell,” the Astartes officer next to her grunted.

Lotara gave him an amused glance. Of all the Space Marines who had rallied her banner the most recently, Kossolax, former Sergeant of the World Eaters Legion, was undoubtedly one of the most interesting recruits.

And not just because that when the Blood Rose had announced she was searching for volunteers so that it could be assessed if the Butcher Nails could be removed from Astartes’ skulls safely, the warrior had been the first to step forwards.

Kossolax had been one of the eight who survived, out of sixty-four who endured the arduous and horribly painful procedure blessed by Khorne.

Since then, Lotara had already promoted him twice.

“It looks like Terra,” the mistress of the *Conqueror* corrected, “Terra at the end of the Great Siege, of course.”

“Terra never had oceans of boiling blood.” Kossolax remarked. “And the land wasn’t surrounded by flames. How in the name of the Skull Throne is this world able to remain outside of the Warp?”

That was, admittedly, a very good question.

“The Haematia,” Lotara Sarrin answered conversationally before rising from her command seat. “It does not have the...sheer flexibility of the Tzeentchian Noctilith, but do not underestimate the power of our Lord. Anyway. I am returning to the world below. Choose seven of your brothers to accompany me.”

There was not a significant pull from Khorne, but the urge in her heart was clear.

“That will be...where will we land in the first place?”

“Why,” Lotara smiled, “we will land on the Spaceport, of course.”

It did not take long to descent. And the closer they came to the surface, the more Kossolax’s assertion this planet looked like hell proved true.

The landscape was a tortured maze of red-black mountains resisting the onslaught of the oceans of blood. The mountains of skulls her forces had made were now spread everywhere in smaller piles, proud icons dedicated to the Blood God.

This was a world of red, dark, and ivory. The red was for the blood, as well as the flames of the Empyrean. The black was for the soil of the planet burned by the fires. And the ivory was for the skulls of the fallen.

Everywhere on this planet, it was obvious, countless wars were waged. The lower their Thunderhawk descended, the louder the battle-cries and the tumult of battles were rising.

The urge to join them grew stronger, and Lotara was thankful that Kossolax had chosen seven newly created Astartes to accompany them. If her escort had Butcher Nails, it was very likely the Blood Rose would have been forced to kill them before she walked on this planet for the second time.

“For us, it was eight hours,” Kossolax said as they went through the bloody clouds and the Spaceport finally came into view, “but for this planet, it looks like it lasted for far longer.”

“Yes.” You couldn’t argue otherwise, not when the ‘Spaceport’ was the size of a proper Hive, and its enormous black towers where enormous anti-aerial xenos weapons were emplaced had to be over a kilometre in height. “It is an interesting choice of decoration, to say the least.”

Lotara would have thought skulls would have been used, but while they figured prominently into the style of this Spaceport, the structure seemed like a colossal clockwork mechanism, one of varying shades of obsidian.

“Do not kill unless I give you the order,” she ordered as her personal Thunderhawk’s hatch opened.

“They would be mad to provoke you. The *Conqueror* is in orbit, ready to slaughter them.”

“Perhaps, but you are smart enough to know that some warriors of the Blood God are not noted to think before they attack.”

To this, Kossolax was forced to grunt and nod.

As she descended the ramp, World Eaters on her heels, the surprises began.

Lotara had expected xenos, as she had said previously. It was not hard to: there hadn’t been a single human before the first planetary massacre, and if there had been after, it was because certain warriors had continued their rampage while everyone returned to the warships.

Thus yes, xenos had been expected.

The xenos, in front of her, however, Lotara had only seen in some of the dreams she had when resting inside the *Conqueror*.

Their skin must have been a vibrant blue at some point, but most of the colour seemed to have been stolen away, and it was more and more tending towards a deathly white.

Their bodies, which were smaller than the average human, were covered by black armours with red stripes. Demonic helmets were placed in their hands, allowing her to see that the Rune of the Blood God had been painted ritually on each forehead.

As for their weapons, they seemed to favour guns...modern-looking guns, which seemed to have recently received long and very twisted bayonets.

“I have heard of you.” The Blood Rose began, noting that for all the sheer power of bloodlust coursing in the air, the xenos warriors had managed to adopt a respectable military formation to greet her arrival. “You were those who were torn from another reality during the Rise of Anarchy. You were taken by the Blood God to be reshaped in true warriors.”

“We were the T’au Empire,” the commander of the xenos rasped. “We were the warriors striving to defend and expand it. We were the Fire Caste.”

“But no longer.” Lotara said simply. If they had continued to deny the will of the Blood God, they wouldn’t be here and now.

“But no longer,” the pale blue-skinned xenos bared his teeth, revealing he has partaken into a meal of flesh recently. “We are...*the Blood Caste*. No longer will we listen to the lies of the Ethereals! No longer will we deny the pleasure of eviscerating the enemies we fight! No longer will we speak of this idiocy called the Greater Good! Our code is the Bloodshido, for there is honour in fighting a war to the very end!”

“Very good,” the leader of the Khornate forces among the Calyx Hell Stars approved, “and how many of you are ready to spill blood in the Blood God’s name?”

“Only eight thousand for the first wave,” the xenos replied, “but there will be more, provided the proper accommodations are made.”

“Then prepare your troops. The transport ships will bring you to the stars within eight hours.”

Lotara was not going to delude herself into thinking eight thousand of those warriors she saw assembling in front of her were going to hold their ground against veteran Chaos Marines, but a core of eight thousand armoured, disciplined troops was a significant contribution, especially if they could form the foundation for a proper army-sized force.

“The Blood Caste,” Kossolax commented when they left the xenos behind them as Lotara marched away from the landing platform. “An interesting name...I suppose they will be a level above the useless Bolter-fodder we are so often forced to use.”

“No protest about the fact the Blood Caste is a xenos army?”

The World Eater officer tried to laugh...which resulted in a horrible sound.

“Please, Warlord. We have broken every oath and every rule we ever swore to enforce. We are serving the Blood God. What is fighting side by side with xenos...as long as they know their proper place?”

This brutal pragmatism was why Lotara valued Kossolax so much...though she also had to be constantly wary of him too, for his ambitions went far beyond remaining a mere Captain.

“Yes. As long as they remain in their proper place.”

There was a train waiting for them outside of the Spaceport. It was an ugly and vicious thing, a black construct whose power manifested in veins of blood. It looked like it had been forged inside a volcano. It was empty. The Blood Rose and the World Eaters entered it.

Within eight seconds, it began to move, and at a speed that was quite prodigious.

Lotara felt it immediately; this machine was propelled by the power of **Blood**. There was a constant geyser of blood fuelled by tortured souls under this train.

They moved away from the Spaceport quite quickly, though not so fast as to not notice the gigantic hulls in construction around it. One of them, while clearly incomplete, would be an enormous Battleship once the shipbuilding effort.

Lotara didn’t recognise the species’ styles. That it would be armoured and dedicated to the Blood God was unquestionable, but the rest...

The planet defiled rapidly after that. There were countless lakes, some of blood, some of pure darkness where great ships sailed over. There were mountains, some of them from skulls alone, others from twisting and shivering masses of flesh.

There was blood. There was blood everywhere. There were cascades of blood pouring over scarred plains, and many armies fighting and dying to enlarge ever more the rivers coming out of the battlefields.

There were blood rains. There were statues of frozen blood.

The train began to decrease its speed as they passed before a forest of impaled xenos.

This time, they were indeed the green, slimy covered, six-limbed beings that Lotara had personally led the slaughter of.

Curiously, the spikes there too looked like they had been made of blood.

Less curious was the fact that all of the aliens had their souls bound to their corpses, and that slowly but surely, their corpses were forced to descend onto the spikes impaling them.

The torment was excruciatingly painful; and the punishment was eternal.

When the train stopped, the Temple was waiting for them.

It was so high it didn’t seem it could have been built by mere mortals.

Its shape was one of an eight-pointed star, with dark towers rising to reach the blood clouds at each of the ‘point’.

Rivers of blood flowed on each side of the highway leading to it.

The species this temple did belong to was not in doubt, however. The statues marking the various twists of the blood cascades and fountains were clearly recognisable.

“Eldar,” Kossolax affirmed with non-hidden disgust. “Only those bastards could sculpt themselves and look so arrogant without trying.”

Lotara chuckled...before a voice that was hers and yet wasn’t went through her lips.

“**Kaelari**,” the Blood Rose spoke. “**Their true name is Kaelari. They are and will be the Aeldari of the Blood**.”

Eight or so steps later, the first ones were revealed in the flesh.

They looked a lot like the Eldar that had been fought and killed during the Great Crusade...if you didn’t count the very black skin and the burning red eyes. Their bodies also seemed more muscled and built for power instead of skin, though they remained well inferior to the large body of an Astartes Legionnaire.

“The Salamanders aren’t going to be very happy at this shameless imitation.”

“By the Throne of Skulls, please don’t try to insult them that way,” Lotara warned Kossolax before adding a second later, “even if it is true.”

The interior of the Temple, much like the planet outside, was the scene of some vicious fighting...though it seemed the Kaelari had decided not to fight each other but to bleed while trying to compete in various insane obstacle courses.

Spikes were falling by the thousands upon some dancing warriors. Monsters presenting the shape of giant monkeys were trying to rip apart the whip-armed ‘Champions’.

There was no need to wonder what happened to those who lost.

The exsanguinations and the impalements were performed in full view of everyone, and no, they didn’t wait for the victim to die to begin.

Blood flowed everywhere, and Lotara felt both repulsed and yet...excited by the display.

Blood was flowing, and the stronger survived and thrived.

They had no guide, but there was no need to.

The main avenue might twist, lead them to stairs made of skulls, force them to take bridges made of flesh, it lead theme ever higher, and fast.

In what felt like mere minutes, they were already at the very least a kilometre above the ground, and the climb was not over.

The scent of the blood gained new levels of intensity, and a red veil began to dominate, before coalescing in scenes of battle and execution.

There were far fewer Kaelari now, and the ones they met were all donning black armours where extravagant gemstones had been added...but not on the breastplate. There, only the Rune of Khorne was visible.

Lotara began to feel the power of the Temple’s owner.

The presence was...the captain of the *Conqueror* did not know how to perceive it.

It seemed like a combination of amusement, relief, hatred, loathing, and...lust?

The last gates before them opened slowly.

Interestingly, those were entirely golden, and the scenes carved upon them...Lotara recognised what was there.

The shadow of the humiliating wound the Vile One had given her echoed in her very soul, but Lotara couldn’t deny that yes, the giant spiders that had been carved into the golden metal were the same as the ones she had fought recently.

She advanced. She was immediately forced to stop.

For the ‘room’ the avenue had led her to was no grand throne of the imperialistic kind, no strategium worthy of a Warmaster, and no arena like there were so many aboard the *Conqueror*.

It was an immense pool of blood.

Lotara for a second asked herself how much blood must have been shed to fill it...before deciding this was pointless to ask herself the question.

More interestingly, the black-skinned Kaelari present on the rare pillars standing above the red liquid were all naked and female, wearing some jewels, medallions, and golden rings...and they were not standing. No, they were all in a position of supplication.

“What?” Kossolax growled, obviously his self-control fraying, “is this place?”

“Isn’t it evident?” The words arrived like a sublime music, yet one which was drowning in murderous pleasure, “this is my private bath.”

The owner of the voice emerged from the depths of the blood...the blood bath.

Her skin was absolutely flawless and devoid of scars...and unlike the Kaelari servants prostrating themselves, it was a white shining colour that deserved a name of its own.

The contrast could not be vivid between this pearly white and the long red hair, that seemed to have taken the very shade of blood they were bathed into.

The hair was fire-blood, and so were the lips...the mark of Khorne above the intimate parts...and the red eyes which were a sea of blood themselves, with no iris visible.

She was a creature of white and red, standing with everything below her knees into a pool of blood.

And Lotara did not need Khorne to tell her that this xenos was a monster.

“So you are the young mortal I am supposed listening to.” The same musical voice echoed again from the blood-coloured lips. “You don’t look so impressive...especially compared to my Empress.”

Lotara rolled her eyes. While she had never thought Weaver would be mentioned within this hall, the captain of the Conqueror could recognise a challenge when she heard one.

“Where I am coming from, it is good to begin by the presentations. I am Lotara Sarrin, captain of the *Conqueror*. Who are you?”

The mouth of the red-haired Eldar slight opened, revealing a series of perfect white fangs...plus two bigger ones on the upper dentition, which gave her a predatory smile.

“I am Hekatii, the Blood Muse.” The xenos presented herself while looking at her like she was or not a prey worthy of her attention. “Once High Priestess of Khaine, once Priestess of Slaanesh...now I was enslaved by the Blood God.”

Lotara was not impressed.

“Oh yes, I have looked at your Temple. How reluctant you are to serve the Throne of Skulls.”

The female monster that was no normal Eldar hissed in displeasure.

“I say the truth, *Mon-keigh*.”

That hadn’t taken long...the arrogant monster must have had the word upon her tongue the moment Lotara entered the room.

“We are all slaves here.” Hekatii continued. “Do not mistake the reception I created for your arrival for gratitude. You did not free me from my prison. You are not my former Mistress or my Empress. You are weak.”

“And yet I can give you orders.”

The musical-sounding hiss which followed proved her guess was completely right.

“For now,” Hekatii glared at her, and around her eyes, blood-coloured psychic power began to swirl. That made Lotara instantly wary, and for good reason. True, all Kaelari had certainly the potential to be psykers, but Hekatii was evidently an extremely powerful one. “Since we are both enslaved by the same brutish God, I will give you a blunt promise. You fail, I make you bleed for many circles, all the while taking command of your forces.”

“Warlord,” Kossolax grunted. “Why aren’t we getting rid of that-“

“Don’t be foolish,” Lotara said in a conversational voice, knowing that the monster was going to hear everything, whisper or not, “this Muse of Blood is far more powerful than I am.”

“Indeed,” in the blink of an eye, blood erupted, before engulfing the arrogant former High Priestess of Slaanesh. When her eyes could watch her again, Hekatii’s white skin had disappeared behind an armour that was the colour of blood...no, not the colour of blood.

The armour was *made* of blood. Lotara just knew it.

No wonder Khorne had wanted this arrogant xenos in His service.

Only her head had not had a set of armour conjured over it; this could be done at any moment, though Lotara was sure of it.

“Now that you have warned me of the consequences of failure,” the captain of the *Conqueror* spoke slowly but decisively. “Tell me what are your intentions concerning this planet and the fleet you’re building yourself here.”

A sliver of non-identified emotion passed in the blood pits that were Hekatii’s red eyes...and quickly disappeared.

“I have renamed this planet Clar Karond,” the female that was the uncontested leader of the Kaelari began. “I intend for this system to be the main shipbuilding hub for all Kaelari who swear allegiance to me, the Succubus Queen of this Domain. As you yourself have felt, Warlord, the power of the Haematia crystal allow this planet to exist on the other side of the Veil despite being strongly imbued with the power of our God. Regarding the warships, I have several proposals...”

