This might be a teaser

**Legacy 13.3**

**Legacy of Change**

*The Fifth Black Crusade was a disaster thanks to Lorgar’s pathetic leadership.*

*But this was merely one campaign.*

*The Long War will continue, False Emperor.*

*The Long War will continue, and inevitably, your Imperium will fall.*

*It will not happen this year. The collapse may not even start this millennium.*

*But it will come.*

*The Long War is entering a new phase.*

*And you underestimated us. Your precognition powers are incredibly limited now.*

*Your foresight is close to nonexistent.*

*The present and the future are in a state of Chaos.*

*We thrive in it, unlike you.*

*You are of* Order*.*

*This is a completely new war now, and the galaxy is about to change again.*

*You have underestimated us, False Emperor, but we won’t underestimate you any longer.*

*Your servants are waiting on the walls, manning the defences, praying to you.*

*They hear your whispers that everything is better than worshipping the Gods. That as long as they die free and loyal to you, there will be a better tomorrow, if not for them, for their families.*

*But this is all a lie.*

*What your priests pretend to be the Light is just pitiful candles trying to masquerade as a true sun.*

*And your Order is just the ossified carcass of something once glorious.*

*The nine Legions which stayed by your side have become shadows of their former glory, scattered across the galaxy, forced to fight battles that will never be reported by fear the unwashed masses begin to think of the true perils of this reality.*

*The Imperium will fall.*

*And we will the Long War.*

*Death to the False Emperor!*

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Sub-Sector**

**Atlas System**

**Atlas II**

**Ducal Palace of Agra-Napoli**

**3.567.313M35**

**Captain Dino Rossi**

The gates slammed shut before the monster could recover from the latest surprise that they had sprung upon it.

“WHAT IS THAT THING?” Someone screamed.

To Dino Rossi’s consternation, it was the commanding officer of one of the Palace’s primary regiments.

“It is an abomination,” he replied, before adding to the benefit of his men. “And we are going to kill it.”

“IT IS UNKILLABLE! WE MUST FLEE AT ONCE!”

BLAM!

Well, there was at least one question answered for good. Yes, the regiments sworn to the Arch-Duke had the equivalent of Commissars to maintain discipline.

“There will be no retreat from the Palace,” the stern officer in black uniform ordered. “And if any other man wants to spread panic, let him speak here and now.”

Curiously, with a Colonel having a large hole in the back of his head, everyone chose to remain silent.

“Good,” the political officer spoke. “And clearly, any rumours of invincibility are just completely false. A lone Hydra battery was able to destroy its wings and down the monster. Now it is on the ground, and clearly if the last minutes are any indication, it can’t regenerate its destroyed appendages.”

“The problem is the breath attacks of the abomination,” Dino Rossi approved.

Of course, he only had to say it for the creature to make its presence felt.

There was a sensation of infernal warmth, and suddenly, the gates began to melt.

Golden Throne preserve them, the metal covering them wasn’t adamantium, but it was not something easy to destroy either!

“The Gates of Agra-Napoli were blessed by the Ecclesiarchy?” A soldier of the Sapphire Host gasped.

“Were the Priests sent by Nyx, or were they those sycophants the nobles always keep close to them?”

“Err...”

“Silence. Captain Rossi, is it? What do you know about this abomination?”

“I’m afraid it is the Indigan Dragon that so many rumours were mentioning before today, Sir. The beast that was supposed to be the biggest animal the hunters would kill. But somehow, heretics must have used something truly heretical to change it like this. Now it has three heads and two tails, and most of our weapons have literally no effect, from lasguns to light mortars.”

And of course, all of the three vulture-like heads of the monsters could expel some sort of sorcerous flames from their beaks.

This would have been bad enough in the first place, but if the first head unleashed a firestorm that incinerated flesh within seconds, the second was spreading corruption and twisted everything that had the misfortune to be on the receiving end of it. As for the third...there were things that were way too horrible to contemplate.

“I’m afraid the Northern Gardens are completely devastated, Sir. And all the forces which answered the call to arms in the first hour have been annihilated.”

What few of them were there, anyway. Nobody had anticipated something like that.

“The Governor?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know, Sir. We have been able to confirm six of his children were killed as they were too close to the abomination when the hunt became a bloodbath. We know he was alive three hours ago. But I’m afraid we have no knowledge of his whereabouts now. Things outside...are a bit disorderly.”

That was the polite way to say it was a bloody disaster, yes.

“Thank you, Captain. In this case, I think it is time to bring out the heavier weaponry. There are in this Palace’s vaults-“

There was more infernal breaths directed against the Gate, and plenty of soldiers shivered.

“It would be best to hurry, Sir. The Gates aren’t going to hold it at bay for long. And...none of my men here have the codes or the formal authorisation to access the heavy weaponry.”

In fact, the majority of the men present here didn’t have the permission to be here in the Palace, and it included Dino himself.

If the situation hadn’t been such a bloody fiasco, the young Captain would have spent more than a few minutes marvelling at the outrageously rich decorations, the oil paintings, and the splendid armours that had been once used by long-dead members of the Arch-Duke’s Dynasty.

“I know. You! Put me in contact with the Western Command and-“

The shriek interrupted every conversation and order.

It was atrocious.

It hurt your ears, despite all the earmuffs and sound-dampening stuff they all were equipped with.

It was a sound no living creature should ever make.

But it also unmistakably was a shriek of *pain*.

“STAY STILL, YOUR HORRIBLE PARODY OF DRAKE!”

No, surely even Lord Pierre couldn’t-

Something extremely heavy hit the gates.

“I SAID STAY STILL! ARE YOU AS DUMB AS YOU ARE UGLY?”

Fine, it was him.

The gates exploded.

