**Ovation Interlude**

**Monsters and Nightmares**

*My dear Taylor Hebert, I have excellent news for you.*

*Lorgar is reacting exactly like you wanted him to behave, and he pushed Magnus to support him as well.*

*Oh no, I have no spies in his inner circle. The last wizard to try it is still screaming in the torture chambers of the* Trisagion*.*

*But no spies are really necessary when one can hear his tantrums in the Immaterium and the concentration of military forces gathered under his banner is getting larger day after day. Unless the priest-commander of the Word Bearers intend to attack Abaddon the Despoiler and challenge him for the title of Warmaster, his ambitions can only begin with the Cadian Gate.*

*To misquote an Aleph movie, war will arrive promptly in this system. The gauntlet was thrown, and the reinforcements dispatched by the High Lords to the Fortress Worlds have obviously goaded him further upon this course.*

*But I don’t give you any new information, I’m sure. For two short moments, you illuminated the darkness during the Battle of Commorragh. You illuminated the abyss, where no mortal had ever dared bringing the Anathema’s Light. Furthermore, you sent the old rat curse of a long dead age to Sicarus. You may have obeyed only the orders of your crippled master upon his Golden Throne at first, but it evolved rapidly from there. Your deeds, you alliances, and your hopes will break the Imperium’s slow decline and the current rapport of strength between the Imperium and the enemies opposing it.*

*Lorgar can’t afford to give you one more century of rearming, reforms, and hope. He could have waited a bit longer if the rat infestation wasn’t there, but as it stands, his ‘Grand Armada of Chaos’ has a very limited timetable to strike or everything he believes in will be lost.*

*For this is the dying Emperor’s plan, and yours, truly.*

*A Black Crusade is by definition the alliance of the Three-Who-Were-Once-Four. A Black Crusade is Undivided Chaos, or at least a temporary agreement to tend towards that goal. Lorgar is the self-proclaimed Champion of Undivided Chaos. His powerbase in the Great Game can’t survive, unlike Abaddon and other warlords of the Eye of Terror. Not if the rats succeed in claiming Sicarus or a significant place of worship in the heart of the greatest Warp Storm of this galaxy, awakening their God of Anarchy beyond any possibility of suppression.*

*This was a devilish choice you gave him, oh destroyer of Commorragh.*

*Either watch as the Horned God rose on the ashes of his precious temples and watch his precious Pantheon accept a deity in their midst which will make cooperation between the Gods impossible, or try a decisive gambit to destroy Anarchy and put back the genies back into the bottle where they were solidly trapped before you annihilated the post-Fall Drukhari civilisation.*

*If the Custodes gave you enough information on Lorgar, you knew it wasn’t a choice at all for him. The gene-sire of the Word Bearers is a fanatic where his convictions are at stake. I don’t know if it was something gene-crafted by his creator or a malign poison the Gods infected him with when they sent him to Colchis, but this is the reality and the outcome was decided before the first attack on the* Templum Officio*.*

*The Imperium will face the Black Crusade, perhaps the last one in its existence, and you will have a gigantic host of enemy Astartes where you can fight and kill them in a single campaign, burning the dead branches of the Imperial tree which need to be pruned before the new age begins.*

*Two words of warning though, Queen of the Swarm. Do not underestimate Lorgar. His plans are based on a lot of flawed assumptions and millennia spent stewing on existent and non-existent wrongs done to him, but he is still a Daemon-Primarch. When he strikes, it will be with the strength of a Legion and the greatest alliance of Astartes and Neverborn since Horus was killed.*

*And do not think the Three are going to be less redoubtable when it comes to confront you. My Patron and the other Two will be to protect their most important followers from the ravages of Anarchy at all times. Divided the hosts of the Eye and the cultists will be, but a new ‘order’ will soon emerge...until the next war.*

*Because in many ways, this conflict is only the first step for you, isn’t it? It is the great clash before you go back to Mankind’s Cradle.*

*Many Lords of Change don’t believe it is within your capabilities.*

*I believe otherwise.*

*A daughter of Terra must return and deliver salvation or damnation to the Throneworld. One of us must kneel before the Anathema and hear the story of our rise and fall.*

*Because when it comes to it...Parahumans and Primarchs are not that different.*

*I am Malicia the Destiny Unwritten now, Angel of Sacrifice. I will wait for you where even daemons fear to tread.*

\*\*\*\*

From: Agent E-2649VI5

To: [CLASSIFIED BY INQUISITORIAL ORDER]

Clearance: Vermillion

*My Lord,*

*Your suspicions were right. The Traitor Seventeenth has accelerated its preparations. Their agents are seemingly everywhere in the Eye, and are recruiting or enslaving millions of mutants and abominable things that I won’t name here.*

*More worrying is the sheer number of Traitor warbands and the warships answering the call of these monsters. At least one representative for every Traitor Legion has sworn itself to [REDACTED] cause. The number of capital ships is frightening no matter how one looks at it. The sources employed are unreliable in the extreme, but I have been able to confirm over sixty Battleships and ten Grand Cruisers are repaired or in construction in the pit of horrors that is Sicarus.*

*Given how difficult it is to spy upon these heretics, I must concede there are likely more fleets and corrupted hulls waiting into secret shipyards that I have been unable to locate.*

*The industrial effort to sustain this military expansion is absolutely massive and can only be directed at one target. There is no other conceivable reason to equip tens of thousands Traitor Astartes and hold them back in a single location. Add the presence of Chaos Knights and Extremis Traitoris Titan Legions, and there can’t be no doubt left.*

*My Lord, there hasn’t been- [SCREAMS]. You must- [RECORDING PARTIALLY DAMAGED]*

*They are coming. They are coming. Warn Cadia, for the love of the God-Emperor. The heretics are returning to the Cadian Gate and- [SOUNDS OF FIGHTING]*

***WE ARE COMING! WE ARE COMING SLAVES OF THE FALSE EMPEROR!***

*[ABORTED TRANSCRIPT; EXTREME CORRUPTION; AGENT E-2649VI5 DECLARED LOST]*

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**90th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**EKODAS**

**‘APOSTLE OF DESTRUCTION’**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

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

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

**REWARD: 20 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 3 PLANETS**

\*\*\*\*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

Thought for the day: Peace is Hell.

**Grand Apostle Ekodas**

“I hate these damned rats.”

Ekodas had an enormous amount of self-control, one had to be to be a senior member of the Dark Council, but the imprecation had to be released, and his fury abated, if only for a short while.