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Malfi Warp Crown**

**Malfi System**

**Recondium**

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate dating is 310M35**

**Warlord Malicia, the Unwritten Destiny**

Everyone expected her to go back to Malfi.

Naturally, this meant Malicia had to shatter their expectations...and force every plotter having prepared an assassination attempt to change its plans in a hurry.

Sometimes, the female parahuman wished the daemonic promises which promised her to show the horrified expressions were a bit truthful. It would be extremely cathartic watching those who pretended to be her allies reveal expressions of utter astonishment.

But alas, the promises were lies.

And there were other reasons to not immediately return to Malfi.

Kairos Fateweaver had been singularly helpful, but ‘Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods’ meant nothing to her, or any of the Magisters that couldn’t lie to her aboard her flagship.

Malicia needed critical information.

And where better to find it than the greatest library of the Malfi System?

It was only as the fortified gate of the library opened that Malicia knew the surprise was going to cut both ways.

The enormous snake which was revealed to her eyes was a slight clue in that direction, for anyone who wondered.

Yes, her words weren’t the result of a sorcerous hallucination.

There was really a huge white snake going through the library gate...and in height, the beast was half of a Knight’s.

The snake was albino, by the way, as its red pupils made clear. And it was used as a transport by the ‘welcoming committee’.

That was...original.

And it also meant that the mutants who had controlled the One True Archive had at the very least lost their hold on this planet, because the last time she checked before leaving for the Tyrant Star, Malicia was reasonably sure there had been no blue-skinned xenos on Recondium.

And the entire delegation consisted of aliens, the Tzeentchian sorceress had no doubt about that.

Yes, there were some visible mutations, but most of them consisted of a third eye on the forehead.

The vivid blue skin, the hooves, and the flat face? Those were too consistent to be mutations.

Malicia noted they were all clad in what appeared to be white robes when you stayed far away, but were really white scales, snake moults converted into clothing. The blue-skinned aliens were bare-headed and there was no armour to cover their hooves. In fact, they wore little but this snake-altered attire.

“None of you are the Prime Librarian.” She began, choosing deliberately not to waste her time with twenty questions. “I assume you are in control of the One True Library, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. My questions will be simple. Have you heard of the Treaty of Ambition and Proper Betrayals? And if the answer is yes, are you ready to swear on the nine hundred and ninety-nine secret names of the Architect of Fate to abide by it?”

The tallest member of the delegation stepped forwards. His snake robes, unlike the other, had received some slight blue decorations to go with the white original colour.

“The answers are yes, and yes, Majestryx.”

Malicia blinked at the curious choice to address her. Assuredly, yes, this was one of her many titles, though not one of the most popular.

Oh, well. The precautions got first priority. And the first priority in this instance was drawing a shard of Transmutational Changestone out of her pocket and levitating it over the delegation’s head.

“Then swear.”

“I, Ambassador Por’O Elsy’Eir Kais Shan’al, Elder of the Scribe Caste, swear to enforce the Treaty of Ambition and Proper Betrayals. I recognise the Herald of Tzeentch Malicia as the legitimate ruler of Malfi and everything under the Malfi Warp Crown. We pledge tribute and assistance, by the nine hundred and ninety-nine secret names of the Lord of All Knowledge, the Architect of Fate, and the Master of Paradoxes.”

Malicia recited her own part, and the pact was sealed.

Now for the questions the female parahuman had on her tongue...

“You are the species which was torn from its own reality recently. You are the Tau.”

“We are the T’au Empire,” the Ambassador said with no expression at all, though his violent emotions were there, under the surface. “Or what is left of it, now that we are dispersed. We diplomats, merchants, administrators, and investigators, were spirited here. We were the Water Caste, and we were shown...t*he truth*.”

The ‘truth’ certainly had everything to do with the third eye which had grown upon their blue heads; two or three members of the delegation did not have it, and by the way they shivered...it must not be a very pleasant experience.

Oh well...their relationship with Tzeentch was their problem, not hers.

“But you changed the name of your Caste.”

“We had...visions. Before and after we were teleported on this world.” To note, the Low Gothic of the T’au Ambassador was flawless.

“Did you change the name of this planet too?” It was a fair assumption to make, really...

“The Scribe Caste did. This Sept is now called Fe’saan.”

“Fe’saan,” Malicia repeated slowly. It sounded like...a ridiculous bird name to her ears. But who was she to judge? “This will be recorded in the halls of Malfi. I assume my messengers will be able to consider ‘Scribe Caste’ your warband name?”

“You can, Majestryx. We are at your service.”

Great. There was now another set of silver-tongued flatterers in the Warp Crown...like they weren’t already millions of them.

“I will take you to your word, Ambassador.” The sorceress wasn’t going to repeat his full name, not when she was sure she would mangle it beyond recognition. “I came here for information.”

The list of ‘requests’ she had intended to give to the Prime Librarian flew in the Ambassador’s hands.

“If it is in the Great Library of Fe’saan, our Por’la librarians will find it.” The Ambassador’s tongue flickered out of its mouth, revealing that yes, Tzeentch had changed that too. The appendage was too long and too...similar to snakes. Besides, it was also imbued with a Warp curse. “For the Greater Change!”

Minutes later, after a lot of ‘reassurances’ that confirmed that yes, all those T’au were silver-tongued diplomats, Malicia was invited inside the One True Library...which had been considerably modified.

The space between the shelves was considerably wider now, which was a necessity, as giant and not-so-giant snakes were used like one used aircars on Imperial worlds.

The words of ‘For the Greater Change!’ were repeated everywhere, being both religious prayer and philosophy of life.

What it did mean? It seemed to mean...everything. It justified several the torture sessions of several ‘reluctant’ aliens, who were ‘told the errors of their ways’ by pouring snake venom over their eyes.

Sorcery was practised openly in the libraries. It was done for mundane tasks...or for vital ones. Some particularly ruthless T’au ‘diplomats’ were assassinating their rivals by slamming books of metal onto the skulls of their rivals. Others were creating new generation of the ‘Scribe Caste’ by...some heavily modified eggs transformed by sorcery.

There was no assassination attempt upon her. No doubt some of the xenos had considered the idea, but the presence of Ax’senaea by her side was evidently scaring away even the most ambitious individuals.

After two hours of elegant and tiring chatter, the words Malicia wanted to hear were uttered by the Ambassador.

“The Por’la librarians have found what you seek. This way, Majestryx.”

The T’au delegation was joined by other members who looked far more like taciturn librarians, and they rapidly descended the levels until they arrived in some sort of small basement.

Judging by how dusty the archives looked, the books stored there had been here for a while...and the T’au ‘Scribe Caste’ had certainly used some form of sorcery to find the correct section, for there was no archival system whatsoever in view.

“The Graveyard of the Thousand False Gods,” the blue-skinned Ambassador introduced her to a T’au that seemed old and fragile...but had also nine eyes on his head, evident sign Tzeentch had blessed him greatly...or had decided to make an example of him...or her...when it came down to it, Malicia acknowledged she wasn’t able to make the female and the male of that species. “Yes, yes, Greater Change be praised! It is one of the many names of the Ind Cluster, the Northern Altar, the Failed Cradle...”

The list went on, and the names, while interesting, were ones Malicia had never heard before today.

There was one certainty, however.

“This...this cluster is not anywhere near the Calyx Hell Stars.”

“No, it is not, Majestryx! It is not that far from here, it is deep north, as the Light falters and the old darkness remains supreme.”

This was *not* welcome news. Deep north of Calyx, there was only the Halo Stars and their many horrors.

The pages of the voluminous books on the pages were turning at a fantastical rate, and it seemed impossible the old T’au librarian seemed to be able to assimilate the information within the pages...yet somehow, Malicia was sure the blue-skinned alien was doing exactly that.

“How is this that I’ve never heard of this place? Famous or infamous, there should be...rumours about the Ind Cluster.”

“The Anathema,” the being manipulated the books croaked, “the False Emperor burned the Cluster! Those who believed themselves Faithful rejected him and called for the Gods to save them! But they didn’t worship One above the other Three!”

“And so the Emperor killed them all.” Malicia finished, completely unsurprised.

Yes, that explained seriously why the Ind Cluster was not even a footnote left. Servants of Chaos or not, few things could survive the might of an Expeditionary Fleet of the Great Crusade’s Era, and if the Emperor was leading this one in person, the outcome must have been particularly one-sided and unpleasant.

Terminally unpleasant.

“There must be only ruins all over this Cluster of worlds now.” Four thousand years later with everyone having forgotten it save in a few dusty, magically-preserved books. “Assuming the Imperium left ruins in the first place and didn’t destroy the planets with a few Exterminatus Cyclonic Torpedoes.”

“Quite inexact,” the alien librarian giggled, “on the world of Maharashtra...the power of the Gods was strong enough to keep the False Emperor at bay! Praise Greater Change! The Usurper, the False God, could not land on the planet.”

“Really?” Given the sheer power of the one who still held the Golden Throne to this day, Malicia doubted a lot that a thousand or even nine thousand sorcerers could do something like that. “The planet is still intact, then?”

This brought a real grimace, the first time she saw a Tau doing so.

“The planet...is intact. But the Tyrant of Terra...used a poison that killed all sorcerers and those who embraced the truth! Still, even in death, they denied him! The slaves of the False Emperor, the deniers of the Most Glorious Truth of Greater Change...they cannot set foot on the blessed world!”

Malicia didn’t roll her eyes, but inside her head, she laughed.

This was no victory. This was just a stupid, desperate gambit that had resulted in the deaths of each cultist and sorcerer who had tried to stand against one of the most powerful beings of that galaxy.

It was a being that was undoubtedly responsible for the erasure of an entire Cluster from the galactic maps.

And Tzeentch and the other Gods had let him get away with it...until circumstances forced their hands.

Yeah, that was not a victory. It was just dancing in the middle of a graveyard.

But with this graveyard remained ruins, and Kairos Fateweaver wouldn’t have mentioned it if there was nothing useful left.

“What is the name of the planet, and how can I reach it?”

“This is the Blessed Altar World of Maharashtra, Majestryx. And you will find it ninety-nine light-years from...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Merica**

**Mega-Hive Cajun**

**Secondary Headquarters of the Adeptus Almitas**

**0.646.310M35**

**Adept-Primus Joost Harpagon**

Joost finished eating his sausages and his steamed rice with a sound of contentment.

The Adept-Primus had never been disappointed by the work of the cooks he had hired a decade or so ago, but today they had really surpassed themselves.

“My compliments to the chef,” Joost said to his head butler, fondly remembering the culinary delights that had assaulted his tongue. “My tongue and my stomach await eagerly how their imagination will elevate the art of cooking to new heights in the next years!”

“Thank you, Sir!”

The grey-haired servant saluted, and quickly left the room with the other members of the high-class service, and needless to say, the majority of the plates were empty by now.

“I wondered why you moved to Cajun, Joost.” One of his colleagues and current invitees for this evening’s ‘dinner work’ chuckled. “Now I wonder no more. This cooking is really worthy of one of the big ‘Master Chef’ that are the jewel of the Imperial Palace.”

“Our dear Adept-Primus has attracted superb cooks in his service,” agreed another Adept of the Adeptus Administratum.

“I wish I could take credit for it,” Joost said modestly, “but I can’t. The souls who have elevated this ‘Cajun cooking’ to an art form were already there, only waiting for a chance to create nirvana for our tongues and palates.”

“True, true. And so far from the Palace, you are the one who enjoys it every day!”

Joost raised his glass in a mock salute, trying hard not to wince. The truth was, the reason why he had decided to incur the extremely costly expense of moving his de facto primary headquarters – de jure, everyone’s primary headquarters was the Imperial Palace, by tradition and by law – had nothing to do with Cajun cooking, though it had been a significant morale-booster for him when he discovered this food tradition.

No, the fact he had moved away from the heart of Imperial power to this relatively unimportant Mega-Hive was due to the political nightmares generated by Commorragh.

No, it was not glorious, and it had more or less annihilated every chance the Adeptus Almitas may ever obtain a Secundus seat before the next two centuries were over, but at least Joost was alive, and nobody had sent assassins after him.

The good point about living on Holy Terra, was that there were so many people living on it that the old proverb ‘out of sight, out of mind’ was verified a thousand times per year effortlessly.

“I hear many good things about the soup...what is it called?”

“Gumbo,” Joost answered. “And I think ‘plenty of good things’ is understating things, my dear colleague. Alas, this soup requires particular ingredients that are so rare and so delicious we reserve it for a single holy week of celebrations.”

“The Sanguinala,” the other Adept correctly deduced.

“Indeed,” Joost smiled. “And when-“

The doors of the dinner hall opened abruptly, and Joost frowned, the pleasure of dining and receiving compliments about his servants’ cooking performance significantly decreasing, to be replaced by annoyance. He had ordered to not be disturbed, save by events of extreme importance.

To make matters worse, the man who had stormed inside was a mere Adept-Quartus of the Almitas, someone that should have never been authorised to step into-

“Lord Adept! Lord Adept! The Imperial Palace has just received...extraordinary news...the Living Saint has annihilated the Black Crusade!”

Joost often divided the news he received every day in two categories: good and bad.

The third category, that he had labelled ‘nightmare’ inside his head, had been limited to a single episode of his life, and it was Commorragh and all the torments this disgusting name had created for the Adeptus Almitas.

“The Living Saint. Weaver. The Arch-Arsonist of Commorragh.”

“Yes, Lord Adept!”

“Please tell me that she didn’t kill anyone among the Top One Hundred Bounties.”

The Adept-Quartus, a bearded youngster who had not celebrated his fortieth birthday, cleared his throat loudly, and it was as if a massive hole was beginning to open under his very feet.

“Err...I apologise, Lord Adept, but the elimination of the Vile One has already been confirmed-“

“THE VILE ONE? BUT THAT’S THE NUMBER EIGHT!” Too late Joost realised how badly he had reacted in front of his ‘guests’, several of which were high-ranked Adepts themselves...and then a couple of seconds he decided it didn’t matter.

Nothing really mattered, because it was the nightmare of Commorragh returning to haunt him.

No, it was worse!

Vandire. Vandire was going to kill him if he signed away one more bounty.

And the Living Saint....the Imperial Guard had a large presence, and its regiments had never been shy showing their support for her on the Throneworld, some by storming the Almitas precincts for the most ridiculous reasons and in the middle of the night!

“Err...yes, Lord Adept...it is the number eight...with a bounty of...five quadrillion Throne Gelts...and a Sector Overlordship? Wow, that must be nice, to get that sort of rewards!”

Joost Harpagon didn’t feel as if the Imperial Palace was about to fall upon his shoulders, but he wasn’t far from that point. It had to be a nightmare. He was going to wake up. It was merely an indigestion brought by the delicious Cajun food.

“I should have listened to my wise grandmother and retired to a Saturn paradise orbital station after Commorragh! Why didn’t have the courage to challenge the grox in the High Seat?” Joost groaned in despair.