The shriek repeated itself, but this time, it was one where horror and despair was all too evident.

Smoke erupted, poisonous and filled with heresy of the foulest sort, but it didn’t last.

There was something gold hurled in the middle of the devastation.

A second later, the golden flames came into existence.

And this time the horrible shrieking easily tripled in intensity.

There were more explosions.

And then enormous piece of masonry fell down.

The smoke slowly dissipated.

As it did, Dino Rossi was granted the unbelievable sight of Lord Pierre, standing upon the giant abomination. And the Lord Dreadnought had a large Atlasian hat with pink feathers of the latest fashion upon his armoured chassis.

Of the monster...two out of three heads had been thoroughly killed with some sort of different spears impaling them, but the greatest injury done had to be the one which had somehow ensured part of the monster’s thorax was burning in golden flames.

“I HAVE COME TO BUY HATS AND KILL TRAITORS, AND I ALREADY HAVE A HAT! FOLLOW ME, IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR!”

“Yes, Lord Pierre!”

**Hesperides City**

**3.371.313M35**

**Inquisitor Gabriel Mercoire**

“My Lord?”

“Yes, Acolyte.”

Gabriel Mercoire did try to present his usual emotionless expression, and not show his exhaustion.

The Lord Inquisitors above him had thought a few years in the Nyx Sector would do marvels for his health, as he would be given the opportunity to recover from wounds sustained during the recent battles in Segmentum Obscurus.

Nobody had really thought Atlas would explode in such a manner, or that he would be the closest Malleus Inquisitor able to answer.

“I’m all rejoicing that the Dreadnought serving Her Celestial Highness was here to deal with the Possessed dragon and everything, but...why was he here in the first place?”

“I have my suspicions,” Gabriel answered truthfully. “Knowing how tense the relations between Atlas and Nyx were before this week, it was not to compliment on the promptness of his tithes’ deliveries, or to celebrate his next birthday.”

Bolt Guns fired in front of them. Over twenty traitor officers fell.

Gabriel Mercoire was willing to overlook a lot of petty actions when the daemonic was the enemy, but the sheer level of economic corruption and incompetence that was the norm had to stop in one of the chief city of Atlas had to stop immediately.

“How does the situation in the Palace looks?” he asked, dismissing the matter. The regiments of the PDF that were now mustering were moving far faster. It would have been better if dedication burned in their hearts, but he would settle for what he had.

“Inside the Palace, it’s relatively manageable. The Dreadnought arrived in time, and he was rapidly reinforced by solid units which promptly purged the cultists and the mutants. Outside the palace, I’m afraid it is worse. The Northern Gardens are just...gone. The teams we have are not encountering the Arch-Enemy for the first time, but this corruption is shocking even for men and women of their experience.”

“That’s what happens when you lower their guard and refuse to take seriously the threat represented by the Ruinous Powers.” Gabriel Mercoire said grimly.

Politics always were a messy business, but you couldn’t deny that Atlas had been the only system to be targeted by the heretics, and what a coincidence! It was the only system that had refused to enforce several of the reforms sponsored by Her Celestial Highness.

Coincidences existed in their line of work; it was a big galaxy after all.

That, however, was not a coincidence.

“The Governor?”

“His personal guard was able to drag him out of the nightmare, my Lord. He lost his arm and will have to spend several weeks in a hospital, but we tested him using the holy Aethergold. He didn’t show any sign of pain.”

The representative of the Ordo Malleus didn’t know if he was to feel pleased or frustrated by that revelation.

On the one hand, the Planetary Governor had clearly stayed loyal to the God-Emperor. As someone having access to this extraordinarily level of power could do extreme damage and spread the roots of corruption to a disastrous degree, this was somehow a relief it hadn’t happened.

On the other hand, this cultist coup and entire heresy had been done under the nose of the Governor. It was not a small error of judgement that could be overlooked. Many Adepts in the past had lost their heads for smaller catastrophes.

“Your orders, Lord?”

Fortunately for the Arch-Duke, Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor had politely *requested* Gabriel to abide by certain guidelines.

And besides, Brabanto XV da Flor would have to answer for his incompetence quickly enough. The Inquisition was not the only authority who was going to be out for blood here.

“For now, just assign the Governor a squad of protectors, and ensure he stays in his private clinic. In time, I will have a talk with him. Once he will be healthy enough to be moved, I expect Nyx to summon him.”

And for his own sake, the Planetary Governor of Atlas Secundus should begin to work on his future eloquent defence against the accusations that would rain upon his head.

“The Magma Spiders?”

“The Astartes have broken through the Eastern Fort, and put to death every traitor noble that was assembling here.”

“How many cultists were among them?”

“None, it seems, my Lord. It was just one power-hungry cousin of the Arch-Duke having delusions he could sweep away all opposition and take power.”

This day was really didn’t going to get better.

“I suppose that explains why the sons of Vulkan were able to rally so many PDF regiments to act as their support when they landed.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Gabriel Mercoire listened to the reports of his other Acolytes, all informing him by highly-encrypted communications of their progress.

“The first priority is to excise the corruption and wipe out the heresy. We have Aethergold in sufficient quantities, and it won’t do any good to be spendthrift with it. The Northern Gardens are to be quarantined by reliable units while the Purifying Squadrons march in.”

“Rules of engagement?”

“We have the reports of a sworn member of Her Celestial Highness’ Dawnbreaker Guard, Acolyte. I think we can trust him to report accurately the situation.” And the mutation breath of the abomination had done so much damage anyway that death after that was likely a mercy. “Everything that was caught inside these walls must burn. If someone or something endures unscathed the holy flames, the Acolytes are to use their best judgement. Otherwise, my previous orders stand.”