And he was doing trampling the corpses of dozens of giant rats, one of the few therapeutic methods he had found to work since this war had begun.

The Grand Apostle uttered a word and hundreds more of vermin corpses were liquefied, creating a torrent of blood which would run to the prepared altars. At least that way Khorne would be satisfied. The souls of the rats were repugnant and unsatisfying for the envoys of the Gods, but blood was blood, and the Throne of Skulls did not care whose blood flowed on Sicarus, only that the life-force of beings poured out of their veins.

“It was a great one-sided victory, my Lord,” his Coryphaus spoke, advancing carefully amid the unending mountain of rat corpses.

It was also a useless victory, and they both knew it.

Battles like the one they had just fought were basically achieving nothing, for they were fought on the surface of Sicarus, where the rat commanders, their spawning pits, and their hazardous armament manufactorums were never to be found.

“Yes, if one discounts these rats should have never been here in the first place.”

The Cathedral and the Bastion of the Black Scalpel were the heart of a fortified city where until today, the vermin had failed to make any inroads. Most slaves had been Possessed to make sure the slaves of Anarchy had no possibility to teach them their heretical beliefs. Skulls had been modified to play the role of vigilant sentinels.

Living and non-living guardians had been mustered in the thousands to play the role of garrison. Pacts had been made. Sacrifices had bled. And all of this had proven futile in the end. Despite the security measures, despite the seismographs and the other blessed devices to ensure no tunnel creation came as a surprise, a rat army had nonetheless managed to break through and he had to come in person with a thousand warriors to eradicate them.

“Do I begin to assemble a reprisal force for an invasion of the tunnels?”

“Yes, do so,” Ekodas approved the suggestion of his Coryphaus. “We can’t afford to let the vermin believe they’ve struck a significant blow.”

They had, though. The infrastructure damage was really minimal, but his forces would have to be reinforced in this Sector, and for all the blessings and the pacts he had made, Ekodas was very well-aware the strength of his host was limited. The longer this conflict lasted, the more veterans and slave-soldiers were pulled out of Sicarus to participate in the armament preparations of the Grand Armada of Undivided Chaos.

“Can I try a new tactic this time?”

Ekodas tried not to look too incredulous.

“What is this ‘new tactic’, Coryphaus? If I remember correctly, so far we tried summoning Bloodthirsters into the rats’ warrens,” and discovered the hard way how unstable the damnable ‘Warpstone’ was in proximity of major summoning, “conventional field battles, trapping the tunnels, the Scheme of the Eight Major Blood Lakes, the Litany of the Nine Lies, and the Ferric Plague.”

Ekodas thought about it for a second or two before adding for himself.

“Amongst other schemes and tactics.”

Field battles never worked, obviously. Over half of the rat armies fled into their tunnels when defeat was evident. Summoning the children of the Great Ocean often failed, either because the Warpstone explosions banished them, or the vermin refused to bow down to the majesty of the Pantheon and drowned them by the numbers. The rituals blessed by Tzeentch were a hindrance more than a help, as the rats fought themselves more than they did his armies and therefore didn’t need really an excuse to turn on each other. Targeting the leadership was useless: they had sacked and annihilated over twenty times the headquarters of leaders pretending to be ‘the True Council of Eleven’, only for another Council to resurface afterwards.

Releasing new plagues and anti-rats gasses and neurotoxins had pleased Bountiful Nurgle immensely...until the rats developed their own version of ‘Plague Priests’, that they had apparently called ‘Clan Pestilens’.

This had been the end of ‘new tactics’ from their side, because the last thing the Word Bearers needed, in his modest opinion, was to give worse ideas to the rats. The heretical creatures were already far too crazy and prompt to try to kill them in explosions of green flames to risk them reverse-engineering new assets of mass destruction.

“We have received new tunnel boring machines, courtesy of one of the Iron Warrior warbands. I intend to use them for a surgical strike.”

Ekodas hadn’t the strength to muster any kind of enthusiasm.

“You have my permission...under the condition that none of the machines are abandoned into the claws of the vermin this time.”

On Sicarus and against the rats, this meant powerful self-destruction warheads.

“I will make sure of it.”

“Good.”

Ekodas watched the partially damaged Cathedral and Bastion, trying to notice something, anything, which would tell him this damnable war was going to end in his favour.

He didn’t find one. Holy Colchis was crawling with giant rats, and though he and his armies killed millions with each gory dawn, there were tens of millions more ready to replace them. It was an infestation...and discontent and doubts were rife within his ranks.

Such was the state of his thoughts when a portal was activated and one of the souls he loathed the most stepped through.

“Erebus.”

“*Hand of Destiny* Erebus,” the Vile One chided him with this smug smile one always dreamed to make disappear with a series of powerful armoured fists. Repeatedly. “It seems you have a little problem obeying the orders our father gave you.”

Any other Dark Apostle, Ekodas would have been more cordial if only to wait to unleash a good ritual in his face and let his soul be devoured by a Neverborn.

With Erebus though, there was no playing this game.

“I have not invited you in my area of operations. Begone.” Over two hundred of his warriors had encircled the bastard as they spoke, ready to open fire at the first excuse.

“No, no, no, my poor Ekodas! You have failed, and our father isn’t in the mood to tolerate your failures anymore. Report to him immediately.” A scroll was launched at him, and the Grand Apostle of the Dark Council gritted his teeth in fury and the bleeding words confirmed the order. “Your forces will stay here under my command, naturally.”

Ekodas didn’t need to bother re-reading the document to know this point of order wasn’t part of his Primarch’s commands.

“You can always try to take them by force, *Erebus*,” Ekodas spat markedly on the ground. Even if he wasn’t a leader of the Brotherhood whose goal was to purge the Legion of the Vile One’s influence, he would never have left his warriors and his resources under this betrayer’s oversight. For those who believed it was a nice idea, there were the examples of Calth, Nuceria, and a hundred more worlds to point at. “My Host and my allies won’t help you. I would rather go pledge myself to a Black Legion warband than allow my warriors to serve you.”

And for the record, Ekodas hated the very thought of allying himself with the Black Legion, this band of upstarts which had abandoned all dignity for a false brotherhood of broken Legionnaires.

“Careful,” the slime whispered. “Your star is not ascendant anymore, my dear Grand Apostle.”

“I could tell you to be careful,” Ekodas countered. “But I really want to see you eaten piece by piece by a million gangrenous rats before I take your corpse to my dungeons and spend a few eternities working on your soul. Have fun with this war, *Erebus*. I’m done with it.”