Seconds later, the Adept-Primus realised this might not be the wisest comment he had ever made, especially when the Adepts present in the room were all – in theory – the loyal subordinates of one Xerxes Vandire...

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**Inner Sanctum**

**The Renaissance Council Room**

**0.676.310M35**

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Leonardo Melchior**

When his old mentor Samson Pitt had given him the Grand Sea of the Chancellor, Leonardo had had no idea that six months later, he would have a front seat to one of the momentous events of this millennium...nah, of the entire history of the Imperium.

It had been something like fourteen years since the Battle of Commorragh, after all. What were the odds something equally significant would happen in his lifetime?

Clearly, the God-Emperor and his Living Saint were not much concerned about the odds.

And Terra had reacted exuberantly to the news coming from the Eastern Fringe. A massive defeat handed to the forces of the Arch-Enemy would have seen a major effort from the different propaganda services of each Adeptus.

But the Traitors had not just been handed a massive defeat. They had been obliterated, along with billions of xenos.

And no matter how careful the operational security, the whispers had begun to grow until it was officially confirmed the Primate Roboute Guilliman had been resurrected, and two of his brothers had literally returned from the dead.

Even the Imperial Palace, usually sheltered from the madness of the wars raging on the frontiers of the Imperium, had succumbed to the joyful madness of celebrations.

Walking in the halls these days was taking three times as much time as it used to, for the parties and the excited conversations were everywhere. Religious masses celebrating the valiant martyrs who had won the near-miraculous battles were everywhere, and the number of military parades was beyond counting.

The Bell of Lost Souls had been ordered to toll for the fallen, beginning its litany for the legendary exploit of the Invaders Chapter, and many more bell tolls had followed since then.

It was...victory.

Leonardo wanted to say the High Twelve were immune to this atmosphere of miracles and raucous celebrations...after all, ten out of twelve were holding their seats fourteen years ago.

But they were not.

Thousands of Tech-Priests had been noticed singing incomprehensible hymns for the ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’, and while the Fabricator-General of Mars was more dignified, the Chancellor had seen the enormous Martian High Lord drink an absurd quantity of liquor right after landing on Terra.

The same could be applied to each of the other members of the High Twelve.

And the less said about the rest of the Senatorum Imperialis...well, the better.

“This emergency session of the High Council is now opened,” Leonardo said, and predictably, the Arch-Cardinal Terran immediately jumped from his seat.

“We must,” the white-robed representative of the Ecclesiarch exclaimed, “reward Her Celestial Highness with a Triumph! Nothing else with suffice for the extraordinary exploits accomplished under her command!”

His mentor had long mentioned how before Commorragh, the holders of the Ecclesiarchy seat were rotated every year, sometimes every six months. Therefore it had been a shock for most observers that, after Commorragh, Salomon Rovere had not been replaced.

But with a ring embellished with a beetle-shaped on one of his fingers, and a necklace in the form of a spider, this survival had long ceased to be a surprise by 310M35.

So no, it was not a surprise the Arch-Cardinal Terran was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Living Saint.

“I agree,” Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom canted in a voice that sounded less mechanical than usual. “The Chosen of the Omnissiah deserves a Triumph.”

“The Navis Nobilite support this move,” Jakov Balevolio, the new Paternal Envoy of the Navigators after his predecessor died in his sleep, shook his head in an uncharacteristically vigorous gesture.

“The abrupt demise of so many Traitors will guarantee a progressive return to an excellent trade situation.” Aliénor Guttenberg smiled. “The Chartist Captains are in favour of a Triumph.”

The Lord High Admiral cleared his throat a second after.

“If we do not give a Triumph to Lady Weaver for this successful campaign, we won’t be able to give a Triumph to anyone else without sounding like massive hypocrites,” Rabadash y Byng el Calormen admitted out loud. “The Imperial Navy votes for a Triumph.”

“We won’t be to organise a Triumph...immediately.” Felipe de Rivera, clearly, was not so enthusiastic. “I...we will need to let the tempers calm otherwise it will be chaos. But the Adeptus Astra Telepathica...is in favour.”

“The Triumph must happen,” the threatening figure of the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum was...impossible to read, really. “That way everyone will know what happens to those who oppose Him. No Traitor is beyond his reach.”

“Many of the darkest places of this galaxy have been illuminated by the Astronomican, and the attrition of the psykers is at an all-time low,” Pocahontas Valetta spoke, like her fellow female High Lord of the Chartists, with a large smile on her face. “The Astronomican votes for the Triumph, and it is my personal opinion it must be grandiose.”

“Have you all lost your minds?” The Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites had reddened with every voice voting positively, and now the seemingly young-looking man exploded in anger. “Do you realise what you’re doing? This is not Justice, this is-“

The High Lord facing him drew a priceless handkerchief and agitated it.

“Yes, High Lord Brezhnev? What is this, if not Justice?”

Leonardo did his best not to shiver. The tone was...pleasant. The appearance was unthreatening: powdered silver wig on his head, a lot of cosmetics on his face, and a superb attire of green noble clothes that could have been used to go to a ball.

But the words came from Lord Inquisitor Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn, and for all his refined clothes and looks, the man was not to be underestimated.

When Lord Berlin Chimera had officially abandoned his seat, there had been a series of short-serving Inquisitors, none of them who made a lasting impression or tried to push for some notable decrees and policies.

The arrival of Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn had been a massive upheaval, accompanied by the execution of three members of the Senatorum Imperialis.

The appearance was very much the complete opposite of Lord Berlin Chimera. But while the high and tall Inquisitor holding the seat at the time of Commorragh had been rumoured to be from Malleus, Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn had revealed from the very beginning he was a high-ranked figure of the very recently-founded Ordo Hereticus.

“The Triumph is agreed,” Xerxes Vandire said in a hurry. “The Grand Provost was just...astonished, like we all were.”

“Yes,” Tudor Brezhnev stammered. “That was...what I was trying to say...Lord Inquisitor.”

“Hmm...the Holy Ordos is in favour of a Triumph.”

The representative of the Holy Inquisition slowly removed himself from the enormous throne-seat that he had commissioned for an extravagant price. His handkerchief touched for a second his left cheek.

No one in the room was stupid to break this moment of silence.

“I have been able to exchange many messages of critical importance with Macragge.” Lord Leyden revealed. “There are several measures that will need to be adopted. First of all, the title of Warmaster will be abolished, here and now.”

“You’re joking!” Grand Master Hunter for the first time in living memory seemed aghast. “The title and the duties-“

“Have been claimed by Traitors and the Despoiler has been acting behind the scenes to corrupt it beyond redemption.” Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn said imperiously in a tone that was as warm as the Fenrisian oceans had been. “I don’t care how you handle it. Abolish some privileges, diminish the authority in several aspects. But the name has to go. Am I clear?”

“Crystal clear,” Aliénor Gutenberg replied levelly. “I suppose the Inquisition is supportive of the...negotiations that have occurred between Her Celestial Highness and the Dark Angels?”

“Yes. The Inquisition will support...the negotiations. And the Holy Ordos will deal with the sons of the Lion if they try to back out of the agreement.”

“The return of the Avenging Son?” It said quite something that Huang Utrecht was only speaking only now. His irrelevance in most affairs of utmost appearance has skyrocketed after Commorragh, and this tendency was accelerating, not decreasing, since Cadia had come under attack.

“The Thirteenth Primarch is not fully recovered, and informs this Council his first priority is to erase the scars marring the planets of his realm. It is expected it will take years to restore Macragge to its legendary glory. Until that state of affairs change, the Holy Ordos see no point about any conversation involving the Avenging Son. Unlike another Primarch.”

“What do you mean...my Lord?” Jakov Balevolio asked warily. “I mean...we all thought the...the other sons of the Emperor would stay with their brother. Forgive me for my assumption, but we all thought the Space Wolves’ survivors were going to settle in Ultramar until we decide their punishment...that way they will stop antagonising every authority of Solar and Obscurus they come across, while avoiding a headache with Ultima.”

“This is logical...but it isn’t going to happen like you want.” The impeccably-dressed Lord Inquisitor grabbed a golden cane that looked like the baton of an orchestra’s choirmaster. “The Sixth Primarch has, at last, accomplished the mission the God-Emperor gave him. He is coming here.”

“The Primarch Leman Russ is coming here?” Rabadash y Byng el Calormen was not yet panicking, but the emotions in eyes showed he was very, very close to that point.

Not that Leonardo Melchior blamed him for it. The information come completely unexpected, and it was...a violent shock.

“Yes. Thus my Lords I would suggest you to not make hasty suggestions where the punishment of the Space Wolves is concerned.”

The sound of the cane striking the marble of the Renaissance Council Room felt louder than a thousand tolls of the Bell of Lost of Souls.

“But it is just a suggestion...my Lords.”

**Holy Terra**

**Europa**

**Fort Aquitania**

**0.681.310M35**

**Lord Militant Commander Paul von Oberstein**

There were ten ranks of seats among the Senatorum Imperialis. The closer you were from the High Twelve of the Primus, the longer you needed to get an appointment.

It was not an absolute rule, but Paul von Oberstein found it quite difficult to find exceptions to it.

And as Lord Militant Commander of the Imperial Guard, a Secundus seat, the veteran officer of the Lucifer Blacks was quite aware that in some cases, there were people who had asked to have an appointment with him for *decades*.

Paul would love to say it was because they weren’t relevant where the current military campaigns were concerned, but it wasn’t the case.

The sad reality was that Paul was only a mere mortal, and even with a staff the size of an Army Group, there was only a limited numbers of men and women he could meet face-to-face in a single day, especially when considering his other obligations, which often included long speeches in front of senior figures of the Astra Militarum and defending his budget against the bottomless appetite of the Terran bureaucrats.

But the point was, no High Lord entered his office without appointment. It didn’t matter if someone was a Decius nonentity of Xerxes Vandire, you didn’t barge in without warning. Period.

Unfortunately, as Paul von Oberstein had discovered minutes ago, there were after all notable exceptions to *that* rule he would be able to commit to his memory.

Because when the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes invited himself in your personal quarters and asked ‘for a moment of your time’, what was a mere Lord Militant Commander to do?

“The Emperor,” began Anubis Excelsor once the very curt courtesies were expedited, “desires to know the rank which you will promote Lady Taylor Hebert to.”

It was a...surprising question. First and foremost, the fact the highest-ranked Custodes – the best of his knowledge, Custodes never gave the intricacies of their hierarchy to non-Custodes these days – had come in person to ask this seemingly trivial question.

“Lady General Militant,” Paul replied after several seconds of silence, but more because he wanted to grasp the political implications of this visit than any indication on his part. “Yes, this is only a promotion of one rank. But this is the highest field rank I can give her. Giving her the title of Lady Commander would mean replacing one of the five current holders, and keeping her away from the battlefields for the rest of her career...which would be definitely non-productive. And a promotion of three ranks means giving her my job.”

There might have been a few more meteoritic ascensions than the one of Lady General Taylor Hebert had made in Imperial History, but there could be counted on one hand, and probably with some spare fingers.

Paul von Oberstein shrugged dramatically.

“I don’t doubt she would likely do a better job than I am, managing the bureaucracy and all other vellum-associated duties,” as could be expected; he had a big sleepy mastiff, and Weaver had an army of big spiders hunting the Administratum Adepts and the vile paperwork. “But so far, Lady Taylor Hebert has shown no sign she would accept replacing me. The title of Warmaster is officially discarded for good. As long as there isn’t a consensus among the High Twelve to officially proclaim field ranks above Lady General Militant, my hands are tied.”

“And Lord Solar? Or in this case, Lady Solar?”

It was really frustrating to read a Custodes’ facial expression at the best of times...and the Captain-General was not making it easy.

“Some might believe the ranks are interchangeable, but they are not. While the ‘Lord Solar’ rank has far more prestige behind it, as none of the holders have yet to turn Traitor, they don’t carry as much authority and ability to suppress internal problems as the old title does. And besides...I intended to propose it for Ender Trevayne.”

“If you do, many of the High Twelve will urge him to return to Obscurus and Cadia as fast as a warship can sail from Ultramar to the Gates of the Eye.”

“I know.” The dark-haired Lord Commander Militant admitted to the golden-armoured giant. “And since we can afford to be honest, I don’t like how many resources we are concentrating around Cadia and the other Redoubts for the next decade. The Black Crusade is over. There are other campaigns that could benefit from several hundreds of regiments each. The Calyx Expanse, for example.”

“No,” the Captain-General immediately countered. “Not the Calyx Expanse. Your forces would be slaughtered in short order, or worse, turned against the oaths they swore. There is not enough Aethergold on this world or in the entirety of Segmentum Solar to spare for them. Before sending a Crusade to this pit of Traitors, certain conditions have to be met. Some of them, that you are allowed to know, necessitate Aethergold in large quantities.”

Well, that answered the question why so many Navy Admirals had suddenly all declined the honour of leading their Battlefleets in that direction. In all likelihood, the Lord High Admiral must have received the same ‘a moment of your time’ appointment.

That didn’t answer many questions he had. The scarcity of Aethergold, after all, wasn’t going to change tomorrow. Yes, his ‘most productive subordinate’ – and Living Saint – had recovered a lot of Noctilith, but Macragge’s was not next door to Terra, and even if it was, everyone wanted Aethergold. In many ways, Paul was more optimistic concerning the sizeable deposits of the Nephilim Sector, even if they required Space Marine and Guard combined operations to eradicate xenos opposition.

The best case, in his humble opinion, was that the Imperium’s offensive campaigns were going to lack a large reserve of Aethergold for the next decade. In the most optimistic scenario he could conjure, five years.

And barring a miracle, there was nothing the Guard or the Imperium as a whole could do to decrease the delays. Noctilith mining was barely in its infancy on several secret sites...and when it came to it, there was only one Living Saint to transform the valuable Noctilith into priceless Aethergold.

“Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert and Lord Solar Ender Trevayne?” Paul asked, as if the part about the Calyx Expanse had not been voiced at all.

“These promotions are...acceptable,” the Captain-General spoke, before adding a few words that gave the Lucifer Black officer an unpleasant feeling of foreboding, “for the time being.”

And on this, the Custodes left his office.

Paul von Oberstein waited for several seconds before sighing.

“Well, at least I know why I love people asking for an appointment months in advance now...”

**Terra**

**Old Muscovy**

**Hive Volgograd**

**The Rogue Trader Museum**

**0.684.310M35**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

There were planets of the Imperium, Nicephorus knew, that had tens of thousands of churches and cathedrals.

There were also planets that had tens of thousands of museums. Generally, those were Paradise Worlds, since their tithe to the Adeptus Terra was mainly coming from the ‘cultural fees’ they took from the bored nobility and the highly wealthy ‘pilgrims’ that came every year to visit their collections.

And then there were worlds which had the museums *and* the cathedrals in countless numbers.