“There are...rumbles across the nobility, my Lord. We will have to keep an eye on the principal troublemakers. They may do something stupid...some of them are baying that members of their family are trapped inside the Palace’s area.”

Gabriel Mercoire felt a flicker of sympathy for a heartbeat. But he extinguished it. Most of the nobles missing were dead, and those who weren’t had to wish they were, because the corrupted monster had done things to them that were heresy incarnate.

“Indeed. And since we speak of the nobility, it is time for us to begin the real part of the work the Ordo Malleus exists for in the first place.”

“My Lord?”

“The abomination was slain by a servant of Her Celestial Highness,” the Inquisitor said coldly, “but I don’t believe for a second that the architects of this heresy were able to do something like that from one or two Sectors away. Not with the number of cultists and PDF officers that went traitor.”

There were some agents of the Arch-Enemy that were capable of it, to be clear, but most operated in Obscurus, not here.

And honestly, the fingerprints of the cultists were everywhere; the situation reeked of chaotic *amateurism*.

“Find me the head of this diabolic conspiracy, Acolyte. And once you do, take him alive. I have a lot of questions to ask him.”

**Palace of New Bologna**

**3.373.313M35**

**Marquis Galeotto da Montane**

How? How did they find him so quickly?

How?

“We have been betrayed!” Galeotto snarled. “It is simply not possible that the dogs of the False Emperor found their way to my palace so quickly otherwise!”

The Grand Master of the Nine Secret Ambitions wanted to add a few more curses, but the thunder of the shells arrived in the next seconds.

There was a considerable amount of explosions.

The lights flickered out.

“Grand Master, is it possible they found your correspondence with the commander of the Hesperides garrison?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” the Marquis of Three Seasons hotly retorted. “I ordered him to burn the messages as soon as he had finished reading them! What kind of moron would be so reckless and blatantly stupid to keep compromising evidence that would result in your execution if the Governor’s lackeys found you with it?”

Still, the doubt began to spread out in the depths of his thoughts.

If this incompetent General had truly betrayed him-

“Grand Master! Your guards inform us they aren’t able to hold for long! The enemy has brought troops using Power Armour! Some kind of Stormtroopers we have never seen before!”

“Weaver,” Galeotto cursed. “It has to be Weaver. Tell our guards to buy us as much time as they can. We are going to try to mount a counterattack.”

“But...Grand Master...how?”

“I thought it is evident, really. By now, the two other rebellions must have made great progress. The dogs of the False Emperor committed all the Space Marines of the sub-Sector here, on Atlas Secundus. This means that on Atlas Primus and Atlas Tertius, our fellow conspirators must have made great headway!”

“Err...Grand Master...”

“What it is?”

“We have been studying the aether and the long-range communications of Atlas Primus and Tertius. There is no rebellion ongoing. There hasn’t even been a coup attempt.”

“NO!” Galeotto da Montane shouted before his self-control was somewhat leashed again. “It has to be a mistake. Perhaps some kind of undercover sorcery that impersonated the First Duke and his cousins and-“

“Grand Master...” the bombardment came closer, and several windows exploded. The fires were getting closer. “There isn’t any sign of that. And the high nobles are all calling on all their channels to inform their friends that this rebellion is an accursed thing, that they are all loyal to the God-Emperor and His Living Saint...”

The Marquis of Three Seasons expressed a hysteric chuckle.

Loyal? These insolent parvenus who didn’t deserve their title had the gall to proclaim themselves loyal?

They were as loyal to the Imperium as the God Khorne was a fierce supporter of Peace!

“And what of the rest of the Sector?” He asked for the fifth time in the last hour as massive fissures appeared in his priceless painted ceiling and dust began to fall from several sections. “Surely there must be some agitation! Warlord Malicia promised us support! Surely we aren’t the only ones to rebel!”

The terrified expressions were all the answer he needed, and a massive pit of despair opened its fangs to swallow his last hopes.

“I’m sorry, Grand Master, but...there are massive Astropathic emergency communications. And while many of them are out of our means to decipher...we can perceive mustering orders for Atlas, and only for Atlas. Many dozens of transports and warships are on their way. Nyx is reacting like we are an egg, and they a Power Hammer.”

Galeotto grimaced at the image.

This was a couple of heartbeats before the screams of the dying arrived to his ears.

“Why? Why would the Warlord betray us like that? We serve the will of the Changer of Ways?”

“But the Architect of Fate is the God of Ambition and Betrayals too, Grand Master! Is it possible this accursed sorceress feared your rise, and decided to lead you into a trap before you were ready to overthrow her and become the Herald of Change?”

Hatred and pride waged war in his heart.

In all honesty, he didn’t know which feeling won out in the end.

“Yes! It would explain why the enemy was able to slay so easily the Steed of Chaos! This Beast is supposed to be invincible, especially once it possesses something as mighty as an Indigan Dragon!”

This was not his fault that his efforts were ending in failure. At every point, he had been betrayed by those jealous of his successes.

“But I will have my revenge! I will have my revenge over you, traitors, even if it is the last thing that I do!”

His world disappeared in a storm of thunder and the bark of thousands of weapons.

“NO!” he screamed. “They can’t have...to the secret passage! To the secret passage! Don’t let them-“

The orders he heard from the implacable army running towards him caused Galeotto to panic completely.

“ALIVE! THE INQUISITOR WANTS THEM ALIVE!”

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**Palace of the Orient**

**2.381.313M35**

**Dankanatoi Custodes Murasame Oda**

If not for the lack of crowds, one could almost believe it was one of the minor private manors of Terra.

There were plenty of soft carpets covering the floors, while on both sides of the alleys, small trees and plants had been arranged in harmonious compositions.