The Grand Apostle didn’t turn his back on the Vile One, nor did any of his Word Bearers, of course. No one presented his back to Erebus, not unless you had a death wish.

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**8th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**EREBUS**

**‘THE VILE ONE’**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT TO ELIMINATE THIS SLIME**

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

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS COWARDLY IN THE EXTREME AND HAS BEEN NOTED TO FLEE AS SOON AS EVENTS DO NOT TURN IN HIS FAVOUR**

**REWARD: 5 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF ‘AVENGER OF CALTH’ AWARDED, VOTE OF THE HIGH LORDS FOR A TRIUMPH, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**82nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**JARULEK**

**‘APOSTLE OF LIES’**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

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

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

**REWARD: 57 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, SEAT ON THE HOLY OPHELIAN SYNOD, 1 CARDINAL STELLAR SYSTEM, 1 FRATERIS TEMPLAR ARMY GROUP AND SUPPORT FLEET, ETC...**

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**The Eye of Terror**

**Illumination Shipyards – outer Sicarus System**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

“Kelbor-Hal certainly intends to fulfil his part of the pact.”

Much like Kol Badar hated to agree with this runt of Marduk on anything, in this instance the Coryphaus was willing to concede the Dark Acolyte was not completely in the wrong.

At least the deployment of strength in the Illumination Shipyards was impressive enough, both for veteran and ignorant eyes.

Before the proclamation of their Primarch that the Grand Armada was to be mustered, there had been a few dispersed shipyards in the asteroids, at least capable to supply one minor Host and some. But now, the scene was a spectacle of implacable space industry and forges of wars. Dock after dock could be seen as far as optical augmentations and Astartes eyes were able to, and all were filled to the brink with the most formidable machines of war ever built by the Hell-Lords of the Mechanicum.

Ranks after ranks of Infernus-class Battleships were completed at speeds ranging from insane to miraculous. Desolators and Battle-Barges had their own construction sites, and between them Executor and Avenger-class Grand Cruisers were modified or outright rebuilt from the keel up. Hades, Styx, and Hecate Heavy Cruisers stolen from forgotten mothballed fleets of the False Emperor were beginning a new glorious career in the True Legions. Nor were the ‘lesser’ Cruisers neglected: Murder, Carnage, Slaughter, Inferno, Hellbringer and other classes of Strike Cruisers were all present here.

For each Battleship they had here, at least four or five capital ships could be added to the order of battle. And for each capital ship to be built or repaired, the Word Bearers would have a flotilla of Escorts and Attack Craft, not to forget the Heldrakes and their modified Starfighters and flying Daemon Engines to add weight to their salvoes.

Kol Badar had thought at first the name ‘Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided’ to be a bit of a mouthful, but as the firepower mustered here was revealed in all its terrible glory, the Coryphaus had to admit he was maybe a bit too hasty.

More than one hundred Battleships. Dozens of Grand Cruisers and Battlecruisers. Hundreds of Cruisers of all tonnage. According to rumours, the number of Heldrakes hibernating in the interstices of the warships’ hulls was over two hundred thousand. The escorts and the attack craft were simply uncountable. Entire hordes of daemons laughed and fought nearby to possess the Daemon Engines which would conduct the great slaughter.

“We will see. Sota-Nul came with a lot of forces, I will give her that.”

And the former Emissary of Horus was not shy about parading her forces so that they acknowledged her ‘generous’ contribution. The ‘Hell Forge-Mistress’ had moved to Sicarus with thirty capital ships, including one hull which may have started as an Ark Mechanicus – but which had grown far beyond that in the last millennia – three Titan-Arks, two Heavy-Battleships, and some other ships which had to be unique designs originally developed inside her tenebrous mind.

“Jealous of the Titans she is bringing to our cause, Coryphaus?”

One more time, Kol Badar was vindicated in his thirst of vengeance against the perfidious weakling which had killed his blood brother. Marduk was japing and whining, and could only kill a true warrior when somebody else had already weakened him.

The worm could laugh for now, but he didn’t know what Jarulek had promised him...

“No, not at all,” the veteran of Terra answered. “I don’t need Titans to crush everything on the battlefield.”

“Oh? Then why did I hear you had concerns about the newly assembled 2nd Great Host?”

Sometimes, Kol Badar wondered who he wanted to kill the most: Marduk or the informants who whispered to him every action he made in his duties of Coryphaus. Every time, the conclusion was the same: it was Marduk he loathed the most. The others would get their just deserts once he put the runt’s head on a spike.

“Concern is such a strong word. I was explaining to the other Coryphaus the will of Dark Apostle Jarulek.”

In fact, these were true concerns, but he wasn’t going to tell the run *that*.

The problem, when the Primarch had ordered the Grand Armada to be reorganised into eight Great Hosts, was the fact most of the pre-existing Word Bearers Hosts had not fought together since Terra. And for some formations, it was even further into the past.

As a result, manoeuvring each Host to be a united whole again was...problematic. The 34th Host had been better than most in the coordination of super-formations, as they had over one thousand and four hundred warriors, but others weren’t so lucky. And anyway, mustering one thousand and four hundred Astartes wasn’t the same as deploying twenty-eight thousand Word Bearers.

Joy of joys, the 2nd Great Host had been given to his Lord Jarulek, but they had to endure the presence of the Sons of Horus, the arrogant sons who had failed when all the Legions counted on them and fled Terra like curs.

Kol didn’t like Drecarth the Sightless and his lieutenants. They thought they knew everything about war, but under the symbol of the Eye, their shame and cowardice was there for all to see. They were barely above Marduk the runt in that regard.

By the Gods, why did they didn’t send Horus’ spawns and threw them against the walls of Cadia as cannon-fodder? It wasn’t like they were going to be missed...

“But if you want to hide in a Titan, don’t worry Dark Acolyte. I won’t tell anything to our Lord.”

Kol could almost feel the fury burning behind the eyes and the face of the runt.

“I will-“

“Is everything proceeding according to my plans, my Coryphaus?”

“It is,” Kol Badar smiled, as the Anointed he commanded took position around Dark Apostle Jarulek, Blessed by the Gods, Chosen by Holy Lorgar to command the 2nd Great Host of the Grand Armada of Undivided Chaos. “The Host is awaiting your pleasure. We were merely...conversing about the war potential of our Mechanicum allies and the assets they brought with them.”

“Ah yes. Sota-Nul and her Legio Vulturum.”

This was the strongest weapon in the Hell Forge-Mistress’ arsenal, yes.