Holy Terra was in this category. It had large, middle-sized, and small museums. It had monumental Basilicas, great temples, and Spire-sized churches. It had everything when it came to the cultural and the religious, and many more things besides that.

It was the Throneworld, the Cradle where Mankind had evolved before conquering the stars.

Holy Terra had everything.

And naturally it was an immemorial tradition that the High Lords of Terra were the benefactors and the patrons of several of those places where the culture of previous ages was exhibited.

The Rogue Trader Museum, needless to say, wasn’t among the most prestigious locations owned by Clan Vandire.

To say the truth, it was a rather miserable and eminently forgettable museum. While there were plenty of great and renowned centres proclaiming the exploits of famous Rogue Trader Houses on Holy Terra, they wouldn’t be found on Hive Volgograd.

No, this museum had been founded by House Gotha some millennia ago. No doubt the Rogue Traders of that line had estimated the propaganda benefits would outweigh the trillions of Crowns and Throne Gelts necessary to buy real estate on Holy Terra.

But this had been in late M32. And if House Gotha was alive today...well, to be honest, Nicephorus was pretty sure they were not. They might be. By pure curiosity, he had done some research, and discovered that a late Lord Gotha had, for some reason long lost to Adepts like him, decided to abandon the family palace of Volgograd and sail into the unknown somewhere in the fourth century of the 34th millennium.

And they had never returned.

The Warrant of Trade and the most valuable objects, of course, had left with House Gotha. But if there was some point where the rumours about Rogue Traders were perfectly exact, it was that there were bloody, unrepentant *thieves*.

Even with the best pieces missing, there was a profusion of xenos skulls, antiquated maps of planets interesting no one, shiny but cheap gemstones, primitive bronze weapons, and other ‘trophies’ that House Gotha had judged ‘worthy’ to be presented in this museum when they were the masters of Volgograd in all but name.

And no, Nicephorus didn’t know why they had chosen Volgograd of all the Hives available to them in the multitude of those existing on Holy Terra. The name itself was useless and not relevant to anything concerning their affairs in these dark days.

There was only one certainty.

Since his brother was busy smashing several old collections with a mace, the ‘Rogue Trader Museum’ was going to stay closed for...an extended period of time.

“SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE!”

Glass and a lot of materials Nicephorus had no wish to study were pulverised on the museum’s floor. Splinters of bones from long-extinct creatures were thrown everywhere as the skulls they were part of were ferociously thrown against the walls.

Maps were torn to shreds.

Nicephorus grimaced inwardly. When he had told his brother the rampages in the wings of the Imperial Palace had to cease for they cost too much in reparations, the Solar Guardian hadn’t thought Xerxes would interpret it as ‘do it elsewhere, and in a location where there isn’t anything too valuable’.

“SHE COULDN’T WIN THAT BATTLE! BY THE SPIRES OF ZION, SHE WAS HALF A GALAXY AWAY! HOW WAS SHE ABLE TO WIN THAT CRUSADE? EVEN THE TRAITORS SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER! IMBECILES! DID THE ZEALOT BASTARDS HAVE MARSHMALLOW INSTEAD OF BRAINS?”

The destruction which followed was...very significant.

Most of the old spears were broken, and when they weren’t, they were literally used to smash things that had yet to be destroyed.

It was really looking more and more like a storm had devastated this part of the museum...but no, it was only Xerxes’ fury.

Nicephorus huffed, turned his head away, and waited.

Predictably, after several minutes, Xerxes stopped, partly because the objects that were still in pristine condition were nowhere to be seen, and partly because he was exhausted by this rampage that had been chained since the news of the ‘Cataclysm of Macragge’ had arrived.

“What she did...it is impossible.” This time, fortunately, the heat in the words was much diminished.

“Unfortunately, Xerxes, *she*,” Nicephorus wasn’t going to utter her name, he wasn’t that suicidal or masochist, “has a gift to accomplish the impossible every time she goes to war.”

The High Lord of the Administratum grunted like a stubborn grox.

“You are going to tell me ‘I told you so’, aren’t you?”

“Do you want me to?” Nicephorus answered while raising his eyebrows, making silently his opinion clear.

“No. Yes.” The fists of Xerxes tightened. “I don’t know! It was supposed to work! Even with everything she could muster, that wasn’t supposed to be enough firepower to win!”

“But it didn’t.”

Fortunately, his neutral tone didn’t trigger a new enraged storm of destruction.

“Yes. Give me the bad news.”

“The Bristol Group broke the alliance and decided to...move decisively to Segmentum Obscurus, shall we say?”

“I know that. The Head Bastard told me in person the battlefields of Obscurus were less dangerous than a continuation of our alliance!”

“Well, he’s not the only one.” Nicephorus continued. “We have lost four of our bigger Chartist supporters, the service of three Navigator Houses, fifty Telepathica contracts, and the few Mechanicus Radicals we work with have decided to triple their prices...since they know Mars is not going to be in any hurry to send us Tech-Priests.”

A mutilated tapestry of House Gotha comically fell from the walls, before falling into a small pool of green paint. Xerxes ignored the noise.

“And?”

“Samarkand and its Zaibatsu are raising a ruckus.” Nicephorus admitted. “Some of them were sufficiently clever to know the tithes’ increase we destined to their Quadrant was for Nyx only, but now that *she* is victorious, suddenly they are smelling blood. Several of our most visible agents at Samarkand have been assassinated in the last ten days.”

“I was assured they didn’t like *her*.”

“They still don’t like her very much,” Nicephorus conceded. “As far as I understand, she insists in redistributing a lot of wealth to the plebeians, and her negotiation tactics...don’t show a great of concern for the interests of Samarkand. But everyone loves a victor, Xerxes. The mere reality that she has spoken with several Primarchs and saved the home system of the Ultramarines...this is something Clan Vandire can’t give them. Not now, and certainly not in a thousand years. And worse...we tried to increase the tithes. She didn’t. It doesn’t take a genius to know which way they are going to jump.”

“And we may speak of the Nyx Quadrant before this century is over.” Xerxes spat on a tribal wooden shield that he had trampled relentlessly minutes ago. “Fine. What else?”

“The various accusations we pushed against her are returning at us like a crazy demolition engine,” the Solar Guardian of Records told grimly, “many of our solicitors were told bluntly they were lucky they hadn’t enough evidence to try them as heretics. Most of the cases are dismissed, sometimes with the vellum they were crouched onto burned in front of them.”

In terms of resources, they had lost very little. In terms of influence, the impact was already devastating, and promised to be something absolutely egregiously bad in the long-term.

Everyone was certain they had tried to stab a Living Saint in the back while she was facing the hordes of the Arch-Enemy....and to be fair, that was exactly what had happened.

No matter the opinion many Clans and Houses of Terra held for the Victor of Macragge behind closed doors, they would support her in public.

It was the ‘right thing’ to do for the masses of the Throneworld...and they had never loved Clan Vandire in the first place.

“Who stands with us?”

The answer was short.

“The Arbites and the Navy in Segmentum Solar. For all her military triumphs, she hasn’t been able to change that. So far.”

“So far?”

“Xerxes, your son, my nephew, is going to be court-martialled this year. The prospects of avoiding it were going to be slim enough before the news from Macragge arrived. With the return of several Primarchs,” and what a shock it had been to read the first official communiqués, “it is going to happen, no matter how many Navy officers we can rally to our cause.”

“I have acquired a lot of blackmail on this slimy serpent calling himself the Lord High Admiral. And if I have enough officers, I can transform the Court into something that will destroy what’s left of his political career.”

“Maybe,” Nicephorus winced as his brother glared. “Yes, you can pressure the Lord High Admiral. But you were present at the Council. A Primarch is coming. And since Macragge is on the other side of the galaxy, I am ready to bet everything I own that several Space Marines’ Companies that Ormuz insulted at Cadia will be there for his arrival. Rabadash will have to choose between your blackmail and the wrath of many Space Marines, plus the presence of a Primarch. Don’t begin something that will convince a Primarch we must be eliminated, please.”

The legends were old, but each and every one of them insisted it was never a good idea to antagonise the sons of the God-Emperor...especially when the Master of Mankind was not them to protect you.

“And what do you suggest, then?”

“There will be a Court-Martial, we can’t stop that.” Nicephorus shook his head. “But no one will be able to say anything if Ormuz is declared innocent by his peers at the conclusion of the Court-Martial.”

“Weren’t you the one who complained that it was going to get too expensive?”

“Yes, I did. But since the political survival of Clan Vandire is now tied to this Court-Martial,” and maybe the simple survival, given how things were unfolding, “I think this is a price we are going to have to pay...though if you want to retire from your High Seat and win a few favours that way-“

“We have suffered some reverses, but the game is not over!” Xerxes growled. “Do not suggest things like that in presence, even if your intent is to humour me!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Ardium**

**Hive Volubilis**

**2.779.310M35**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

Taylor was half-asleep in an enormous armchair in the colours of the Ultramarines when Dragon arrived.

“Someone had a very exhausting morning...”

And the Tinker received a large yawn in response.

“I didn’t see you volunteer for a spar with the Queen of Blades, Dragon.”

Dragon chuckled.

“I will admit, after certain rumours spread, a spar wasn’t what came to mind.”

The unimpressed sniff which came was very loud and royal.

“I am not going to sleep with her Dragon,” the insect-mistress yawned again. “I already have a lot of difficulties adapting to the sensations which come with an Aeldari body. I am not going to go down that road...and anyway, I first want to speak to Wei in person before I invite anyone else in our bed.”

“Gossip-mongers will be so disappointed,” the Nyxian Minister of Industry smirked.

“Don’t go further in that direction,” the Lady General warned, “I have an active love life...unlike a few parahumans I could name.”

“I am changing the order of the day immediately,” Dragon promised, as an Adjutant-Spider arrived, preceding a small column of insects carrying a few sugary rations and refreshments.

“And what is this ‘order of the day’?”

“The major projects we are going to have to fund in the coming years. The order of priority will have to be...modified.”

“The NBP is coming first. The NAPAP comes second.” There was a third yawn. “I thought I sent Artemis to give you a list yesterday.”

“Oh, I received it. And on the first two points, I completely agree. The New Battleship Program and the New Astartes Power Armour Program are vital, both for the Imperium and the Nyx Sector.”

They were so important, in fact, that the preparations for them had begun before Operation Stalingrad officially began, though how critical they were had taken new levels of priority very recently.

And this was one of the reasons a large force of Magma Spiders Astartes and several of Salamanders were going to go immediately to Nyx the moment this quarantine was formally over.

“We are going to have to allocate more funding to the research program of quantum cogitators, of course. With Admiral delivering you the STC template to build Argus hyper-auspexes, it is incredibly important we integrate this major advance into the prototype of NBP.”

“Will Archmagos Sultan be able to modify the prototype with hyper-auspex and complete it in fourteen months? I seem to remember there were already some unique challenges.”

“Based on the latest astropathic coded messages, I believe the Mistress of Ships has everything under control. She has already sent several of her subordinates to Tau in the Ouralia System, by the way.”

“How wonderful to have capable subordinates,” Taylor murmured while abandoning her sleeping position, and taking a glass of water from her beetles. “I believe you are all a bit too optimistic, but if you can do everything in the timetable we agreed upon, I will not interfere.”

“We can and we will,” Dragon assured her, “don’t forget that we have six months right after this deadline to convince all the representatives of the different Forge Worlds our Battleship design deserves to be built in significant numbers.”

Taylor nodded, but remained thoughtful. Dragon didn’t tease her, for the NBP was a very big endeavour. The Imperial Navy had many Battleships to defend the Nyx Sector, but none of them had been built this millennium in Nyxian or Wuhanese yards. All the servicemen had done was to make short or long-term maintenance upon these enormous warships.

Building a Battleship was more than a sign of prestige; it translated into a considerable amount of influence where all Adeptuses of the Imperium were concerned.

Moreover, the construction of Battleships was only the first step. If they wanted to build highly specialist designs like Astartes Battle-Barges, the New Battleship Program had to be a resounding success.

“You mentioned you didn’t agree on other points, Dragon.”

“Yes.” The Tinker shook her head. “Respectfully, Taylor, I think you are ready to invest in too few research programs.”

To her relief, the Basileia of Nyx snorted.

“Twelve military and twelve civilian programs of Sapphire-class importance are not something I would call ‘too few’, Dragon. And besides, the limiting factor has many times been the number of Tech-Priests we can place on each program. Nyx has billions of red-robed enthusiasts, but the number of those who can be trusted and are skilled enough to be considered for these programs is not a hundredth of that number.”

“That was true fourteen years ago,” the Tinker disagreed...respectfully. “It is less and less true those days. And the Magisterium supports me.”

“They do?”

The scepticism in the insect-mistress’ voice wasn’t unwarranted; the Magisterium was by its very nature a conservative organisation.

“They do.” Dragon gave a large data-slate to the Adjutant-Spider, who eagerly began to read it.

“Dragon,” Taylor sighed, proving that for all her attempts to make it seem that she wasn’t paying it attention to it, she was reading the same thing her arachnid servant did, “that is going to be incredibly expensive.”

“Even after the bounties will be paid?”

The groan was very loud and very comical.

“Well, first, I have to...convince the Adeptus Almitas to pay the bounties. According to my sources, the Adept-Primus of that particular organisation is on his way to Pluto and considering hermit’s life.”

Dragon giggled. This was incredibly funny...though apparently, Taylor didn’t appear to acknowledge the irony of the whole situation.

The Basileia of Nyx sighed.

“I am less than convinced we can find everyone we need to make those programs complete successes, Dragon. And funding them may require borrowing Throne Gelts from the Banking Houses for the first time since I became Basileia. And you know how I hate that.”

“Yes,” Dragon replied in a more serious tone. “On the other hand, you really defanged them well before Operation Caribbean.”

“And I am not eager to give them the tools to bite again.”

The Adjutant-Spider gave her back the data-slate.

“I am going to consider the different programs you proposed,” Taylor announced after five seconds of silence. “I will make the final decisions on an individual basis. I did note some of them won’t have their principal research headquarters in the Nyx System.”

“We can’t hoard them, no matter how good it is from a draconic point of view,” the Tinker replied virtuously. “And really, we need testing grounds where there aren’t billions of potential witnesses.”

“The latter sounds like a more reasonable argument.”

“The former is twisting your long ears?”

The new groan was even more impressive than the previous one.

“Not you too...I had already several Harlequins commenting on my mistakes when I sparred with the Queen of Blades...and their jokes were horrible!”

“Well, speaking of jokes that have lasted for far too long, when aren’t they going to escort Rogal Dorn and Jaghatai Khan here? Having them lost in the Webway for several more millennia isn’t some extremely poor use of the sons of the Emperor’s talents.”

The insect-mistress grimaced.

“From what the clowns hinted, it is going to take...some time.”

“Aren’t they the servants of the Master of the Webway?”

“Yes, they are. And that’s the problem. The Primarchs aren’t in the Webway tunnels anymore.”