Once past the entrance hall, tall fountains of marble were there to refresh the air and provide more decoration. Soft music played in the background. And in the main quarters, the number of sofas and comfortable armchairs was simply prodigious.

All of it was true. And yet nothing was as it seemed.

Plenty of plants had colonies of insects buried in their pots. The fountains were filled with several crabs and other sea-based arthropods. And while they tried to stay as discreet as possible, Murasame could count the number of Fay and Nyxian guardsmen waiting behind the red curtains.

That didn’t count the huge golden spider in the middle of the room, that was pretending to sleep – poorly, in his opinion.

It was a formidable amount of security, and Murasame knew that no one, not even him, would be able to penetrate it alone. Uncountable assassins had tried and failed over the years, and it was not because they were utterly incompetent.

It was not the reason of his visit today.

“I didn’t receive the message warning me of your arrival.”

“I didn’t send one.” He replied.

The stars-filled eyes turned towards him for only a glimpse, before turning away.

The Basileia of Nyx made a slight nod.

Many guardsmen behind the curtains left, silently or not. The music levels rose.

The Adjutant-Spider stopped pretending she was sleeping.

“The Enemy has decided to attack the Quadrant, as I’m sure as you are aware.”

He received a snort in return.

“Call him Abaddon, Lord Oda.” Lady Weaver told him bluntly. “We can dispense with the pretenses and affirm it was him, no?”

Murasame Oda didn’t hesitate, for this wasn’t the way of the Ten Thousand. He merely considered what approach would work better in this case.

“Yes, it was the Despoiler making his first move.”

“Indeed,” the woman the Emperor had imbued with his Light grimaced. “If it had been only Atlas and a few other actions, mind you, I could have almost believed Malicia was the sorceress-in-chief of these atrocities. But there were the others. And while in some cases it isn’t exactly hard to guess how it was accomplished, others leave me completely baffled.”

“The former First Captain of the Sixteenth may look like a brute, but he is very cunning.”

“That is the understatement of the year.” The golden wings were unfurled, increasing the radiance of the room. “Capua of the Maximus Sector. Someone threw a cursed sword into one of the largest arenas of the planet, proving once more it is a very bad idea to not have appropriate wards around these pits of violence. By the time the Inquisition was able to intervene, both spectators and fighters had torn each other apart under a rain of blood.”

Before the Angel of Sacrifice, a hidden hololithic projector materialised a map of the Quadrant. Three seconds later, it zoomed on the Ashikaga Sector.

“Nara, a Civilised World of no importance. It seems a Night Lord Traitor Marine was able to land unnoticed and began a fell ritual. For eight consecutive days, the sun was unable to pierce the sorcery clouds plunging this world into a nightmare of shadows. Once Aethergold burned the taint, over a third of the population had disappeared, and there was only an empty armour of the Chaos Marine left. More concerning, the inhabitants were not killed by daemons...the Inquisitors told me every man, woman, and child had died of *terror*.”

The map moved towards the eastern frontier of the Samarkand Quadrant, to a world Murasame Oda was familiar with.

“Cadmus, Bacchus Sector. Some degenerate cultists somehow found a xenos crown-artefact that they offered to the Governor’s Heir. It took only minutes for the murderous orgies to begin, and soon enough, the entire court fell into depravation and things that should only be seen in a Drukhari society.”

Reading the reports of that disaster had not been a pleasant thing at all. Slaanesh was dead; that was a fact. All its daemons had been killed, permanently. Everything the Monster of Excess had done had collapsed. So how had the Despoiler done it?

“Industrial Plant Alpha of Planet W-5T3, Vancouver Sector. At first, it appeared like an industrial accident that detonated a Fusion Reactor. Except industrial accidents generally don’t have a cursed Power Shield in the middle of it inciting everyone nearby to pick it up and reduce into slavery everyone else. Grom, Fire Helm Sector. It took a single jewel crafted as an eye to convince a merchant of importance to divide his inheritance among eleven complete strangers he’d never met until that day, and Anarchy spread uncontrollably, engulfing eleven significant settlements before the Ordo Hereticus arrived to stop it. Hessian, Brunswick Sector. The cultists managed to get in position to carve eight-pointed stars upon the brows of an entire mercenary company, ensuring they all began to believe themselves Chaos warlords, rallying those unable to resist their charisma to their banners. On the station Minos of the Icarus Sector, a Warp plague broke out, killing the loyal and transforming those foolish enough to believe the lies of the Ruinous Powers into abhorrent colossi of contagion.”

The Basileia didn’t speak of the ninth event, but then there was nothing pleasant about commenting about this awful event aloud.

The hololithic projection vanished.

“I’m sure you have realised it was a ritual.”

“I’m aware, yes. Strategically, both on Atlas and elsewhere, doing what the cultists did makes absolutely no sense. On Atlas Secundus, the fallen nobles had every reason to stay in the shadows and continue recruiting more personnel, bribing their way and throwing different factions of nobles against each other. They were way too weak to take power without a massive daemonic intervention, and they had no backers anywhere in the Sector. If they didn’t plunge the planet into the Warp within a few hours, they always were going to lose once the reinforcements arrived.”

Murasame had to agree with her. Yes, the killings and the uprisings had done massive damage, but most of the cultists clearly hadn’t been in position to corrupt planets beyond redemption before the Inquisition arrived and committed Aethergold.

And from a cold-blooded perspective, the worlds themselves were hardly vital for the Imperium. There was no Sector or Sub-Sector Capital. There was no Industrial World of importance. There was nothing to disrupt the war effort or the civilian economy for a significant period of time.

It was...concerning.

“It is possible the Despoiler’s actions are a provocation to urge you to abandon your plans, Lady Weaver.”

The stars-filled eyes stated at him.