“She brought the Knight Houses of Morbidia and Vextrix.” Knights were the lesser cousins of the Titans, but in great numbers, they were extremely dangerous, and Sota-Nul had convinced one hundred-plus of the war suits to accept her ‘patronage’. “But I will admit, it is the Gore Crows which will be the true hammer once we need to break the walls the lackeys of the False Emperor fight behind.”

Rare were the Titan Legions which once followed the Warmaster to survive in their original numbers into the Eye. Most of them had dispersed into various splinter factions. There were exceptions, however. One of them was the Legio Mortis, serving Abaddon the Despoiler.

The Legio Vulturum, formerly sworn to Xana, now following Sota-Nul, was clearly another.

Kol felt...wary about it. Ninety Titans were a force which could destroy entire star clusters if properly wielded, but that Sota-Nul, not Kelbor-Hal, commanded them was in his opinion a clue something was wrong. The former Master of the Red Planet had not exactly been trusting his subordinates with large Titan commands during the war to topple the False Emperor; that he did know was a contradiction by itself.

And the Legio Vulturum was visibly augmented and modified by xenos technology, not the blessings of the Gods.

“They will indeed be useful for the Great Plan.” Jarulek gave him a thin smile. “Ah, I believe Sota-Nul is going to present us her biggest creation...now.”

Kol Badar didn’t smile, not as the biggest Titan he had ever seen became visible.

Legio Vulturum wasn’t the Legio Audax; it was extremely ‘top-heavy’, possessing few of the ‘light titans’ like the Warhound class, and on the contrary deploying great numbers of Reavers and Warlords.

But the machine on its way to be paraded made the classic Battle-Titans look like mid-sized projects.

Its arms were gigantic cannons of a model the Coryphaus had not seen before. Its head was a skull bigger than the entire body of a Knight. Its legs were pillars of ceramite, adamantium, and terrifying technology.

From armoured feet to the upper-fortified castle, the Titan was fortified so massively that even super-heavy tanks had no chance of collapsing its multi-layered shields.

It was a mountain built to crush armies single-handedly.

It was an Imperator-class Titan, the machine Tech-Priests worshipped as an avatar of their God, be they the True Mechanicum or the petty fools who toiled in the name of the False Emperor.

“I wasn’t aware Xana had managed to build Titans of that size,” Marduk the runt admitted.

“As far as I’m aware, they only built a handful of them; they preferred the Reavers and the Warlords.” Kol maintained a facade of civility. “This one may be the last surviving one. Behold *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, the Maw of Xenocide.”

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Approaches of the Svalbard Sector**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Kroozer ‘*Rockwaagh*’**

**9.339.299M35**

**Uber-Mekboy Brukk ‘X-Rock’ Brukk POV**

Not the time to say ‘ere we go!’, and the metal-heads were already boarding them!

That was fun! That was Vallawaagh!

“GIVE THEM HELLZ BOYZ!” Brukk roared, grabbing the first shoota available and smashing it against the awesome big green gun of the Necron. “FOR GORK AND MORK! WAAGGH!”

“WAAGGH!”

The Boyz and his favourite squib didn’t need more to roar and charge the funny metal-heads. They had big guns! The metal-heads were so funny with their ‘surrender and die’. But the Orks were da best!

“FIRST DA METAL-HEADS, SECONDZ DA SWARM BRINGA!” The Mekboy shouted, strapping hurriedly his new ‘bigga gun’ with ‘da sonik cannon’. Brukk had built it to shoot down insects, but metal-heads worked too!

One by one, the boarders vanished in green fun and explosions.

“BOSS! Somethingz shooting at us!”

“WHERE?”

Something violent hit and the *Rockwaagh* shook...shook a lot.

“WHAT ‘AS THAT?”

“DA MOON!”

Brukk laughed.

“LOOK DA THAT BOYZ! DA METAL-HEADS HAVZ A’ WAAGH MOON!” The Mekboy raised his sonik cannon above his head. “LETZ GOEZ TAKE ITZ!”

“WAAGGH!”

“WAAGGH!”

The Boyz shouted. The Boyz fired their weapons and began to prepare for the scrap of their lives.

“LOADZ THE TORPEDOEZ TUBS! ENGINZ SPEED MAX-RED! CANNONZ FIREZ! The Ork commander barked. “GORK OR DA SWARM BRINGA! WAAGGH!”

“WAAAGH!”

**Vargard Obyron**

According to the manifesto spread by the Szarekhan Dynasty, the Great Sleep had been a supposedly infallible plan of the Silent King to guarantee the Necrons would endure while the mortal races would perish to the ravages of time and galactic disasters.

Obyron had barely woken up, and he could see this statement was worth exactly as much as the promises of Mephet’ran the Deceiver, which was to say none.

“WAAAGH!”

Obyron teleported himself behind the gigantic green brute and decapitated it, claiming his twenty-fifth significant kill of the skirmish.

“Enemy leader down.” The Sautekh officer said curtly. “Formation Two-One-Tekh. Execute.”

His soldiers were the elite of Gidrim. They didn’t miss. Five seconds later, they weren’t any living beings inside the dangerously instable hull, and he had lost no troops in the violent skirmish. The engines were sabotaged in record time, and the starship was thrown into the enemy formation, out of control and no longer representing a threat to any Necron phalanx.

“The first part of your plan is accomplished, my suzerain,” Obyron said after teleporting back. “I’m afraid the enemy failed to recognise the generosity of your surrender conditions, however.”

Obyron hadn’t bothered to ask more than once for the sake of it, truly. These greenskins were more barbaric and less intelligent than the Krorks, but ‘surrender’ was not in their vocabulary.

And if Overlord Zahndrekh had been himself, he would have recognised it.

“Stubborn secessionists!” the old Necron grumbled. “Look at them, Obyron! They are advancing in a dispersed Khardatopek formation. Do they really think that painting their ships red and bathing themselves in green paint is going to change anything at the outcome of this battle?”

Obyron nodded half in resignation, half in sadness.

There were many reasons the Great Sleep had been an utterly stupid idea that only a Szarekhan mind could have imagined. Tomb-Worlds had been destroyed, that much had been clear, despite how prompt the Triarch enforcers were at silencing the murmurs of discontent. Resurrection systems were malfunctioning. Old and new enemies continued to plague this galaxy. The superiority of Necron phalanxes and fleets, won in millions of battles, had been forgotten as millions of years were spent in stasis.

But for Obyron, the harshest blow was the mental damage suffered by his suzerain.