“Isn’t it good news? I mean, you gave Dorn a psy-beacon, and between the Space Marines and two Primarchs, they can fight their way out of very dangerous situations.”

“Cegorach in person told me he expects the Primarch to rush back in the Webway once they admit defeat,” the woman who had now won the Battles of Commorragh and Macragge said with a disabused smirk. “I don’t know for you, but it doesn’t sound like good news to me...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Traxis Frontier Exploration Zone**

**Nectavus System**

**Nectavus VI**

**9.781.310M35**

**Primarch Rogal Dorn**

“Brother?”

“Yes, Jaghatai, I’m all ears.”

Rogal knew that tone. It was the one Jaghatai used when he thought Rogal was doing something stupid.

“I’m sure you had a lot of fun killing that enormous reptile-“

“I didn’t have ‘a lot of fun’ the Primarch of the Imperial Fists protested energetically. “And for the trouble it caused me, I am going to eat it, even if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

The thing had scales harder than the armour of Baneblade, and it had taken a lot of ingenuity and the judicious use of the local environment to slay it.

“Well, consider myself corrected,” Jaghatai said cheerfully, his terrible scars making his good humour all the more incomprehensible, “I just wanted to inform you there’s a storm of iron shards coming this way.”

“Again?”

The ground rumbled under their feet.

“A new earthquake? Really?”

“Well, it must have only been ten minutes since the last one-“

A tongue of fire rose north of their position. On any battlefield, Rogal would have guessed it was something having a very bad day.

On this cursed planet? It was the signal for something altogether worse.

“And now we have the super-eruption of the hour.”

Then the ground shook extremely violently, proof the rumble had been a mere prelude for the new round of earthquakes.

The next minutes, evidently, were spent surviving the shockwaves of the volcanic explosion and the hordes of super-predators on the hunt as thousand of animal species fled the lava, the toxic gases, and more lethal dangers.

“I’m not one to easily say it, Lord,” one of the two Salamanders Space Marines with them exclaimed, “but it really feels like home!”

“Come on brother, the only moment the air is that toxic is during the Time of Trials!” The second Salamander answered. “Of course, the beasts are a bit too small and not enough dangerous to be considered equals to our magnificent Salamanders...”

Rogal shook his head. Of course the sons of Vulkan were going to say that. On the other hand, the fact they could compare their home of Nocturne and this fresh hell where they had emerged from the Webway without exaggerating was hardly a source of relief.

The storms of iron, in particular, had to be endured to be believed.

“Jaghatai...are you sure?”

“Rogal, there is no way the devices we have will be able to perceived by any human ship visiting this system. The iron and the spores saturating the atmosphere are too powerful. Our only chance to escape would be to find a permanent fortress of the Imperium on this world. Given how...amusing our progression, or lack of it, has been on this very world, I don’t think the chances of meeting a beachhead of intrepid Rogue Traders on this Death World is very likely.”

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists nodded slowly.

Death World. How he hated those two worlds.

Yes, technically his homeworld of Inwit was one, but there was Death World and Death World. Inwit, as long as you worked hard, could be a refuge for Mankind. This world they were trying to explore was anything but.

“You think our best chance is to go back to the Webway.”

“I’m beginning to think it is our *only* chance of survival,” Jaghatai replied with a slight chuckle. “Sooner or later, one of us will make a mistake...and even if we don’t, the Space Marines by our side have accumulated the injuries. We need a hideout where we aren’t attacked every hour...and we won’t find it on this planet.”

Rogal Dorn gritted his teeth.

“I have a feeling I know now why this purple-gold clown was mocking us with quantities of ironic farewell gestures when we rushed out of the Webway Gate...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Ardium**

**Hive Emeritus**

**2.804.310M35**

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

Roboute did not rise from the massive *thing* he was forced to use to sit, but this wasn’t a mark of disrespect...it was just that when it took more or less fifteen minutes to be encased into this medical-purposed structure, there was no way for him to get out in mere seconds.

Otherwise he would have stood up to welcome the woman who had been so vital in saving Macragge.

Ironies of ironies, Lady Taylor Hebert had not come clad in her golden armour today, much like his brothers. This meant he was the only one in power armour...though at least he had the excuse of not being able to get out of it.

“Can I offer my congratulations for your promotion?” The Lord of Ultramar decided he might as well begin, since neither Leman nor Corvus was willing to do so. “Lady General Militant is a just rewards for all your military achievements.”

“Thank you.” A faint smile appeared on her lips. “Technically, I was already commanding multiple Battle Groups and Army Groups for all the duration of this campaign, but the promotion is nice...and will remove several problems and issues which came regularly on my desk.”

“Ah yes, *those* problems,” Leman didn’t spit, but it was most likely because the marble floor had been rubbed and cleansed thoroughly before this audience.

“You will have to forgive my poor brother here,” the Primarch of the Raven Guard intervened. “Our father didn’t create him to integrate bureaucracy problems in his warfare methods.”

“HA!”

“Now that the first courtesies have been observed,” the very young woman said, adjusting her long robe in the colours of the Blood Angels to sit more easily, “I am in the regret to speak first of a most unpleasant subject. The quarantine procedures are soon going to be completed, but the next major problem is already striking at the door. The temperatures are continually dropping outside, and for the efforts of my Ambulls and my Ants to create nice underground shelters, it is not enough.”

Roboute winced. He had not doubted that the last minutes of the devastating battle had changed Ardium’s climate beyond recognition, but some part of him had hope that by the time the quarantine procedures would be over, the temperatures would rise again. He had not thought they would reach again forty degrees Celsius, but five or ten would have been adequate.

Apparently, this was not going to happen. Not this year, and likely not this decade.

“You are going to suggest evacuation.”

“Yes.” The golden wings were unfurled in all her majesty as the Lady General Militant nodded. “We can feed the population of Ardium, that’s not the problem. The Agri World of Nova Thulium is intact, and I am very thankful for that, otherwise starvation would have been a very real prospect. But none of the Ardium Hives was designed to endure extremely low temperatures for long, and that was before the Tyranids came and provoked a major refugee crisis, which is now double with an energy one.”

“Surely many of the men of Ardium will love the snow!”

By common accord, everyone around the table chose to ignore the outburst of Leman Russ.

“I thought about it,” sometimes Roboute was not happy his head lead him to implement plans the moment he saw a problem, and this was one of these moments. “And I believe I have a solution.”

On his command, Cawl activated remotely the hololith next to the table, revealing a map of the now defunct Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar.

South of the Parmenio’s coordinates, a blue dot began to shine.

“This is the Frontier World of Shiloh. When I fought my last battle in the thirty-first millennium, it was one of the planets which were still part of the Realm of Ultramar, as I had yet to give it to one of the Chapters of the Second Founding. I intended to give it to a new Chapter, but...circumstances prevented it.”

“And it has remained a Frontier World for the last four millennia?” Corvus Corax asked with an interested voice.

Roboute shrugged.

“After I was placed into stasis, the system was more or less forgotten, condemned to remain a backwater. It is only a recent dispute between the Administratum and Ultramar which made it relevant again.”

He was going to need to make some concessions, but it was the best solution...in a sea of very bad ones.

“The problem of course is the logistics,” Roboute Guilliman continued. “Out of a population of seventy-five billion, my intelligence resources estimate that within a year, seventy billion men, women, and children will want to leave Ardium. And obviously, Ultramar has neither the ships to transport them without crippling some other vital parts of the Realm, nor does it have the industrial capacity to build the basic necessities on Shiloh.”

“But I do.” Lady Taylor Hebert remarked clearly. “Or rather, the Adeptus Mechanicus does, when it comes to the industrial capacity. I have the ships to organise this...exodus.”

“Indeed. I am-“

“This will be done.”

Russ laughed like a mad man on his right, the traitor.

“You should have left him speak, girl! He was able to give you a splendid speech, promising you plenty of concessions, and fill our ears with some splendid Macraggian rhetoric!”

Roboute glared at the Lord of Fenris. Unfortunately, this only seemed to make his brother howl in laughter...and more loudly than before.

“Ahem...yes, maybe I intended to do that. Are you sure?”

“At the pace the Administratum or any other major organisation is moving, the population of Ardium will still be there in a decade, something that will result in millions of deaths once the infrastructure damaged by the invasion or overwhelmed by the refugee’s needs unavoidably fails. I am here. I have the contacts and the resources. I am not going to stay idle while tens of millions die.”

The golden-winged woman passed a hand in her black hair.

“Obviously, I will expect...compensations. Depending on the future main exports of Shiloh, some privileges to buy first before other potential customers or something like that.”

“That sounds...reasonable.”

“And Ardium itself?” Russ asked, having finally stopped howling like a lunatic. “It can’t fulfil its duty as a Hive World anymore if the Hives are near-empty.”

For the first time, the powerful woman who had tied herself to the sons of Sanguinius seemed very surprised.

“I thought it was agreed it would become the new homeworld of the Wolves? You know, with the different branches of the Adeptus Terra being very happy a certain Fenrisian chapter is nowhere to be found in any of the major Segmentums...according to the rumours, the local Adepts are openly celebrating.”

“It remains to be seen. Roboute is making things difficult.” It had not taken long before he remembered why too often, he wanted to strangle Leman Russ during the Great Crusade.

“I am not opposing it in principle. But there are proper procedures. And I have to take into the account the will of Ardium citizens. Some of them want to stay...and they object vociferously being ruled by your larger-than-life Fenrisian saga-seekers.”

This time, it was the turn of Lady Taylor Hebert to chuckle and place a hand in front of her mouth.

“I admit that it sounds like...a fascinating clash of culture. I will let you to your brotherly negotiations, then. Though will you have to deal with it before Lord Russ here leaves for Terra? Per the Custodes’ orders, the *Enterprise*’s Pylon has been transferred to their ship, and the departure is only a question of days.”

If there was any truth to the rumour the Custodes had promised several more Pylons to the Lady General Militant so they could reach Terra faster, there was no sign of it to be found Taylor Hebert’s face.

“Probably not,” Leman grunted.

“Almost certainly not,” Corvus corrected.

Black eyes looked at each of them with amusement...before turning away, and deciding that whatever the problem, it was not something she was prepared to involve herself with.

“The next reason I invited you,” Roboute said after clearing his throat and receiving some pain for it, “is the Bacta issue. I have been informed of all the...problems and incidents some problematic representatives created at the last ‘Nyxian Bacta Conference’.”

“I had no doubt you would find out in time,” was the polite reply.

And no more words were uttered, which meant the very theoretical and pessimistic scenario the Thirteenth Primarch had thought over was very much reality.

Roboute was trying to think about the best approach when Russ, as usual, jumped with armoured boots to attack the problem.

“Then we call a Second Bacta Conference and change the-“

“No.” Power seemed to radiate from the winged body of the woman many considered a Saint. Not enough to impress a Primarch, since it was far weaker than their genitor’s aura of power...but it was far from an insignificant display of power. “Absolutely not.”

“You have the authority.” Leman was stubborn, that had always been one of his best qualities...and one of the traits that gave him trouble in countless occasions.

“I have the authority to call for a Second Bacta Conference,” Lady Taylor Hebert corrected. “But the Bacta Accord I signed with my blood is something I intend to respect. I gave my word to all the Chapters who negotiated with Nyx. I am not going to break that trust.”

Corvus clapped his hands in approval....and Roboute couldn’t pretend be surprised. After all, Deliverance was a Bacta depot-fortress, much like Nyx, Chogoris, Terra, Nocturne, Baal, Talus IV, Mortikah IV, and Talasa Prime.

“My brother spoke poorly. I don’t think it would be wise to break any agreement of that importance, no. But I’m sure that you understand our desire to...renegotiate to more favourable terms what has been done when some of my sons behaved like imbeciles.”

“I understand.” The ruler of the Nyx Sector winced. “I really understand. And as I say, I can call up a new Bacta Conference. It is within my authority, and the victory I won in this very system has generated plenty of good will. But it is the different Chapters who negotiated in good faith the first time that you will have to convince. Because, while not giving specific details, I can tell you that a majority of the sons of Sanguinius, Vulkan, and Dorn are not in the mood to make you any favours in that regard. And even if the latter were willing, the High Lords of Terra have a copy of the agreement. They won’t agree to decrease the percentage of stocks stored in the Sol System; they have the veto power, and they won’t be afraid to use it.”

Roboute looked at his raven-brother...who nodded with a grimace.

Formidable, that was a feeling shared by the Astartes who used Deliverance for the Bacta delivery too...

“To make matters even more problematic, one of the Bacta storage facilities is very close to Macragge, on the world of Talasa Prime.” The commanding officer of Operation Stalingrad opened her hands in a placating gesture. “All the other storage facilities are quite distant from each other, a good thing given how big this galaxy is.”

And reading between the lines, the creation of the Sigillite that had gone way beyond anything he might have imagined....the Inquisition was not willing to negotiate down its part of the Bacta deliveries, and was already finding good arguments to deny them.

“Couldn’t production be increased outside of the Nyx Sector?” Roboute proposed. “I saw in the documents I was able to access that you only spoke of the Nyxian production-“

“I am not going to play with words when it comes to Astartes Chapters,” the young woman immediately refused. “I do that quite often with other parties, and I already don’t like it. Setting aside the matters of honour, the different gene-lines trusted me with the Bacta Conference, and I am not going to break that trust by exploiting the various loopholes. I can increase the production inside the Nyx Sector; that was already something planned when this campaign began. But since the deliveries per storage facilities are fixed in percent of the overall production, this won’t help Macragge at all.”

“This is us running in circles,” Russ complained and all the eyes turned towards him. “What about we change the stalemated situation? We make Macragge indispensable so that the other Chapters have no choice but to accept this system will become the tenth storage facility for your Bacta?”

The eyes of Lady Taylor Hebert widened in surprise. Yes, one more soul who was surprised Leman Russ was far more than his appearance of ‘Barbarian King of the cold’ suggested at first glance.

“That would be...ideal.” The female warrior who had done most of the work when it came to Lorgar’s execution agreed. “But what could make Macragge so indispensable, Lord Russ? The shrine of a dead Primarch is not going to be enough...”

“I had the idea,” their blonde-haired brother informed each and every one of this meeting’s participants, “of extending the system you imagined with Bacta to one for the Armouries of Space Marines.”

Roboute opened his mouth...and was left speechless for a couple of seconds.

“This...it could work. Brother?”

“It could.” Corvus approved.

“Yes...it is something that could convince some reluctant Chapters, especially those waging the majority of their campaigns in Ultima Segmentum,” Taylor Hebert conceded, her wings being quite agitated by the ‘solution’ Russ has proposed. “Of course, unlike the last time where I could more or less every problem by sending the Red Bacta to the Throneworld, we will need a majority vote of the High Twelve. There’s no way they would tolerate something so huge going on without their approval. Bacta? It is near-miraculous in its effects, but it only heals wounded Astartes. It is a decisive help, but it won’t conjure the shells and the armours to wage decades-long wars.”