“In that case, he is going to be disappointed. The shipbuilding plans along with everything else we have allocated funds for are barely beginning. I am not going to abandon everything and rush my veterans and the ships I have to Cadia in the name of vengeance.”

“Understood.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Lord Oda.” Weaver’s words were curt, but her expression revealed the truth. She was furious. “Just on Atlas Secundus, we have already more than one hundred and fifty thousand dead. When we add together the nine atrocities, the butcher bill rises in the tens of millions. Abaddon will pay for that, and so will Malicia and everyone involved in these rituals of mass murder.”

The Dankanatoi Custodes didn’t say a word. After all, the Angel of Nyx was absolutely correct. The execution was going to be difficult to accomplish, though.

“There is however, one way we can react, to make sure the Despoiler can’t repeat what he just did.”

“Yes, I suppose there is one.” The Watcher of the Throne answered. “Is there no other way?”

“Aurelia Malys speaks for all the males, females, and children worshipping Atharti.”

“I am going to contact Terra.”

**Archmagos Dragon Richter**

“I saw the Custodes leaving. He didn’t look happy.”

“Do I look happy, Dragon?”

“You’re not.” The Tinker admitted. “And for that matter, it’s time to admit I am utterly furious they dared sullying the noble and beautiful form of the dragon for their fell schemes. If Malicia one day is taken prisoner, I want to be the one to deal with her first.”

“Join the queue, there are a few more millions wanting her severed head on a tray than there was last year.”

The insect-mistress closed her eyes, and Dragon knew the exhaustion was not faked in the slightest. Going to Catachan in a hurry and returning had taken a lot from Taylor, though she was recovering fast.

“What are you going to do?”

“For the incidents outside the Nyx Sector, the matter can be summed up in a few words.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it begins and ends with ‘let the Inquisition handle the problems’.”

Dragon did not bother hiding her wince.

“I would have preferred a...a gentler and more careful approach.”

“So do I, but if I intervene personally, we’re likely going to add a political crisis to the mess. I am not the Quadrant Lady, and even if I was, the title would not give me the authority to enforce my authority over those of the other Sector Lords.”

That was a good point, though it didn’t bring any comfort.

“And really, this was why the Inquisition was created in the first place. To fight the war against all major threats without politics hindering them.”

“I know. I just find the sheer amount of collateral damage they do...I don’t like it at all.”

“I don’t like it either.” The angelic-looking woman sighed. “But alas, Abaddon forced very much our hand in that case. I’ve read the non-redacted reports of the cultists’ actions and the rest of the butchery, and believe me, it makes for very ugly lectures. The best I can do is to provide enough Aethergold to the Inquisition teams. That way, they can really make the difference between innocents and those who have been truly corrupted by the Ruinous Powers.”

The worst part was that it was not a small consolation. Without Aethergold, the Inquisition would have had truly no recourse in some cases to truly go on a rampage so that no culprit and corrupt agent escaped. In worlds like Nara, it could easily have resulted in the total purge of the population.

“And for Atlas?” the draconic Archmagos asked.

Taylor snorted.

“The childish part of me wishes to remove the entire Atlasian nobility, and not just the one of Secundus. They have never ceased irritating me these last years, and now I have been given plenty of good reasons to send them in battalion-sized formations to the Penal Legions.”

“And the noble and angelic part of you?”

The Basileia licked her lips, and a cloud of insects brought her a glass to quench her thirst.

“Pierre made it clear, in his last report,” the Lady of Nyx replied after emptying it the crystal glass of its content, “that hundreds of thousands of Atlasians took arms against the Change cultists, and not just the common PDF soldiers. The authorities of Atlas Secundus were clearly incompetent when it came to ferreting out the cults hiding near them, but once the coup began, they reacted relatively fast. Many noblemen and noblewomen rushed to the capitals and killed the traitors with extreme prejudice.”

Some of this newfound loyalty, Taylor had to know, was based on the insult to every tradition the massacre of the hunters in the Northern Gardens of the Governor’s palace represented to all. But in the end, loyalty was loyalty. One couldn’t exactly investigate the thoughts of every Imperial citizen.

“Moreover, I suppose that with the other worlds of the Atlas System having had no cultists trying to topple the respective Dukes ruling there, it would be incredibly difficult politically to move against them now.”

“Exactly,” the Basileia muttered. “I know it was probably not her idea in the first place, but Malicia really screwed up everything I had planned for Atlas.”

“Think of all the resources and favours you won’t have to use,” Dragon said sweetly, earning a huff for her trouble.

“I also was thinking of how nice some heads would look once separated from the rest of their bodies.” The golden-winged parahuman admitted. “I will take whatever pleasure I can from this disaster. This has given me a golden opportunity to order the Inquisition to investigate the entire Atlasian society. I somehow doubt we will find more cultists, but it is better to make sure they have not tried to cover Slaaneshi cultists and other traitors before.”

“You have a point.” But Dragon had the feeling the Inquisitors were not going to find anything. Well, nothing related to *Chaos* corruption. The inefficiency and the sheer levels of bribery and nepotism that were the norm among the Atlasian nobles strongly suggested the tithes would need to be recalculated in certain cases, along with several arrests for financial crimes. “The Grand Duke and the First Duke are not going to like it, though.”

“They are not going to like me, unless I turn into a bastion of conservatism and stagnation like their entire ruling caste is, Dragon. Once I acknowledge that, you realise really quickly I have no reason to be particularly gentle with them.”

“You are going to remove the Arch-Duke, then?”

“Legally, it is my duty and privilege to do so. He proved...incompetent. The big problem is that Atlas is not Nyx. There’s no middle class worthy of the name to replace the nobility I will remove. So I very much need advice on the matter.”