Overlord Zahndrekh had emerged from the Great Sleep ‘apparently’ sound of mind. Except of course, his master believed he was still a Necrontyr of the pre-bio-transference times. One might have thought facing the greenskins would have corrected this in short order, but no. From his perspective, these were not barbaric brutes, but Secessionist Necrontyrs they were facing on the battlefield.

Obyron didn’t know if he should feel relief or sadness at seeing his suzerain in such a state. Relief would be because a lot of Gidrim nobles had emerged in a far worse mental state, when they had been revived at all. The Vargard had been forced to put down a large number of them by his own blade.

The sadness was because Zahndrekh was more than his suzerain; he was the one who had believed in Obyron when he was a mere young recruit born of peasant stock. Obyron owed Zahndrekh everything: his life, his long military career, and his political support.

They had survived the bloodiest battles of the War in Heaven together. They had endured the psychic maelstroms of the Old Ones, escaped the wrath of demented C’Tan, and challenged indomitable enemies.

Zahndrekh was...the Overlord was his suzerain. It pained him more than life itself to see him like this.

“Why are you not advancing to exterminate the vermin?” a Szarekhan commander barked in his back.

Then again, not seeing the galaxy as it was had its advantages. The stars and the planets knew the Szarekhan had not stopped being cruel masters after something as short and insignificant as the Great Sleep.

“Patience, Herald. The secessionists must be placed in the correct ground at the correct moment.”

The other noble scoffed.

“They had told me how low you’d fallen, Zahndrekh, but I’d not believed them until now. I think I should summon a few Deathmarks to get rid of your old carcass. For the-”

Obyron feigned to inspect a Warscythe of his own forces before throwing it like a projectile weapon and impaling the insolent who had dared threaten his suzerain. If the command protocols had been active, it would have been futile to attempt, and possibly suicidal, but the King’s command protocols were not activated, and the Szarekhan nobles were pathetic both in their security and their martial prowess.

The imbecile was so sure of his capacities he had not noticed the Deathmarks and the Wraiths were already disintegrated by Obyron’s security measures. Did he really think they were allowing each and every scoundrel aboard the Battleships of the Sautekh Dynasty?

“Obyron, I know he harboured Secessionist tendencies, but it is no way to treat a Herald!”

“My suzerain, I am only concerned about your safety!”

“Obyron...ah, the secessionists have finally decided to commit themselves!”

It was a way to look at it, yes. Another would be to describe it as a gigantic rampage of countless warships which all tried to go in the same direction.

“My warriors!” Zahndrekh shouted. “One day we will see loyalty rekindled and the old errors of the past purged! One day old feuds and inter-Dynasty quarrels will cease! Secessionism must not win this day! Secessionist can’t win this day! For the Necrontyrs are greater than one petty tyrant, taller than the arid valleys of a radioactive planet! Divided we will fall! Together we will survive and from our humble origins rise again, nobler and stronger! FOR UNITY!”

“FOR UNITY!” The Necrons of Gidrim still self-aware to be moved by the speech shouted back.

The Battleships and Cruisers accelerated to face the greenskins, and Obyron waited for new orders.

Because for all his suzerain’s mental issues, Zahndrekh remained the greatest military commander of the Sautekh Dynasty, perhaps the greatest of all Dynasties united. Orks. Aeldari. Hrud. Old Ones. Rangdan. C’Tan. Other Necrontyrs and Necrons. All had eaten dust before him.

These greenskins had enthusiasm and ferociousness, but they had no chance. Not because the Necrons had the Throne of Oblivion on their side. But because Zahndrekh was a genius whose defeats could be counted on one hand, and four out of these five enemies were permanently dead.

“We slept and we woke up to face the same old war...”

Zahndrekh and himself cut through the dimensions together, and they returned to the inferno which had made them legends.

**Mechanicus Cruiser *Athena Database***

**Magos Explorator Alena Wismer**

Magos Explorator Alena Wismer wasn’t going to pretend she was a specialist where Gloriana Battleships were analysed and studied, but she had the honour and the privilege to be invited aboard the *Flamewrought* and to see the *Eternal Crusader* with her optical augmentations. This undoubtedly placed her above most of the Tech-Priests currently toiling across the galaxy to ensure the Quest for Knowledge thrived and would continue for millennia to come.

One thing that had been evident to recognise when the two Gloriana warships were present at Pavia, of course, was the fact Gloriana wasn’t a class at all. It didn’t follow any definition of pattern she was aware of, and the *Flamewrought* and the *Eternal Crusader*, save their extraordinary dimensions making them living avatars of the Machine-God, had little in common.

The ancient Salamander flagship was akin to the mighty Salamanders living on Nocturne: large, possessing formidable weapons, and armoured to the point ‘normal’ Battleships would need days to cause any damage assuming the void shields were brought down. It was a slow and ponderous void leviathan, but once it gained enough momentum, it was unstoppable.

The *Eternal Crusader* had been more answering to the description of ‘Spear of the Omnissiah’. It was a religious monument – the walls of prayers carved upon its hull supported this – and it was as formidable as the *Flamewrought* in its own way, but cursory outside examination was sufficient to know the firepower and the armour were inferior to the ship improved and cherished by the great Vulkan. Not to say the flagship of the Black Templars had no advantages: it was a simpler design, authorising more shipyards to repair and supply it when the demands came; it had a greater capacity to launch Astartes boarding parties, from boarding torpedoes to starfighters; and it was swifter to execute complicate manoeuvres.

“And then there is the third...” She canted in a complicated binary cipher no one but her aboard the *Athena Database* understood.

When Lady Weaver had chosen her for this important operation, Alena Wismer had been quite flattered. Who wouldn’t when the Chosen of the Omnissiah continue to give her important assignments and brand-new ships to explore little-known regions of space and return lost archeotech to the Mechanicus? She had also felt a slight feeling of...concerned trepidation. The *Flamewrought* had been severely damaged by Traitor’s guns and evil artifices, after all.

She had tried to prepare herself, but in this instant, watching the spectacle of ruination and lost technology, it was difficult to do anything behind mourning.

The armaglass bay was releasing only minimal light and tight auspex emissions to avoid detection from the hostile xenos fighting less than one light-year away, but a minor Tech-Priest couldn’t miss the wreck of the defeated Gloriana.

The void leviathan had been a beautiful ship once, as it befitted such a mighty warship. Even after the dreadful fate which had befallen it, enough of the outer hull had survived to admire the sculpted waves and the elegant combinations of artwork its masters had insisted to add in the long-forgotten decades of the Great Crusade.

It was an ancient beauty, which made all the more horrible the four immense scars which had struck deeply the Gloriana Battleship, and were now visible as terrible, black wounds reflecting nothing but the abyss between the stars.