“I will deal with the High Lords.” Take a guess who of the three Primarchs present, was the one to speak the dramatic words. “Prepare the Second Bacta Conference in my absence.”

**Edge of the Eye of Terror**

**The Fulda Gate**

**Lunar-class Cruiser *Limpopo Ocean***

**8.808.310M35**

**Captain Daniels Presley**

“I regret to announce we’ve lost the elusive Raider, Sir.”

Daniels Presley tried to not smile at the disappointed face of the young Ensign who had just admitted his failure...if failure there was.

The veteran Captain of the Imperial Fleet was far less inclined than the young man to believe someone had screwed up.

“Ensign, this is the Fulda Gate. Locating something here is like finding the correct Munitorum data-slate in a vault some idiot has filled with hundreds of years of useless bureaucratic notes.”

There was a reason the view on the bridge of the *Limpopo Ocean* was limited to grey, ugly walls of metal. Armaglass was all fine and good when you wanted sight-seeing, but so close to the Eye of Terror, it was a one-way ticket to lose your mind...if you were lucky.

Daniels couldn’t look outside, but he knew what was awaiting less than ten millions kilometres away: raging storms of energy, tides of empyrean horrors, and many more things that outright shouldn’t exist.

The *Limpopo Ocean* and its crew were close, very close to the edge of this gigantic anomaly that everyone smart stayed well away from.

“There wasn’t a Raider,” his chief of staff gently told the too-young Ensign. “No Warp-capable ship with a tonnage inferior to a Destroyer can sail through the Fulda Gap.”

Really, it was entirely possible that nothing less than a Battleship would be able to avoid the apocalyptic maelstroms raging in this region at the edge of the Eye of Terror.

Permanent Gates that allowed the heretics and their pet monsters to launch raids outside the Eye were extremely rare. That was why the latest batch of Traitors had attacked the Cadian Gate and the Fortress Worlds barring the way. They simply had no other good option but to ram their heads against the Battlefleets and the millions of men waiting for them here.

There were lesser Gates all around the Eye, of course.

But few of them were stable, and the heretics’ ships that tried to use them to evade Cadia’s vigilance in general found out they may have ben a little bit optimistic in their ability to evade all attempts of the Eye to kill them.

Sometimes, the Imperial Navy found some debris to testify there had been a raid attempt. In even rarer cases, they found a sizeable wreck.

In the last year alone, the *Limpopo Ocean* had found three, all of them more likely to belong to Styx Heavy Cruisers that had been decommissioned centuries ago and were now used by the Traitors to wage their wars against the loyal officers of the God-Emperor.

Daniels Presley was thinking ‘more likely’, because none of the debris had been longer than a few hundred metres long.

The Fulda Gate was a really stupid name, honestly. The Fulda Rift should be far more appropriate. But a long-dead Lord Admiral must have wanted to give his name to something, and ‘Gate’ must have sounded far better than the other options.

“There could have been something, you know,” his chief of staff smiled as the poor Ensign returned to his daily duties, which included finding the morning drinks of the *Limpopo Ocean’s* bridge crew.

“Now? I doubt it.” Daniels shook his head. “Some days after the heretics attacked Cadia? This would have made sense. A few ships would have sneaked away while everyone was busy holding Cadia and the Gate. Now? What the hell would Raiders achieve?”

“Trying to sneak away, I suppose.” His chief of staff snorted before his incredulous expression. “Heretics aren’t the most rational of beings.”

“True.”

“And they could think that with only the *Limpopo Ocean* watching the Fulda Gap, they might have a chance to sneak away.”

“Yes. They would sneak away...until a squadron or two waiting some light-years behind us would charge in pursuit and hunt them down.”

The reason the *Limpopo Ocean* was here in the first place was that it was old and expendable. Built in a second-rate shipyard in M32, the old Lunar had been rushed into service to combat some long-forgotten threat, and the result had been a warship that required way more maintenance and spare parts than the usual hulls of the class.

By all rights, it should have been decommissioned years ago, much like Daniels Presley must have retired a decade ago when it was clear he would need a rejuvenation treatment someone of his mediocre connections couldn’t afford.

But the alarms of war, the preparations to counter the heretics’ Black Crusade, had kept him both the *Limpopo Ocean* and himself in service of the Imperial Navy.

Assuming the last messages were the truth, this ‘excuse’ was going to disappear, meaning the end of his unremarkable career was in sight. Maybe not this year, Daniels was sure, but with the arrival of brand-new Cruisers next year to replenish the order of battle of all the Battlefleets...

“How is the hydroponics’ section this morning?”

“As well as it could possibly under the circumstances.” His chief of staff replied stoically. “The cogboys are telling me they have found the problem and they had the pieces to repair.”

“Our recalcitrant fire control for the torpedo launchers?”

“We haven’t exactly the best cogboy-in-chief...one problem at a time.”

“That’s fair. Did you tell them that-“

“ENEMY SHIPS DETECTED! ENEMY SHIPS COMING THROUGH THE FULDA GATE!”

Daniels stared in comprehension...and a couple of seconds later, the hololithic screens began to report what was happening at the Eye of Terror’s edge.

“Warships racing out of the Eye of Terror,” his chief of staff grimly said. “And we’re too far away to intercept them.”

This was no defeatism; merely the reality. The *Limpopo Ocean* was a slow and old Cruiser, and it had just been caught by surprise with minimal acceleration and a ridiculously low speed.

“At least we can detect them,” and it meant their most important duty was going to be fulfilled, “there are seven of them. Do we have an estimation of the tonnage?”

“Not for now. We will have it in a few seconds.”

“Those are big bastards.” Daniels Presley grimaced. His previous words in company of a disappointed Ensign didn’t seem that funny anymore. “Let us pray they aren’t-“

“Sir! Tonnage estimates! All the enemy hulls are Battleships!”

“Madness...they have sent seven Battleships...in *that*?”

“The heretics seem to have some...err...sort of sorcery cloaking their ships!”

“And they are redlining their drives in their haste to sail through the Fulda Gap.” His chief of staff’s calm tone swept away the worried voices on the bridge. “This doesn’t give us a pretty tactical vid, Sir.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Daniels admitted. “Given the course these Traitors are using, it’s clear they want to escape the Eye. If they wanted to fight us, they would be busy rushing on our direction, not racing away.”

The little problem with this was sneaking away, as his chief of staff had mentioned it, generally required there to be no witnesses so that the Admiralty wasn’t warned of the enemy’s moves.

The *Limpopo Ocean* might be obsolete and bound for the scrapyard, but its augurs and auspexes had done their job.

What made the heretics so sure the fast-reaction force from Battlefield Cadia wouldn’t hunt them down like the vermin they were?

“Sir...we have a relatively high-confidence identification of one of the Battleships. It’s...it’s the *Terminus Est*.”

Well, Daniels had his answer. The *Terminus Est*. An infamous piece of disease and plague that was responsible for the death of billions for each raid it launched. Its size easily made it a ‘pocket Gloriana’, the missing link between the Apocalypse Battleships and their larger ‘cousins’.

“Emergency Astropathic message to all commands we can reach. The Plague Marines are at the Fulda Gate!”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Panpacific Catacombs**

**0.810.310M35**

**Grand Master Hunter**

Hunter had known he was in danger until the two aircars exploded.

For most Imperial citizens, it could have been a coincidence.

The Grand Master of the Ordo Assassinorum didn’t believe in coincidences.

And in the unlikeliest case he did, Hunter would have recognised the smell anyway.

The explosives had a distinct smell to them. One of the components of it was made from a special chemical component which was only fabricated on a very specific Agri World of Segmentum Solar, and the souls involved in its production sold only to the Assassinorum. And over a century ago, Hunter had accomplished his first mission with those explosives, one of the reasons he was so knowledgeable about this particular subject.

An Assassin never forgot the first mission which made him a true member of the Officio Assassinorum.

Those who had blown up the aircars knew it.

It was a not an assassination attempt.

It was a message.

Hunter’s surprise visit to the Vanus Temple had been immediately cancelled.

Preparations had been made to return to the Imperial Palace immediately via one of the safest routes he was knowledgeable about.

The second unsubtle warning had come in the form of explosive arrows and an Eldar spitting molecular-cutting ammunition less than ten minutes later. This was a not-so-gentle reminder about his second mission.

A Heavy Bolter and a sociopath armed with mechadendrites had come right after. That was a sign his enemies knew about his fourth mission, but had enough reluctance to not use a copy of the third, for this one had been about neutralising an Exterminatus-level poison.

That left a disturbingly small number of possible choices when it came to the factions wanting to send him a message.

And so Hunter had fled into the Panpacific Catacombs.

One hour later, six minor thugs and four Death Cults’ assassins eliminated, Hunter stopped and waited.

It didn’t take him long to arrive.

There wasn’t a sound, and yet the black colossus with a violet crest above his helmet was there.

Dankanatoi.

A Chamber of the Adeptus Custodes that most people ignored the existence of.

They were dedicated to hunt down and eliminate traitors, wherever they could be found.

“I will not apologise.”

“You know why I had to intervene, then.”

A stone would have had more emotion than the words made by the Custodes.

“Taylor Hebert and Elena Kerrigan represent a clear and direct danger to the Imperium’s stability.”

The Guardian Spear didn’t move, but a single golden sparkle burst into existence atop it.

“This is not for you to decide.”

“And who will decide then?” Hunter asked defiantly. “The other High Lords? Most of them are ready to crawl and lick Weaver’s feet if it means those two menaces are directed at the Traitor Legions and the other monsters. They will give them mountains of wealth, and still refuse to act when they will come to Terra. The Astartes? They will choose them, no matter what they do and-“

“This is not for you to decide.”

“Yes, I freely admit, the order was given to put into stasis three Culexus and send them to Samarkand. What? Are you going to tell me again ‘this is not for you to decide’?”

“No.” The black-clad Custodes replied. “It is stupid. If you really think three Culexus Assassins have a chance against the one the Emperor empowered with Sacrifice, your threat-evaluating skills are unworthy of a Grand Master.”

The words hurt, Hunter admitted inwardly.

Losing a political debate, that would not have bothered him that much.

Having his skills dismissed as unworthy of a challenge...it was insulting...and the worst part was that his conscience told him the Custodes was right.

“What happens now?” The Grand Master kept a determined expression. If this was to be the end, he would not end his on his knees. The Custodes knew too much about him, so the fight was likely so stacked against him it wasn’t funny, but Hunter had his pride.

“There will be a new Grand Master of Assassins at the next council of the High Twelve.” The Custodes said ominously. “If you endorse your successor, you will be authorised to return to field duty. The Emperor has need of a man of your many talents in Pacificus.”

“Who is to be my successor?”

“Callista de Sarcamore.”

The Mistress of the Callidus Temple...it was not a surprise.

“Will she hand the High Seat to the Angel of Shadows?”

To his pleasure, the question was answered. Hunter had not expected the Custodes to.

“Think of it as a prelude to several reforms. The assassins are not destined to always remain in the shadows.”

“I think I understand. Pacificus, then?”

“Pacificus. Remember: no foe is beyond His reach.”

**Mars**

**Olympus Mons**

**0.812.310M35**

**Fabricator Locum Decimus Osmium-Five-1111**

“The political consequences aside, the recovery of those STCs are a fantastic victory,” Decimus told his sole superior in the Martian hierarchy. “I’d heard rumours of the templates the Arch-Heretek had been bribed with, but I certainly never expected anyone to recover them.”

“Correct,” the Fabricator-General canted. “And the assumption was that if we recovered them, they would be too corrupted by the hereteks to be of any use. But apparently, Sota-Nul didn’t trust that much the Warp, or she wanted some untainted STCs for her own purposes.”

These were purposes which, as the message of the Arch-Heretic suggested, had been far from innocent and free of their own dangerous taint.

“And the STCs themselves?”

“The first template stolen from the Auretian Technocracy is an augmented power armour,” Xaerophrys Esvikom confirmed immediately some of the wild rumours that had spread across Mars. “The Chosen of the Omnissiah decided to call it *Lorica*, due to the circumstances of its recovery.”

“Fitting,” Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 approved. “I suppose the holy knowledge is going to be used, after long purification protocols, to work upon a new Mark of Astartes Power Armour.”

“You suppose correctly. Given how the Bacta leads to the survival of Many Space Marines and purges a lot of the corruption which would make some gene-seed useless, many Space Marine Chapters are already voicing demands for this Mark X.”

“The Magi who worked upon the Mark VIII are going to love this. Their armours are obsolete before getting in mass production.”

“We might modify them so they are a ‘neo-Mark IX’. As the Chosen of the Omnissiah explained in length before launching the incredibly successful Operation Stalingrad, an imperfect Power Armour with Ion Shields is better than no Power Armour at all.”

“I can’t disagree with that.” Decimus replied before an unpleasant thought irrupted in his cortex. “Will we be able to push Cawl aside while this future...Mark X is conceived?”

“I don’t know,” the Fabricator-General admitted darkly. “Apparently, ‘our’ Radical evidently had some contacts with the Primarch Roboute Guilliman.”

“Cog and sacred oils...this is...inconvenient.”

“It is. On the other hand, the Avenging Son is unlikely to come to Sol in the decade to come.”

“Meaning we might impose reasonable conditions for the fabrication of the first Mark X in the Nyx System, and then some production lines on Mars itself?”

“Yes.”

“This...might work.” Decimus acknowledged. “It all depends on the circumstances, of course. And the other STCs?”

“The second STC stolen by the Arch-Heretic and his heretekal minions was a template of lightweight solar generator. It is a model of miniaturized technology capable of supplying the power to feed an Epsilon-5 forge complex.”

“This is an extremely useful template.” Decimus didn’t hide his excitement. “I know many vehicles and Explorator-purposed installations which could use a holy STC like this one. And the third STC?”

“The third template did not come from the Auretian Technocracy at all. It was a data-repository from Mars...the entire schematics, plans, and set of instructions to build the Warmaster Titans.”

“By the Omnissiah...” there was a reason why none of the Warmaster Titans, infamous for being the ‘missing link’ between the Imperator and the Warlord Titans, were no longer built. Mars had lost the Forges, the Archmagi, and the knowledge to do so.

“Though obviously, by the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s will, those are Warmaster Titans no longer. We will discard this heretical title. In memory of the great victory won in the name of the Quest for Knowledge, when we will build new Titans of that class, they will be known as *Pharsalus Titans*.”

And to say the STCs were only a minuscule part of everything that had been recovered due to the actions of Operation Stalingrad.

“Obviously, there is going to be a price to pay.” Xaerophrys Esvikom canted.

“Politics.” All the hereteks involved in the betrayal that had led to the Schism of Mars were inside the Eye of Terror, or with Sota-Nul. None of the current members of the Parliament of Mars were involved in these odious machinations.

But the Imperium had to be sure the Forges of Mars were a reliable technological partner. Trust and loyalty were the key words of the Terran-Martian Union.

“Politics,” the Fabricator-General confirmed. “I heavily suspect that I am going to have to return to my personal workshops as a mere Archmagos before too long. The numbers don’t favour this year, but I will certainly have to officially relinquish my position of Fabricator-General.”