Dragon blinked.

“There can’t be many administrators in the galaxy who have experience about backward Civilised Worlds and the process of transforming them into productive planets for the greater glory of the Imperium.”

“Assuredly not, but there’s one ruling the Kingdom of Ultramar who owes me a few favours.”

**Athena Strategium**

**2.387.313M35**

**General Nikolai Rokossovsky**

It was a rather calm atmosphere, all things considered. Obviously, foregoing the pomp and all the rituals helped; there were barely over two hundred men and women present in the Strategium, and it included the ten Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

There were plenty of whispers, naturally; the Strategium was a place of work, and there was much to do, no matter the hour.

It still was one of the best locations to discuss the outcome of Operation Hell Garden.

“It goes without saying that while you came back and gave us an immense amount of data, Your Celestial Highness, we will have to wait until Bellona and Rear-Admiral Yamamoto return to give our official conclusions.”

“I knew it the moment I ordered Artemis to give you in writing everything I had.” Lady Weaver smiled, her attention focused on the many, many hololithic screens in front of her. “The preliminary analysis, please.”

“I doubt you will be surprised to be told that shell consumption once again largely outpaced our worst-case predictions.” Nikolai began. “Though this time, we have a good excuse: we really thought total orbital superiority was to be ours. Kinetic strikes were supposed to demolish the biggest source of opposition, opening the way for the infantry advances. It did not work that way in practise, and thus we had to use far more ammunition of all types than was calculated beforehand.”

Of all the nasty surprises the Tyranids for them, this one had perhaps been the worst, for it had completely changed the rapport of strength between attackers and defenders.

The Vostroyan General cleared his throat.

“I have also read the messages of Adjutant-Colonel Bellona urging me to consider the deployment of Heliosa Flowers on every world of importance.”

The mistress of the aforementioned spider chuckled.

“I suggest you do nothing of the sort for now. Did you see how many tons of fertilisers the Heliosa Flowers consume with each shot?”

“Your Adjutant gave me the figures, yes. We could find options to diminish it.”

“I am not convinced,” the Living Saint shook her head. “The ingenuity to use a Queen-ant to return one of the flowers to serve as an anti-air battery was well-done, yes. But what few people noticed was that at the end of the battle, the Heliosa Flower had pretty much killed all the flora in the neighbourhood to feed itself and continue firing.”

“It’s true that if we placed it on an Agri-World, it could represent...difficulties.”

“Difficulties? It could eat all the food we harvest, leaving millions to starve. We have continent-sized fields of wheat, barley, and many other things for a reason, General. It will do us no good if we save the planet by destroying the supply of grain and everything edible.”

“This is a good point.”

“Besides, I fear that this kind of planet-based defence can only work if the attacker is unwilling to destroy the planet in the process. The primary reason why the Task Force couldn’t incinerate the Heliosa Flowers every time they dug themselves out was that we would have razed Catachan by the time the process was done. And as such, the Heliosa Flowers would not save a world against a powerful Necron, or Chaos Astartes invasion.”

“Very true,” Nikolai conceded. “And I suppose that it is not something that can work more than a couple of times before our enemies grow wiser and learn how to detect them.”

The adoption of counter-measures, obviously, would come in short order after that.

“With your permission, however, I will study possible uses for it.”

“By all means,” the Basileia smiled. “We might never use it, but better to have that weapon in our arsenal if the opportunity presents itself. Other points of importance?”

“The Power Armours have proved their worth, and the more we have, the better our infantry fares against the worst things the galaxy can throw at us,” Nikolai said honestly. “But we already knew this from the Ymga Monolith and Macragge. We need more of them, obviously.”

“Dragon is working upon it, on her copious free time. But as always, building the industrial base to support everything is the priority these days. It will do us no good to deliver ten thousand Power Armours next year, and to realise in three decades that we can’t expend further from that because the groundwork hasn’t been done. Increasing the number of shifts and workers in armament complex is only a short-term solution.”

“I bow to your greater experience in these matters, your Celestial Highness. Can we obtain a vanguard of Titan Catachan Devils to act as a suitable vanguard instead, my Lady?”

“At least you didn’t propose I use it as a mount and a pet,” Lady Weaver grumbled. “To answer your question, the Catachan Devils are incredibly resistant to Swarm assimilation. Bellona forced several young ones to submit, but it only worked for these ‘babies’. The older the Catachan Devil, the bigger the struggle, and past a few years, I am the only one who can control a Devil. But it is very much akin to riding an apex predator; the moment I am not in range, the Catachan Devil will return to its usual levels of aggressiveness and savagery.”

This indeed sounded incredibly dangerous. Too bad. Nikolai Rokossovsky would have paid a lot to see a line of Traitor Marines be destroyed by the implacable pincers of an army of Catachan Devils.

“As for the Titan Devil itself, its place is exactly where it is right now: in the jungles of Catachan, hundreds of kilometres away from any human presence. We have markers to ensure any Catachan Jungle Fighter and other agents stay as far away as possible from it. It managed to kill one of the evolved prototypes the Genetors evolved from a Death Worm of Necromunda, something I wouldn’t have believed possible if my Spiders had not shown me the fight from their memories.”

“If your Genetors can do something like that, could they do the same for this outrageously-powerful ‘Guardian’?”

“No, General. I’m afraid the mighty ‘Guardian’ is something that is beyond all human Genetors, past and present.”

**The Amber Library**

**2.390.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“I have a feeling that if enough resources and Adjutant-Spiders were available, Taylor, you would rebuild the Imperium from the foundations to the top of the Hive’s spires.”

The compliment was pleasing, especially coming from Marianne, but years as the Basileia of Nyx ensured she wasn’t distracted by it.

“But?”