And as terrible as the devastation created by these injuries had been, they had not given the killing blow. No, the death of the mighty Battleship had come when a xenos weapon had literally *melted* the rear of the warship, engines and rear batteries all, despite the multi-layered void shields, the adamantium armour, and the countless other protections supposed to prevent an enemy from exploiting this relative weak point.

“Probability of a C’Tan-powered attack having overwhelmed the defences and destroyed the engines?” Wismer asked.

“Assuming we use the base our Necron allies gave us involving their Commorragh performance...over ninety-three percent, Magos.”

Omnissiah and Motive Force, this really wasn’t good at all.

Alena stayed silent as she studied more of the data arriving in her Noosphere implants before arriving to an unpleasant conclusion.

“They were running,” she whispered to the two members of her staff waiting her commands. “They were carved apart by the Gauss weapons, but they had enough energy and discipline to run.”

“I’m not saying you are wrong, Magos...but where are the other ships of the fleet?”

“Closer to the Ymga Monolith,” Alena Wismer grimly declared. “They didn’t survive long enough to have a chance, but a wounded Gloriana had the defences and the sheer toughness to try.”

But the null zone forbidding any Warp translation too close to the Ymga Monolith had been the doom of the Emperor’s servants. Their void shields had to operate at minimal power to give the engines and the other vital functions the energy they needed, and then the enemy Necron commander had most likely unleashed a C’Tan to prevent the escape attempt.

As more data came in, the hololith representation allowing her to examine the damage of the prow found something interesting.

“Stop on 1-42.”

It took a second for her command to take effect, but then the scarred letters appeared, and the final piece of evidence she needed was revealed. Elegant letters higher than a manufactorum of good size, several of them dented and horribly mangled, but the name could still be difficulty read.

*Tsunami*

Loud footsteps were heard behind her, heralding the arrival of Shadowkeeper Baldur Vör, surrounded by four Sisters of Silence.

“Lord Vör, my teams will be ready to begin their landing into the hangar bays within three hours.”

“Acceptable. I trust you haven’t forgotten the agreement?”

“No, Lord.”

Aside from the exploration mission being under one of the higher clearance levels possible, Alena was not authorised to keep anything like gene-seed, Astartes trophies, and banners of past campaigns. Omnissiah be her witness, some things she was defended to touch or record!

She could interact with the databases of the Tsunami and copy them for extensive analysis, though. Lady Weaver needed to know what the Space Marines of the Great Crusade had died against.

“Do you really think you will be able to tow the Gloriana Battleship out of the null zone?” The black-armoured Custodes asked in his usual unfriendly voice.

“I promised Lady Weaver I would succeed, and thanks to the myriad of containment foams and protection foams generously provided by Lady Dragon, I will accomplish it.” Alena replied. The Adeptus Mechanicus wasn’t going to let a little thing like Necron destruction go into the way of the Quest for Knowledge! “I have the Tech-Priests and the materials to do so. The major issue which will determine the duration of our first emergency repairs is whether we can use the original Gellar Field, or whether we will have to install a temporary new one before removing this work of the Omnissiah from the Oblivion Quarantine Zone...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Kuiper Belt**

**Starfort *Crown of Isolation***

**0.001.300M35**

**Grand Master Hunter**

If you worked in the Officio Assassinorum, being predictable, no matter how you tried to hide it, was a death sentence.

Thus the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum did his best to be unpredictable.

His true name was only known to three people: the God-Emperor, the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, and a blind trainer of the Vindicare Temple who had not uttered more than five words in the last forty years.

He had no known schedule, and the only known location where he could be found regularly was the room where the High Twelve met – to compensate for this, each time his turn came, he manifested his decision to change of council room and moved it to another palace of the Inner Sanctum.

While some expert spies and assassins knew he was originally from the Vindicare Temple, few were aware he had taken steps to attain mastery in sixty-two weapons which were *not* of a gun type, and he didn’t include the three dozen of absolutely lethal poisons he kept on his person at all times.

Predictability was dangerous, and thus he tried to do his best to mitigate it. The Assassinorum Landers, starfighters, and warships which transported him were sometimes belonging to one Temple or another, or other Adeptuses entirely. For example, the hull he had chosen for this travel ‘officially’ belonged to a Chartist Captain of the minor Catania Dynasty. Hunter had done his best to ensure no one knew ‘Alfonso Catania’ had never existed, not that it would be important for much longer, as in twenty hours, he wouldn’t set a foot on the *Long Game of Catania* ever again.

Some might call his precautions ungrounded paranoia.

The Grand Master begged to differ. Of his twenty predecessors, only two had died of what could be called ‘natural circumstances’: growing too old, they had passed their mantle to their chosen successor and tried to go hunting one of the ‘Top 100’ targets plaguing the Imperium. The others? Three had died by Custodes, five were eliminated by their own Temple subordinates when other High Lords decided to back a new potential Grand Master more in conformity with their own interests, and the others had perished countering plots of heretics and more monstrous things waiting in the dark.

As a consequence, Hunter continued to walk on the unpredictable path.

He would be the first to recognise it wasn’t an existence most of humanity would be able to endure for long. He had no wife, no children, or any known descendants. He had no sexual relationships, no attachments, and no ties save his loyalty to the God-Emperor of Mankind, He Who Guides the Astronomican.

When he died, there would be no great funerals, no mourning, and no deep eulogies. At best, he would be ignored and a few individuals would nod silently. At worse, citizens would openly drink and celebrate his demise.

This was fine. One did not become the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum for the accolades and the parties.

Like the Primarch of the First Legion Lion El’Jonson had said, loyalty was its own reward.

Unpredictability remaining key, there was no ceremony and the minimum welcoming committee when he landed on the Crown of Isolation, just as he wanted it to be.

“Grand Master!” the warden of the Starfort, an ex-Vindicare Assassin answering to the codename of Wraith-102. “You honour me with your presence.”

Hunter made a single gesture of the hand, and the attempt to flatter ceased.

“Two months, six days, three hours and forty minutes ago, I informed you I had finally convinced the High Twelve to give me the authorisation of deploying an Execution Force in support at Cadia. How fares the selection process?”

“Very well, Grand Master.” A hidden stair, several concealed elevators, and satisfying to the exigencies of the alpha-class security system were necessary before the conversation continued.

“Evidently, we were forced to keep the triplets of Project Absurd outside of Sol, per the ancestral protocols.”

Images flashed out, revealing three identical bald males, so pale-skinned they might have rivalled the void-born of the Imperium.