And in this scenario, the natural successor was one Decimus Osmium-Five-1111.

“I would have hoped it would not come so soon.” Decimus was ambitious, he would haven’t reached the rank of Fabricator Locum otherwise, but he knew what the position above it entailed, and he doubted anyone could be too ready for it.

“I will make sure a few of our loudest troublemakers will resign with me,” Xaerophrys Esvikom promised. “Though I unfortunately don’t think this will apply to Cawl...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**High Orbit over Ardium**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.815.310M35**

**Clade-Primaris Xanaria Lythis**

Xanaria had not known what type of reception she would get when in presence of the Living Saint. After all, the...unofficial contacts between the Assassinorum and Weaver had not generally been a model to emulate if you wanted to establish long-term diplomacy.

One thing was sure, the Clade-Primaris’ best guess had not been a huge spider berating in High Gothic the next best thing as a dozen of small black felines.

“Furballs! Stop distracting the Webmistress from her holy task of Administration!”

The much tinier animals superbly ignored the arachnid, and one even used a nearby desk to jump on her back.

“Webmistress! I need assistance!”

The Living Saint chuckled before rushing to the rescue with a couple of Space Marines.

The kittens were promptly put into large baskets with pillows and musical toys, and then escorted out of the strategium by several guardsmen.

“An interesting parade of feline power,” Xanaria tried not to sound too ironic...and the golden spider didn’t like the insinuation.

“This is your fault!” The giant arachnid raised one of its legs in an accusatory move. “We had already the white furball, and now the jokes of your Apprentice mean I have to endure the assaults of the black-furred ones!”

“Err...yes?”

“Adjutant-Colonel,” Weaver reassuringly intervened. “I’m sure the Clade-Primaris played no part in this joke. Can you go outside solve the problem we spoke about?”

“Yes, Webmistress! Post-quarantine exodus preparation phase, here we go!”

And the golden spider fled the strategium like all the Legions of the Warp were after her.

“Apologies for the spectacle.” The Living Saint gave her a smile while throwing several data-slates to different red-armoured Astartes. “We have a lot of administrative tasks to care of, and the events to relax are few and far between.”

“Oh, I understand.” Xanaria assured her. “I had...a lot of those moments recently.”

Specifically, since the Custodes had informed her of everything Elena Kerrigan had been up to in the service of the God-Emperor since being teleported away to Fenris.

Shock and astonishment had been way too weak as words to explain what she had felt.

“Good. Now...the Watchers of the Golden Throne told me you were coming with a certain number of requests...requests that came with the full support of the Adeptus Custodes and the new Grand Mistress of the Officio Assassinorum. The only problem, of course, was that they didn’t tell me what those requests were.”

Thankfully, the radiant-winged Living Saint was in a cheerful mood.

“How awful,” Xanaria replied with a curt node as the strategium emptied in several seconds...something that didn’t feel like a coincidence. And the advanced anti-spying devices which activated a second later meant she wouldn’t have to ask for them. “To keep things simple, the Officio Assassinorum and the Adeptus Custodes wants you as a high-ranked partner for the reform program that will lead to the transformation of the Callidus Temples into the Umbra Sororitas.”

“Oh,” yes, the Watchers had not informed Weaver of what was intended. “I see. Why me, though? I will not deny Nyx has now gained sufficient industrial capacity to hide a few black projects, but we’re hardly on Terra’s doorstep, and there are far better candidates I can think of. Stygies VIII, for one. They have a lot of stealth-related templates we don’t have.”

“Some Forge Worlds have been mentioned, before being discarded. The problem is that many Tech-Priests won’t keep a secret between themselves, be it because of the Noosphere or some other technological reason.”

“I see.”

“And though it was not said openly, I think His Holy Majesty want Elena and you to keep close ties, your Celestial Highness...this will prevent you from being drifting too far apart.”

“I doubt we will ever be friends,” the black-haired woman commented with an amused chuckle.

“Maybe not, but at least the hope is to have a professional relationship that will work in the name of the Imperium.”

“Light and Shadow working for the same purpose, isn’t it?”

“We live in a galaxy where symbolism has power.” The Clade-Primaris replied neutrally.

“Yes, we are.” The Living Saint conceded. “How fast does this project need to be completed?”

“You will have several decades. Elena needs to gain experience first as an agent of the Officio, and her powers, from what I was given to understand, are only in their first stage of development. In the mean time, there are reforms that need to be done.”

“Several decades...I can work with that.” Weaver said with a frown. “Of course, it depends what the projects are about. A Hive-sized project doesn’t need the same funding a new pattern of Bolter requires.”

Xanaria withdrew a chip from one of her fake nails and handed it to the Victor of Macragge.

“That...that looks like one of those submarines the Tech-Priests are using when they want to explore an ocean world. But...for the void?”

“Void submarine...not a bad description. It is the biggest sample of what is intended for Project Melinoë.”

“Hmm...an extremely stealthy void ship...deployment by a modified stealth Thunderhawk like the Raven Guard...stealth Power Armour whose systems can merge with your Callidus Synskin...and here I was thinking Dragon wanted expensive toys for Sanguinala.”

Eyes filled with stars looked at her thoughtfully. Xanaria didn’t flinch.

“It isn’t just Light and Shadow, isn’t it? The...the Umbra Sororitas will act with the opposite methods the Templar Sororitas are beginning to use. Where one will go in group of a dozen maximum, the others will go in force of hundreds, maybe thousands. The Order of Silver Rose will have some crystals of Aethergold, but they will be able to use the Light of Sacrifice only in a few limited occasions. The ex-Callidus, however, will be able to use the Umbralshroud transformed Noctilith when Elena will be ready.”

Suddenly, it was no wonder why the Custodes had been so reluctant to part with the critical information before the time was right...the Living Saint had been able to sum-up a lot of the plan’s foundations not five minutes after she read some essential data.

 “Is it going to be a problem?”

“No.” The golden-winged Champion of the God-Emperor shook her head. “Though I will need some details as the research for the projects will be in a good state of advancement. Black projects or not, some infrastructure will need to be built and expanded. And there remains an issue.”

“The Frostlions or the Ecclesiarchy?”

“What Elena wants to do with her ‘furballs’, as my Adjutants are so prompt to call them, is her problem and no one else. The same applies to the Ecclesiarchy. I already have enough on my plate with the religious affairs of the Nyx Sector and the rest of the Quadrant. I am not going to intervene in what promises to be an interesting moment of diplomacy between the Officio and Ophelia VII.”

The Clade-Primaris was a bit amused...before realising how much of a headache said ‘diplomatic moment’ promised to be. Yes, the Living Saint had good reasons to stay away from it.

“If this is not it, what is the issue we’re supposed to speak about, your Celestial Highness?”

“Where you intend to base the Umbra Sororitas,” ah yes, that issue... “I rule a Sector. I didn’t have any problem finding the appropriate infrastructure for the Order of the Silver Rose. But even if Light and Shadow are not meant to be diametrically different, I doubt it is the intent of the Emperor to let Elena rule a Sector.”

“You’re right...it won’t be a Sector.” Xanaria took a deep breath. Here came the most...interesting part of her assignment. “The Grand Mistress, with the blessing of the Adeptus Custodes, has settled for a very specific planet.”

“Oh, good.”

“Not...exactly.”

“The Custodes have this grox of Vandire in range of their spears,” the Living Saint was not shy confirming the rumours of her enmity with a particular High Lord was alive and kicking, “he will pretty much give them everything they want, and with the rewards Elena will claim the moment the Almitas release the Throne Gelts, the Assassinorum will be able to pay for it anyway.”

“Agreed,” the Clade-Primaris admitted. “If it was an Imperial World.”

The stars-filled eyes looked at her for several seconds...before a loud sigh escaped the mouth of the Living Saint.

“Oh, great. Farseer Ulthran and High Priestess Malys are going to *love* that.”

**Moonlight-class Battleship *Rebirth***

**2.818.310M35**

**High Priestess Aurelia Malys**

“Yes, this is a world under the protection of Craftworld Ulthwé. Of course, we don’t call it...Kush lie your Empire does. It the world of...in your human language, ‘the Shadow Soul of the Forest’ is as close as I can explain it.” Aurelia grinned. “I am not surprised your Seer-Emperor thinks it is the perfect place to hide its shadow blades. At least they are going to be hidden, I assume?”

“I suppose this is the plan,” her Empress said. “I was not given the information, but I think that the moment the plan proceeds, the equivalent of my ‘Aethergold Pylons’ will be deployed in the form of Umbralshroud, the shadow-empowered Noctilith of Elena Kerrigan. I don’t know all the powers it will give the planet, but I’m pretty certain it will be able to obfuscate the sorcerers sworn to the different Ruinous Powers.”

“That would be for the best,” Aurelia agreed, placing one of the Empress’ hands between hers. She considered it a true victory that Taylor Hebert didn’t withdraw it immediately. “This is the kind of target the Primordial Annihilator will not hesitate to strike at the moment it is aware of its existence. And some of the goals are interesting. But there is a problem. A small colony of Asuryani already exists on this world that was blessed by Isha long ago. For them to accept a settlement of humans...many concessions will have to be made.”

“You want more Noctilith, don’t you?”

The High Priestess of Atharti gave a splendid smile to the new Empress of the Aeldari.

“We certainly wouldn’t say no to more. You promised only one block per Craftworld or significant world who converted to the worship of my Goddess, after all.”

Certainly it was not a small thing, not when each block could be converted into several altars of Symbiosis and Carnality.

“But in this case, it is not the black stone that I am worried about. It is the preservation of the planet. Forgive me for being prudent, my Empress, but your Empire is not known to be kind to Maiden Worlds when they happen to settle upon it. I don’t want the beautiful forests being burned, the rivers turned into poison, and the earth wounded and carved apart so that its entrails are visible from a spaceship.”

“I...I understand that you are worried.” The human turned Muse looked at her with a very determined expression. “That said, this time no one among the different parties involved want the mineral wealth or the wood of this planet. It is to be...a training ground and a spiritual centre of the women who will follow Elena Kerrigan. If there are weapons or ships to be forged, they will likely be far away from this world. The main strength of this shadowy world would be that no one should be able to find it without being approved by the Umbralshroud protections. And the Callidus women are not a large organisation by design. I would be very surprised if there are more than one hundred thousand at all times spread across the entire galaxy.”

“Reassuring words,” Aurelia considered them one by one, “but not sufficient by themselves. We will need more than that-“

“NO! EMPRESS! SAVE US! SHE IS GOING TO TORTURE US!”

This time Taylor Hebert truly laughed, a sound that was truly beautiful in her Aeldari Aspect.

“I see the Queen of Blades is busy dragging Maea and Yvraine to her torture sessions...pardon her ‘long and arduous Apprenticeship’.”

“She does. Better prepare yourself, my Empress. Once Aenaria Eldanesh is bored, she will likely return to the Arena of Blades for some sparring...”

“I will keep it in mind.” The eyes filled with stars made clear enough that the return of the Queen of Blades could wait for another cycle. “What are the conditions this time? And please do not say it in rhymes, I had that from Cegorach.”

“That bad?” Aurelia really, really tried to not laugh at the pout of her Empress...she was ready to swear she tried.

“It was not too bad, honestly,” the Victor of Commorragh and Macragge huffed. “His main goal was that I remove all my spiders from the Webway. That’s why I sent several Adjutant-Spiders with the clowns the moment the quarantine was over.”

“The ones that are busy grumbling about ‘furballs’ lately?”

“Don’t laugh too hard, High Priestess! These felines grow very big, very quickly, and most of them seem to have decided to be treated as ‘honoured deities’ by the Angel of Shadows and the Callidus.”

“You mean pets, surely?”

“No, I mean ‘honoured deities’. Thousands of years ago, on Mankind’s homeworld, the cats were worshipped as divine creatures, and by all evidence, the Frostlions and their kittens seem to be in agreement this situation is to continue.”

“In the eyes of Atharti...these beautiful creatures have really nice fur to caress, and I’m sure we can find a regimen of milk for the young ones...”

“You see? They have corrupted you too...or at least it’s what my spiders will pretend.”

“Ah...this isn’t entirely impossible. Setting aside this, one of the conditions to accept human settlement upon this jewel of tall forests and long shadows would be a place to create our own sanctum in the kingdom you rule over, so that we can create Slavhreenur from Noctilith.”

“*Salvation* for your Noctilith imbued with the power of Symbiosis?”

“You don’t like the name, my Empress?”

“No, no! It rings nice...I was just surprised.” There was a moment of hesitation. “Much like the Goddess hides herself in the light of the Emperor, you want your Salvation’s creation to be hidden in the Light of my Aethergold.”

“This is one of the many reasons I have in mind, yes.”

“Hmm...I don’t see why not, but it is a big favour, and don’t pretend the settlement of the Umbra groups upon a Maiden World would be enough to compensate. I will need a few things...”

Aurelia nodded and smiled. The real negotiations had just begun, praise Carnality and Symbiosis.

**Gloriana Battleship *Flamewrought***

**2.821.310M35**

**Rogue Trader Guts**

The Flamewrought was what everyone should dream when one said ‘warship’.

It had enormous batteries. Its guns were simply enormous even compared to his *Dragonslayer*! And yes, he was comparing the weapons of the Gloriana to his entire Assault Cruiser!

“Casca, Guts is drooling again. Strike him.

“Ouch! I didn’t drool!”

“You did.”

Fortunately – there had to be some luck here and there – they passed through a last Salamander-decorated hall and arrived to a relatively...modest room, with only a rectangular table and some hololithic projection.

Well, the room was modest, but there was a Living Saint dominating everything.

Guts didn’t think he was weak-willed, but for a second, it was really difficult to breathe correctly. And when he stared at her eyes...he turned away. It was just too much.

“Lord Solar Trevayne and the Band of the Hawk, your Celestial Highness!”

“So I see.” A military salute followed. “Lord Solar.”

“Lady General Militant.”

“The communications with the High Lords are going well?”

“For now. I’m speaking a lot with High Lord von Oberstein, and the High Twelve seems to appreciate the arrangement. There is...a great deal of political upheavals on the Throneworld.”

“I had the same impression.”

Even Guts, who was, as everyone in the Band would agree, not the most political-minded Hawk, knew there was far more to it than the words.

“But this can wait for another day. I see you brought the Rogue Traders of the Band of the Hawk.”

“And we weren’t told why,” Guts added before receiving an arm in his ribs, which hurt, since he wasn’t wearing any armour today, “your Celestial Highness.”

The Living Saint giggled.

“You are, Rogue Lords and Ladies, because right at this moment, Lord Solar Trevayne’s exact authority is...in a state of flux. You see, the authority of a Lord Solar is exactly equal to a Warmaster by tradition...as long as he commands or exerts his authority within the stellar limits of Segmentum Solar. Minus the Sol System, of course, for obvious reasons.”