“But,” the Vicequeen smiled like an innocent feline, “contrary to what some people may believe, no one has an infinite amount of resources.”

“I know that.”

“And you insist that you won’t divert manpower and funds from your reforms.”

“Well, of course not,” the insect-mistress replied while handing a jar of sweets to Artemis. “We need to have very qualified teachers, and the Academia World we negotiated with has a reputation of quality, if not one of cheap prices. And I need an education system that won’t collapse the moment I will begin to look away from it. We have plenty of other things we can’t neglect either. There are food production goals to reach, big transport and infrastructure projects, to name just a few. And of course, contrary to what some people murmur, war doesn’t pay for itself.”

“We could name our beloved Vicequeen as Planetary Governor of Atlas Secundus,” Wei suggested, not changing her lazy behaviour on the red couch. She was instantly rewarded by a loud groan.

“How generous of you,” Marianne Gutenberg declared.

“Atlas Secundus is a rich prize,” the Regina of Wuhan declared unrepentantly.

“As long as you are happy to steal the income of the average Atlasian citizen, keep the majority of the population in a state of quasi-servitude, and make sure to limit all city and farmland infrastructure projects. That way, all the wealth is confiscated by the local aristocrats. Yes, the system is of a great stability, and you can become relatively rich doing that. But if you decide to improve the lifestyle of the non-nobles, the benefits are going to decrease at a stupendous rate.”

“The untapped potential can still make it a rich prize in the end.”

“Oh, yes,” the blonde agreed enthusiastically. “It has three inhabited worlds, and a population of sixteen-plus billion, after all. It is a crossroads for several Warp routes, most of them able to bring consequent revenues if you’re a prudent investor. But most of it has a single, big problem: the Atlas System is essentially controlled by a clique of Governor-Dukes that don’t tolerate outsiders.”

The beautiful blue eyes shone with mischievousness when the next words were uttered.

“Remove the three Dukes, and I would be willing to take the challenge of transforming Atlas from a poor backwater to a powerhouse that can stand proudly as a mercantile and trading partner of Nyx.”

It was tempting, really tempting.

And not just because Marianne was taking a very seductive pose.

“No,” the Basileia said regretfully. “I have enough reasons and legal precedent to remove the Arch-Duke, but I can’t remove the two others. Obviously, the investigations overseen by Inquisitor Mercoire have just begun, so a lot can change, but so far we’ve only found Chaos worshippers on Atlas Secundus.”

“You could purge them nonetheless.”

“Yes, thank you, Wei.” Artemis was of no help in that case, her Adjutant-General was already calculating the neat increase of performance this would generate militarily and economically. “Mind you, there are going to be purges. The Inquisition removed the Traitors, one the investigation moves on to the non-heretical side of things, I am sure more heads will roll. But I am not going to kill nobles just because they have had the bad luck of being born in a world that adheres to a rigid feudal system.”

“I see,” Marianne nodded. “In that case, whatever plan Guilliman is sending you by courier ship is certainly the best option you will have. You mentioned a Republic?”

Taylor raised an ironic eyebrow.

“Theoretical: Macragge is still a Republic de jure.”

“And the practical?” her wife wondered curiously.

“Well, Roboute Guilliman is the Eternal Consul of Macragge.” And the Second Consul, save in rare occasions, had always been the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines Chapter. Or before the Second Founding dissolved the M30-M31 organisation, one of the Chapter Masters of the Thirteenth Legion fulfilled the duties of the position. “And there is a Senate.”

“Does it have to do with Leet screaming something about ‘I am the Senate’ before cackling maniacally?”

“Yes, it does.” Taylor looked pointedly at Artemis. “And now that I think about it, I will certainly have to make sure all my precious Adjutants stay as far away from him now. Some of their reactions during Operation Hell Garden proved that during their sentinel duties, they may have listened *a bit too much* Leet’s monologues.”

“I will ferociously tackle the problem, Webmistress!”

“Yes, I’m sure you will. Ah.” Gavreel and Gamaliel were on their way, and there was only one reason why they would urgently return after they marched out half an hour ago. “It seems we are going to have to finish this conversation another time.”

“What a pity,” Wei yawned. “I hope this is not more bad news. One Atlasian tragedy is quite enough for this year.”

“No, I don’t think it is bad news. I could be wrong, but I think my faithful Astartes of the Dawnbreaker Guard are going to confirm that Aurelia Malys arrived. And I need to have an important talk with her.”

“Oh good!” the Regina’s grin was so huge the alarms rang in her head long before the verbal strike came. “Don’t do anything with the High Priestess of Atharti that I won’t do!”

Marianne, of course, burst into laughter.

“Vicequeen, you’re absolutely not helping...”

**Nyx**

**Somewhere in the South of the Dolos Continent**

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

**The Hope Beacon – in construction**

**2.392.313M35**

**High Priestess Aurelia Malys**

“Do you intend to always look so smug all the time?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. My Empress.”

Not far away, Liandra of Caledor laughed.

The Muse devoted to Atharti didn’t try to change her expression and her pose.

It was not every day Aurelia was in the Angel’s presence, and she could tell begging the giant spiders for their silk had been a sound decision. Her Empress was glancing very frequently at her body half-covered by the red robe made out of it.

“You are very, very smug.” It was not a complaint, but it was more than a statement too.

“So I can ask and receive everything I want?”

The former Blood Muse chose to express her hilarity again...and was promptly silenced by several spiders of different sizes.

“Within reason,” the ruler of the Swarm said. It was a title that had never been more deserved as around them, entire armies of insects built massive structures, patrolled as guards, and supplied the workers in a synchronisation that reminded her of several anthills. “The Emperor will veto any attempt to reclaim the World Spirit of Biel-Tan, for example. I think his reasoning is that after so many efforts doing a God-forging, it is out of the question for Atharti to swallow millions of warmongering souls and end up with some distorted version of Khaine once again.”