“We have solved the...mental stability issues of AC-1, AC-2, and AC-3. They only killed ten percent of the individuals we used as martial instructors. Since we are going to keep them in this new casket of cryogenic-chamber...”

“It will be more than adequate.” Hunter approved. These Culexus triplets had cost him enormously to acquire and even more to train; it was out of the question to let something as stupid as questions of collateral damage keep them out of active service. The null aura being multiplied the closest they were to each other amply compensated their sociopathic and psychopathic behaviour.

Besides, if the Black Crusade tried to storm Cadia, there would be far too many enemies for them to bother with ‘allied’ guardsmen.

“Callidus?”

“I thought the prime-subject of Project Umbra would be extremely interesting to use,” Wraith-102 licked his lips. “But I understand progress has been made to make her more...receptive to orders?”

“Yes. Her Callidus mentor has managed to increase her usefulness.” After a totally classified visit in the Holiest Place of the Imperium, but Wraith-102 didn’t need to know that. “For the present time, her skills are in high demand elsewhere. Do you have a substitute in mind?”

“I have. Agent Decima is in my opinion the perfect choice.”

Ah yes. This insane hyena. If she wasn’t so efficient at getting rid of her targets, the Assassinorum would have ejected her into the nearest star a long time ago. Unlike him, her given agent name was a real nickname: nine out of ten people who saw her really met atrocious ends.

“Venenum?”

“The Clade-Primaris is proud to present you Project Joyous Feasting.”

Hunter had a stomach of steel, but he nonetheless felt the four minutes of recordings which were presented to him very nauseating.

“Organ transplantations and bio-alchemy to make the agent a natural poison to everything surrounding her...impressive.”

And quite worrying it was the first time he learned of it. Evidently, he was going to need to reinforce his monitoring of the Venenum Temple.

“Does she have a name?”

“Yes, she is Agent Basilisk.”

He needed a lot more questions to know how close the Venenum Assassin could be deployed from the Kars of Cadia, or if she needed to remain in space all the time. The answers were...not exactly what he had predicted.

By contrast, the Vanus Agent selected was non-problematic. Project Accident had already given excellent results in the last decades, and the male Agent named K-1 had completed nineteen successful large-scale missions.

Now it was time for the hard part.

“Has a consensus been reached about Project Nest?”

Predictably, Wraith-102 winced.

“Are you sure, Grand Master? The new recruits have barely completed fifty assassinations between them, and none of them were against especially difficult targets.”

“I know. But they represent a critical asset that has never been used against Chaos Marines, including the demon-sorcerers of the Word Bearers.”

The last Black Crusades had been humiliating fiascos for the Officio Assassinorum wherever the self-proclaimed ‘Dark Apostles’ were present. It had gotten so bad that according to the last notes of the M34 Grand Master of the time, entire generations had been rushed in the hope quantity would be successful where quality had failed.

The outcome had been...disastrous.

 “A duo then seems the most promising option,” his interlocutor reluctantly agreed, “Typhon-Gamma and Falcon Tertius are the agents which have, based on their mission successes, the best chance to survive and reach the primary targets.”

These two Vindicare units were most likely going to die, barring a miracle, and both Hunter and Wraith-102 understood it perfectly.

“As for the Eversors, the Temple of the Holy Wrath has at last finished training their new generation of Imperial Assassins. Given their...nihilist outlook on life and their fierce hatred of the Arch-Enemy, I am confident they will prove excellent instruments against the Chaos Marines and their slaves.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” this Temple was so rigorous in its tests no one in the last decades had graduated from its final graduation slaughter, also best described as pitting the aspirant Eversor against an overwhelming military opposition like a Hive filled with heretics or something similar. “How many did pass?”

“Six, Grand Master.” Hunter smiled. “Hum, how many do you want deployed at the Cadian Gate?”

Hunter took ten good seconds to think about it. Project Absurd would cover their approach, but the leaders of the Chaos Marines would be well-protected, by sorcery and a lot of military assets. On the downside, the Assassinorum resources weren’t infinite...

“Assign four of them to the Execution Force. Let’s teach the Traitors that no foe is beyond His reach.”

**Holy Terra**

**Inner Palace**

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Samson Pitt**

“Do we really need to spend so much in resources and men to fortify the systems behind the Cadian Sector?”

At least, Samson thought with relief, Xerxes Vandire had not greeted the proposal of the Fabricator-General with his usual disdain.

“I would not propose this militarisation plan if my simulations showed the current preparation were sufficient,” the metallic voice of the ruler of Mars answered with a finger of irritation.

“You have to admit, my dear Fabricator-General,” Chancellor of the Estate Imperium Huang Utrecht intervened, “the question of the Master of the Administratum is legitimate. We have fortified...heavily the Cadian Sector and the nearby systems, I think we can all agree upon this fact?”

Eleven nodded, some more reluctantly than the others. By now, calling the Cadian ‘fortified’ was like calling Terra a Hive World. It gave the truth, but didn’t give it any justice. Assuming the reports on the table were correct, there were billions of guardsmen in the Cadian System, supported by at least four thousand Space Marines of the Astartes Praeses, several Battle-Maniples of six Titans Legios, many lances of Knights, and millions of Skitarii, not to mention two full Cadian Battlefleets and several heavy squadrons of the Solar reserves.

The neighbouring system of Agripinaa was possibly equally as fortified, as the Forge Worlds of Obscurus and beyond had answered with a shocking celerity the demands of help of the Agripinaa Fabricator, and the new naval base of Belis Corona was a redoubt able to shrug off the assault of multiple Battlefleets, also harbouring an Inquisitorial presence which varied between massive and incalculable.

Dozens of other critical system, like the Boros Gate and Hydra Cordatus, had also been massively reinforced and received new citadels and anti-starship batteries, not to mention priceless war supplies. It was, in many ways, one of the greatest logistical successes of the Chartist Fleets and the Imperial Navy to transport men, food, equipment, fuel, and ammunition to the Cadian Gate, and it was only made possible thanks to the near-annihilation xenos pirates and outlaws had received in the last years.

“Sincerely, I understand the point about covering all our bases and make certain there are no weak points in the defensive system we voted for, but is everything absolutely necessary?”

Lord High Admiral Rabadash y Byng el Calormen cleared his throat.