And they were in the Macragge System, tens of thousands of light-years away from it.

“Does it means that the payment promises we were given are null and void?” Griffith asked cautiously.

“No. It just means that I, as a loyal servant of the Emperor is going to uphold said promises...unless you want several years for Lord Solar Trevayne to fulfil his, really.”

“Years?” Guts muttered. “It might take centuries, with the bureaucratic morons...”

And needless to say, the Dragonslayer and all the Band’s warships couldn’t wait for centuries that the Adepts allocated the funds. They had been wrecked by the Battle of Fenris, and the clashes after that had aggravated the problem.

This time Casca didn’t hit him. Maybe it was because it was the truth?

“Quite,” and the black-clothed Rogue Trader realised that despite his low tone, the woman who had slain Tyranids by the millions had perfectly heard him. “That’s why I’m going to repair your ships with one of my Star Forge Galleons. It might need some time, I’m afraid I can’t allow only one of them for your entire ‘Band of the Hawk’, and you the warship classes you use are not common, even by Rogue Trader standards. But by the end of it, I promise in my name, your ships will have their combat capabilities fully restored. They will also be refuelled and their ammunition stocks refilled.”

Even Griffith stared open-mouthed at the enormity of the proposal. This kind of ‘generous’ move was easily worth billions of whatever currency was in use in this part of the Imperium...that was the Macraggian Sesterces, no?

“That’s...err...yes, it will be excellent. Any...err...conditions?”

“I would appreciate if there are no more ships named Dragonslayer, in the near future,” the Living Saint said in a very amused voice. “My Minister of Industry and recently promoted Archmagos is called Dragon, you see, and she is really taking offense when someone calls a starship by that name.”

Everyone’s eyes naturally turned in his direction.

“First they denigrate my splendid Bellerophon Heavy Assault Cruiser, then that...” Guts bemoaned.

“I would be very interested to hear more about it.” Oh, oh... “Especially since most of the ones who remain Ultima Segmentum are in a very secure mothball shipyard of Kar Duniash, and the other Segmentum Fortresses have similar procedures. You must have been quite ingenious, Lord Guts, to acquire one.”

“Yes...” Casca hit him in the ribs. Guts shut up.

“Of course, the same applies to the class of Indrajit Heavy Cruisers, so I’m not going to be too inquisitive.”

This time it was the turn of Griffith to try to give an innocent face.

“But we’re not going to speak of those subjects today. Not when it is time for me to fulfil one of my promises. Artemis, music!”

“By your will, Webmistress!”

Dozens of musical instruments began to play at once, and all of them were quickly escorted to a monumental hall, where there were hundreds of Space Marines and grand officers of the Guard and the Navy...and suddenly Guts realised why they had all been told to come in grand uniform.

There was an altar at the other end of the hall.

There were Priests too.

White flowers were thrown on the Imperial red carpet, and the triumphant musical march got louder.

“Casca did you-“

Guts stopped, because a mere glance at the eyes of his lover told him that, yes, she had been informed.

This moment of distraction had been sufficient for the Living Saint to fly by the side of the Priests’, by the way.

“My dear children!” An ageing Priest declared with a large smile. “Let us be thankful to the God-Emperor, for we are all gathered here on this blessed day to celebrate the union of a man and a woman...”

**Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado***

**2.827.310M35**

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“Chosen of the Omnissiah, thank you for giving me this private audience so promptly.”

“You are the senior Archmagos of Operation Stalingrad, Archmagos. If I wasn’t here to hear you, I think that would lead to a great deal of questions throughout the fleet assembled here. Now let us skip the courtesies and all the prayers for now. We have multiple conferences to attend together, and a great number of Tech-Priests to reward for their exemplary service. I presume you have many concerns about the Tau?”

“You presume correctly, Chosen of the Omnissiah.” Gastaph replied grimly. “Their...alien nature is problematic, but the few Astropathic conversations coming from Ouralia are very concerning, indeed. I realise why there are many reasons you don’t want to burn them for their tech-heresies, but their behaviour when it comes to Abominable Intelligences is unacceptable.”

“Personally, there are a lot of things I found more worrying, Archmagos.”

That...didn’t reassure at all the Martian Tech-Priest.

“Such as?”

“Such as the reality the Tau elite scientists of the Earth Caste were trying to replicate a Warp Engine, and evidently didn’t know it had to be associated with Gellar Fields.”

“This is a poor attempt to humour me, Chosen of the Omnissiah...” Then Gastaph realised how serious the Lady of Nyx was. “This is not an attempt to humour me.”

“No, it is not. And to be painfully honest with you, it is only the most evident case my Adjutants found while I fought the so-called ‘Master of Shadows’. There are many other cases I was able to discern thanks to the tech-expertise I gained from having many Tech-Priests explaining their works to me in the last decades.”

“By the Great Cog,” Gastaph Hediatrix swore, “how is it possible that these xenos didn’t blow up their whole civilisation the moment they discovered how to build nuclear bomb?”

“If I had to guess, I would say it’s because the Ethereals were forcing what we would call ‘tyrannical unity’ among the four different Castes. And to be fair, it has some advantages. As long as their little Empire was alone, their pace of technological development offered many advantages. Dangerous experiments could be done on asteroid belts far away from anything valuable, and since they had not lost a single scrap of knowledge, a few failures were hardly problematic.”

“Ah. Yes, that would explain things. The problem would begin once they would...pull a Cawl, so to speak, and try to copy the work of other races. Incomplete understanding is more dangerous than no understanding at all.”

“Indeed, Archmagos. And there’s another thing to take into account. The power of the Ethereals was such that it reduced the risk of Abominable Intelligences turning against their masters. When their drones went rogue, they weren’t going to turn their guns against the soldiers of the Tau Empire. They often disappeared and no one asked the good questions.”

“That still relies on a colossal amount of luck. Sooner or later, it ends.” Mankind had learned it the very hard way when the Cybernetic Rebellion began and survival became the new imperative.

“Yes. This is why I ordered Archmagos Lankovar to go personally to Tau and explain exactly why many actions of the Earth Caste are perfectly suicidal in the long-term...assuming they don’t kill them in the short-term, of course.”

“A good beginning, though I will suggest some Magi under my authority too, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“By all means,” the new Lady General Militant nodded. “A few more precautions can’t hurt. Many achievements of the Tau Empire are noteworthy in their own right. They have developed a lot of technology which gives their population a high-standard of living. In military fields, they have produced Plasma, Ion, and Railgun-type weapons, both for ground-based and space-based use. But before I even consider giving a small Tau gun into an infantryman’s hands, I want to make sure the whole affair has no chance to blow up in our hands...literally.”

This reassured a lot Gastaph, and he was sure the majority of the Tech-Priests present in the Nyx Sector and those who participated in this campaign would approve wholeheartedly. They would verify and re-verify, test and re-test, and make countless checks with Aethergold...and for the Tau, maybe some Bacta too.

“The same conditions apply to the *Spirit of Eternity*?”

“In a certain manner...I would insist you focus on the data the AI released into my hands. With an Aethergold-protected gold, Warp corruption isn’t an issue, and as long as the crew and their silicate-made companion respect their part of the accord, I will respect mine.”

“I will select more Tech-Priests to make sure the vigilance of the Mechanicus is at all-times high.” The Archmagos Prime promised. “And that leads me to another subject that is reminding me of Commorragh. Many Forge Worlds representatives are asking when we will create copies for the holy STCs templates you have in your custody, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“I’m so glad to hear that the Battle of Macragge and fighting so many horrors hasn’t changed the priorities of many Tech-Priests, Archmagos...”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Skavenblight**

**Academy of Sublime Treachery**

**Temporal Anomaly – Total Anarchy – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Daemon-Primarch Omegon**

There were things that should be impossible even in the Eye of Terror. A planet stopped from colliding with another by a slim pillar of green crystals should be one of said things.

What he was sensing and perceiving with his elevated senses proved that it wasn’t.

**This was always part of my plan. Do not doubt me!**

**Fenris was supposed to be disintegrated!**

**We had to stop it before sending it to crash against Medrengard!**

**The crystals are the wrong colour!**

If there was one thing Omegon truly missed since he had been torn apart and remodelled to serve as the Daemon Primarch of the much insane deity calling itself Malal, it was silence.

There wasn’t a single heartbeat where he was free within what vaguely could be considered his ‘mind’.

The Primarch was really missing it.

And it was gone forever.

There were Gods that left their slaves more or less in peace as long as they accomplished their will, but the Horned Beast wouldn’t give him that please.

It *couldn’t* give him that pleasure.

Malal was Anarchy.

Giving him several heartbeats or whatever short moment of peace a living species would recognise...it would imply that the countless voices of the Beast would agree on *something*.

**The planet was stopped too close from Skavenblight!**

**The ritual was adequate for my purposes!**

**It is far too distant to give a proper sense of awe from my loyal vermin!**

That was what Omegon was dealing with every second.

The Twentieth Primarch wasn’t going to deny it had its advantages. The prime example of it was his name. Anarchy had wanted to change it back to ‘Alpharius’ at first. Some other Aspects had proposed other names, some which made his essence shudder in horror.

But in the end, Malal had not been able to decide which course was the best. The ‘debate’ – more like a vociferous quarrel arbitrated by thousands of Skaven ‘philosophers’ – was continuing and showing no sign of ever reaching an outcome.

So he was still Omegon.

**I persist to say Rumpelstiltskin is a fine name.**

**No! We must call him Alpharius!**

**Why not Verminus Primarch? It is his function!**

In many other ways, he hadn’t been so lucky. Yes, he wasn’t crippled or enduring agonising pain because of the Phosphex Guilliman had deployed against him at Eskrador, but it was a very small consolation.

Omegon had to watch powerlessly as more and more Legionnaires of the Twentieth were falling to Anarchy. It didn’t matter if it was in the Eye of Terror or elsewhere; each time one of his sons was succumbing to the relentless pressure of Malal, the Beast made sure he saw it like he was a spectator...and then got the overwhelming sensation of *pleasure*.

The Alpha Legion was no more. The Anarchy Legion was on the rise, and many Harrowmasters had already rallied other Traitor Legions before Malal could use its baleful...its holy influence to drag them into its clawed embrace.

The worst part was it was less and less disturbing for him personally.

Omegon knew that meant Anarchy was changing whatever remained of him.

Or maybe it was that never having a moment of silence was going to turn him insane step after step.

The possibilities weren’t worth rejoicing.

**A Skaven Crusade must be launched immediately! I will-will it!**

**No! Summon the Council! We must kill at least five of them for grotesque heresy and trumped-up charges!**

**The priority is to humiliate Weaver, yes-yes!**

**We must deal-deal with Guilliman!**

**Death to Corax! He offended me-me greatly!**

At times like this, Omegon knew it was easy to see why his father had thought a plan to let Anarchy become the Fourth Power instead of Slaanesh was good.

Unlike the former Goddess of Excess, there was not a single thought of long-term planning with the Beast...or if there was, it was drowned by a monumental cacophony of discordant voices.

It was **Anarchy**.

Now if only his appearance didn’t reflect that...

His essence was fundamentally unable to take a stable form.

He had thought Magnus and other servants of Tzeentch had it bad, but even the God of Change sometimes delighted in imperceptible changes where his slaves were concerned. Slightly altering the colour of the eyes, for example, or adding a finger here and there.

Omegon had not that chance. In the time it took him to walk four steps, he had grown four tails, lost one, then two more grew, before all of them fell down.

No wonder the Astartes of the new Anarchy Legion, half-insane or not, stayed well clear of him.

At the best of times, he was a white-black armoured colossus with a rat head and multiple appendages having no purpose, spitting acidic venom, spreading a torrent of corruption wherever he went.

It required an effort of will to be that ‘orderly’. When he didn’t bother, Omegon’s outer essence did not differ greatly from a Chaos Spawn.

He stopped thinking it after a while.

His thought returned to the world which had been called Fenris.

The desperate combination of rituals, monstrously weird weapons, plus some things even his anarchic mind had still to process had stopped the planetary collision.

For how long...the Beast of Anarchy had not given him the answer to that question.

The two planets were now tied by a gigantic pillar of black-green crystals. It was not Warpstone, but Omegon was sure the Skavens and other races having succumbed to Anarchy would find uses for it.

If for the moment no one had been stupid enough to bring explosives against the pillar itself, Fenris itself standing above Skavenblight was covered in it, a ‘cocoon’ that seemed to radiate with the sheer power of Anarchy itself.

Naturally, several wars were already raging everywhere.

As the cowardly rats had quickly discovered, the best efforts of Russ and Corax to exterminate all life on Fenris had not been completely successful.

Some Tyranid lifeforms had survived.

All of them were feral now, but that hardly made them inoffensive, and a Carnifex could butcher and eat thousands of Skavens per day.

This didn’t bother the voices raging inside his essence.

The Skavens’ numbers were uncountable, and many ragtag starships had already catapulted towards other planets of the Eye.

Anarchy couldn’t be killed by a single decapitation strike anymore.

And as his current seventeen eyes fell upon a white-furred Skaven, the voices grew more strident.

**Something must be done about this vermin. He failed to heed our orders in the Galactic Core.**

**His efforts to please Anarchy are amusing.**

**His time is past. We have much greater and better servants now.**

**Give-give him another chance, yes-yes! More-more Anarchy!**

As usual, Anarchy was undecided.

And that left the Skaven sorcerer prostrating itself.

The white-furred Skaven which was more than anyone responsible for stopping Fenris above their heads, though it was in reality an attempt to usurp the Council and eleven great conspiracies gone wrong at the same time.

“Mighty Great One! Your mighty-humble servant Thanquol is here-here!”

The voices continued to bicker...and Omegon decided that he might as well decide to have his fun. The galaxy had forsaken him. His father had warned him, and he had chosen to disregard the advice.

There was nothing left but **Anarchy...**and **Chaos**.

“**Proud and dedicated anarchists of Skavenblight**!” Omegon’s voice thundered across the mess of ruins and incredibly fragile spires erected since the Word Bearers abandoned the planet. “**We have our Champion!”**

Billions of eyes instantly turned towards them...or more accurately, they stared hatefully at Thanquol.

The white-furred Skaven squirmed, and his fear...his fear was delicious.

“Give me-me your orders, Mighty Great One! I will obey-obey! Praise Anarchy!”

“**You will lead the hordes of Anarchy to the Calyx Hell Stars!”**

And after this sentence, Omegon suddenly realised the voices had fallen silent. Whether it was from shock of him taking an initiative or for another reason, the Daemon Primarch didn’t know...or didn’t care.

“Yes, Mighty Great One!”

“**You will spread Anarchy**!”

“Yes, Mighty Great One!”

“**And you will kill the King in Yellow, or I will eat your tail myself**!”

“What-what? I mean, yes-yes, Mighty Great One!”

“**Do not disappoint me, Champion of Skavenblight**!”

Omegon was teleported away before he could say more.

But before he was spirited away, he could hear the voices again.

And they were all laughing and screeching in approval.