This was prudent of the Human Seer, yes. Because as much as she wanted to say the concerns were unwarranted, Aurelia didn’t really know what kind of influence the Biel-Tani souls could have over her young Goddess. The songs of those truly believing in Carnality and Symbiosis should be able to drown the choir of war, but what if it didn’t?

“I understand the restriction, my Empress.” The young High Priestess answered seriously, before showing her ‘smug’ smile once again. “But I wouldn’t be myself if I didn’t point out there are far more spirit stones of Asuryani that your Imperium confiscated since it has come into existence. And many of them weren’t like Biel-Tan.”

Weaver breathed out.

“The argument is a good one. That said, I can only promise what spirit stones are in the vaults of Terra personally monitored by the Custodes.”

“There may be a few in the trophy halls of the Chapters of the First Founding, my Lady,” one of the red-armoured giants chose to intervene. “Obviously, nothing of the loot acquired by the Traitor Legions is in our possession now, but I think some of the Chapters may have a few trinkets left.”

Aurelia hid a grimace. These were more than trinkets, these were unique souls that had been willing to risk being trapped, alone and forgotten, because the alternative was being devoured by She-Who-Thirsts!

But she was willing to tolerate the ignorance. The fate of many, many souls was at stake, and the giants were willing to ‘help’, no matter the past actions of their ancestors.

“Well, I don’t have much influence over the Dark Angels, never mind the Iron Hands, but we will check with the Chapters of the First and Second Founding. We can offer some kind of deal of brand-new weapons for spirit stones and other Eldar possessions.”

The imperial eyes flashed gold for a heartbeat.

“It goes without saying that I will insist that there will be no reprisals and no reopening of vengeance campaigns from any side after the deals are made. The Astartes were doing their duty, and the Craftworlds and other factions involved are generally not blameless either.”

“If we can obtain cherished souls and valuable possessions that were taken from us, I am ready to swear on Atharti that there will be no attacks to punish the wrongs of the past.”

Aurelia didn’t say out loud they were all too likely going to be too busy appeasing the traumatised souls and helping them find harmony within Atharti’s embrace to spend time pursuing wrongs. And the humans responsible were nearly all dead as they spoke.

“I, of course, came with a list.”

The Empress looked at her with an unsurprised glance. Aurelia almost wished to try to get closer to deliver it in her hands, as it would give her the opportunity to do a few more risky deeds, but it was not to be: the giant golden spider that answered to the rank of Adjutant-General stole the singer-document from her hand with the help of smaller red-black arachnids.

“Artemis?”

“It sounds acceptable, Webmistress! Of course, I will have to contact the Watchers and the Primarchs. They are the ones who have the biggest stashes of everything belonging to the long-ears!”

“Contact them. But no Astropath messages this time. I want a maximum of secrecy for this.”

“At once, Webmistress!” And over a thousand spiders ranging from the size of a flyer to ones which could fit at ease within the palm of your hand spread out, with ‘Artemis’ storming a nearby tunnel.

Plenty of giants and other human soldiers laughed, especially as in her precipitation, the spider had slightly disrupted the choreography of the Swarm’s moves, with the ‘excuse me!’ and ‘hurry up, I am in the Webmistress’ service’ particularly loud.

It didn’t last more than a short micro-cycle, however.

Both spiders and ants working knew their purposes, and they adapted very fast to unforeseen factors.

“This is a very massive Aetheric Engine, my Empress.”

This was not a Muse praising her Empress to win more favours; it was the naked truth. Save the humans, who had built their ‘Astronomican’ before going on to conquer the galaxy, there were few races which had dared imagining the construction of something so powerful.

And here, it was built in secret, with the air burning everywhere in orderly Light, to ensure the Primordial Annihilator was unable to perceive what was coming.

“Since the times are anything but peaceful, I find the entire project prudent.” There was one ironic smile blossoming on her lips. “And there is an ancient saying of Mankind that the wise prepares for war if they want peace.”

“We have a proverb not too dissimilar to yours,” the young Muse confessed. “The blades which have been broken, once abandoned, will not be of any use for those lacking foresight.”

Unfortunately, it was an old song of the lost Empire, and the translation in the tongue of today was really awful and hurting her ears.

No more words came, and Aurelia took it as an invitation to continue.

“I will bring the agreed help as fast and as discreetly as I can. There will be however one payment I expect in return.”

“What did I say about the smugness, High Priestess?”

“It is nothing too onerous!” She smiled innocently. “The Bonesingers have lovers and families, my Empress. I want their children and partners to be allowed a serene life into the Embassy we were given.”

There was a long silence.

“They will have to obey the strict procedures for each travel between Hive Athena and the Fortress of Light.” Her Empress said at last. “And I expect an excellent performance in return.”

“You will not be disappointed.” The High Priestess of Atharti promised. “This Aetheric Engine will stand for thousands of cycles and fulfil its purpose.”

There was nothing but calm acceptance coming from the Angel, but the giants and the humans around them were far easier to listen to.

“This is not the only Aetheric Engine you plan to build, my Empress.”

Weaver sighed.

“It is not. Prudence is the keyword, and we will build a second just to ensure that if the Ruinous Powers somehow manage to sabotage the first, we will have an Aetheric Engine to use to replace the first. But for now, finishing this Aetheric Engine and learning how to use it to its full potential...it is my goal for the next years.”

“And what is the Aetheric Engine going to do, aside from burning the tendrils of the Primordial Annihilator in this region of space?”

“Why I just don’t show you, oh Herald of Atharti?”