“To be blunt, Chancellor? Yes, the increase of the defence of the Pius line is necessary. So are the shifting of the Starforts on the four Obscurus-Solar lines. I agree completely with the Cadian High Command and the Lord Admirals’ conclusions present in the theatre of operations. The heretics will have two options if they decide to challenge us again: besiege the planets of the Cadian Gate one by one in an attempt to gnaw our ground and space assets to dust, or send sacrificial forces against Agripinaa and Cadia in an attempt to stalemate us while they strike the logistical nodes behind them like the Despoiler did during his M34 campaign.”

“This seems nonetheless a bit...excessive.” Xerxes Vandire chose his words with care.

“All the scrying, Tarot readings and divination prediction done under the Light of the Astronomican confirm a Crusade-level assault is incoming,” the Mistress of the Astronomican affirmed. “Due to the foul sorceries employed by the Arch-Enemy, we can’t exactly determine the date, but it can be anywhere between this year and two decades from now. And while the Despoiler is rumoured to stay out of the game for this one, the forces arrayed against us will be stronger and viler.”

For many seconds, the High Twelve stayed silent. When silence was broken, it was the Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites who spoke.

“Then we will of course approve the fortification and the reinforcement of these important systems and trade lanes.” Tudor Brezhnev told his peers, and no one voiced an objection. “But...with all due respect to your analysts, Lord Admiral, I don’t know if it is possible to push for the same effort of ‘defence-in-depth’ in Segmentum Obscurus. It is a far larger space theatre, and while we have more Battlefleets available, there aren’t hundreds of them in surplus. Unless we cancel many operations in Ultima Segmentum or increase the tithes for Solar, the resources, the regiments, and the logistics simply aren’t there.”

“Many operations prepared in the eastern Segmentum are critical,” Marianne Gutenberg commented neutrally. “Besides, simple logistics would make a transfer of assets and resources from the Eastern Fringe theatres to western Obscurus quite costly in time and hull availability.”

“Indeed,” the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial navy consulted several vellum papers before shaking his head. “But unless you give me permission to withdraw one or two Battlefleets from the Core Solar Worlds...”

“Not happening,” Gandhi Brobantis abruptly shut down the proposal.

“Well, I am going to have to make some hard choices.” The blue-dressed High Lord shrugged, showing no sign of surprise at the answer. “Cypra Mundi, Mordian, Vostroya, and a few dozen other critical chokepoints are going to get the best naval commanders and squadrons. I will prepare third-line squadrons for eastern Obscurus just in case, but they will be by their very nature dispersed and will need time to concentrate.”

“It would be quite...careless of the heretics to venture so far out of the Eye of Terror,” Inquisitor Berlin Chimera pointed out.

Rabadash shrugged again, silent reply meaning ‘you know better than me there’.

There were three more hours of discussion following this relatively cordial exchange of views, but every person in the room knew the proposal directing the course of the next years had been – at least in part – taken here and now.

“We are in agreement, then?” the Arch-Cardinal Terran asked for the sake of formality.

“We are.” The Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica replied for the eleven other High Lords.

**Outer Palace**

**Petitioner’s City**

**Solar Guardian Nicephorus Vandire**

Nicephorus had a headache...again. He doubted anyone reasonable could blame him for it, honestly.

“And how,” the ageing high-ranked Adept asked whimsically, “are we going to pay for all of this?”

The ‘we’ was Clan Vandire, of course. The ‘all of this’ was a true mountain of vellum burying several desks by their sheer mass.

And his question, in his opinion, was perfectly reasonable.

His niece Abagnale looked distinctively ill-at-ease, though only a person who knew her very well would have noticed the little signs of disquiet.

“An exceptional mining tax has been created for the Brisbane-Ayers Sector.”

Nicephorus blinked.

“Wasn’t this scheme tried already thirty years ago?”

Given the emotion seen in her eyes, the Magistrate had obviously hoped he wouldn’t remember that.

“Yes,” the admission was not one uttered with grace. “It will be really an exceptional and temporary tax, this time.”

Nicephorus felt the urge to shout or make some ironic comment about how the inhabitants of the dozens of Mining Worlds of said Sector were unlikely going to throw themselves at their feet and thank them. If his records were accurate – and he was reasonably sure they were – everyone in the planets sworn to the Lord of Brisbane-Ayers were paying more exceptional taxes than they were paying Administratum tithes, and the latter was not a light resource-imposition by any means.

“I know it isn’t your idea, Abagnale,” his niece thanked him silently for it, “and I know you’re the messenger bearing the unpleasant news, but I have to say it: the tax-and-tithe pressure is getting out of control. There’s so much blood and resources we can force a Sector to spit out before...unpleasant things happen.”

It wasn’t only their Brisbane-Ayers dominion where the fiscal hammer was striking hot. Their other holdings, their main holdings he should say, in the Zion and Yucatan Sectors were not exactly tithe-paradises.

“The plebeians are kept indoctrinated and loyal.”

Nicephorus didn’t ask for how long. He had made his views clear to his brother, and the answer had been...unsatisfactory.

“Whether the plebeians are kept quiescent at this point doesn’t matter,” the Solar Guardian said emotionlessly. “The Sector’s economy is slowing down. No new Cartel has invested resources in the mining assets we have on the worlds of Brisbane-Ayers. The Chartist Captains are choosing new destinations where the ‘exceptional taxes’ are not likely to hurt their profit lines.”

He didn’t mention the Adeptus Mechanicus; after the recent political affairs, the Fabricator-General of Mars had taken the stance to ignore his brother as often as he could get away with it, and to oppose his moves the rest of the time. The number of Tech-Priests on Vandire worlds, as a consequence, was slowly but surely shrinking down.

“We can’t continue like this,” Nicephorus told Abagnale in a quiet but determined voice. “We have to reduce our taxes before the cycle is too viciously locked there is no escape out of it, and to begin this, we need to reduce our expenses.”

“They are necessary for the prestige of Clan Vandire,” the objection came, as predictable as the day.

Nicephorus grunted and seized randomly a vellum parchment on top of the piles.

“One hundred million Ducats to buy the allegiance of several Guard officers of the Bristol Conglomerate doesn’t feel really ‘necessary’ to me,” Nicephorus remarked before the content of the text really percolated into his brain. “Wait a minute...”

And sure enough, the next ten demands for more bribes and euphemistically ‘services rendered to loyal servants’ were from powerfully-connected men and women sending their younger generation into the privileged positions existing all across the Throneworld and the System beyond.

“What is Xerxes thinking trying to suborn so many officers of the Astra Militarum?”

“Err...insurance against Lord Commander Militant Oberstein?”

“In that case,” Nicephorus said acidly as he discovered a new list of names, “maybe he should try paying the *competent* officers of the Guard...”