This is not an update – 31 January 2023

**The Warp**

**Custodes Battlecruiser *Vigilance***

**Primarch Magnus the Red**

The name of the ship was *Vigilance*, and it belonged to the Custodes.

Somehow, Magnus very much doubted it had begun its career with the golden-clad Watchers.

It was way too comfortable, for one. The Custodes didn’t reject everything when it came to decoration and furniture, but compared to Space Marines, their lifestyle definitely tended in direction of austerity and frugality.

So when the Battlecruiser had things like couches, a large library and some very comfortable things, the logical assumption was to think it had been some pet project of an Imperial Admiral who had ended the wrong way of a Guardian Spear, and then been ‘requisitioned’ by a faction inside the Adeptus Custodes.

This was all for the better. It was still a prison; the right to leave the compartment was denied to him. But it was something that made the travel a very tolerable affair, and gave him other things to think than endlessly worry about what fate awaited him at the end of the journey.

Of course, there were far less pleasant things stocked up in the compartment too. Some of them could be ignored.

The lifeless body of Fulgrim, contained within a casket surrounded by multiple stasis fields – and incidentally guarded by two Custodes and two Sisters of Silence – was not within his mental discipline to forget.

“It is difficult to remember he was considered one of the best of us,” Magnus began conversationally when he heard the loud footsteps of his brother.

“Was he?”

That was...really a complicated question.

“I think he was, yes. We should have told him to tone down the ‘perfection’, but hindsight is always so formidable after the tragedy...”

“He should have spoken to us.”

“He had not that many close friends.” Magnus said soberly.

“Ferrus-“

“Ferrus understood him...at least in some aspects. But he had no one among his Legion to confide in, Leman. Name me five artists or famous officers Fulgrim confided into.”

Not a single name came for seconds.

“I think Fulgrim doubted a lot. Much like Sanguinius did.” The Fifteenth Primarch continued. “But he was alone. He was inaccessible, atop his pillar of perfection, and there was no one to tell him the path he had chosen was going to end in catastrophe.”

“The Third Legion had many Loyalists in its ranks. The number the traitors had to purge at Isstvan from the Third Legion may be proportionally higher than the Sixteenth.”

“I won’t disagree with that.” Magnus grimaced. “But I fear the reason of their existence was that, ultimately, every Captain was in love with the idea of the Perfect Primarch, and of course perfection can’t throw itself into treachery and betrayal.”

This was alas, not something he could fully confirm. Leman had confirmed Rylanor had been recovered, but for evident reasons, Magnus had not been allowed to speak with him.

“He looks completely dead.” Yes, this was a far safer subject.

“When it comes to soul-severance, there’s not much difference, I would argue. Even the techno-arcane secrets of Terra are unable to restore something as complex as the bond between a soul and a body. As in many things, it’s easier to destroy than to create anew.”

“Could Father restore it?”

Magnus chuckled.

“Of course,” there were some advantages to be one of the most powerful psykers to ever have walked this galaxy. “Weaver could do it too, I suspect, with a proper sacrifice. The problem is the soul. It has to be recovered first...and I’m afraid I don’t know where it is right now. Decay tried to seal it away, but I find it all too likely the events which happened on Fenris destroyed or at least led to a serious imbalance of the ritual.”

Tzeentch had counted on it; that at least Magnus remembered. Even in defeat, the Power of Chaos Change had tried to keep its feathers open for more opportunities.

“Is there some hope?”

Magnus shrugged.

“That depends how much sanity is left in our brother’s soul. Speaking as someone who has experience in the matter, I would argue that yes, there’s some hope. Alas, I am not at all versed in the horror of having a Keeper of Secrets expel you from your own body.”

This would have been traumatic at the best of times. The fact that the final part of the ‘severance’ had been caused by the murder of Ferrus on the black sands of Isstvan V made the trauma far, far worse than Magnus could imagine...and he had an excellent imagination, courtesy of having witnesses horrors beyond reckoning.

“He was not the best of us. Sanguinius was.” The civil war had made that clear, at least. “But he should have been there, on the walls of the Imperial Palace, inspiring the defenders of Terra.”

“Like you.”

Magnus snorted.

“If I had been on Terra and in position to defend the Imperial Palace, brother, I would have been replacing our father on the Golden Throne, assuming I was powerful enough to endure the strain of it. That way, the hordes outside would have had to fight *him*.”

“I would have paid a lot to see that,” Leman Russ snorted in turn.

“It would have been quite an experience, I’m sure.”

Save Horus, who had been empowered by the Four, there was really no one to stand against the Emperor. Imperator Titans, millions of cultists, Ordinatus batteries, tens of thousands of Astartes Legionnaires, including the siege-breakers of the Iron Warriors...all of them together would have died in front of the Imperial Palace without making a single breach in the walls.

“Much like I don’t doubt you had an *interesting experience* attacking Fenris some millennia ago.” Russ growled.

Magnus would lie if he had said he had hoped this conversation wouldn’t come before they reached Terra.

“What were you trying to achieve when you attacked *the Fang* the first time, *brother*?”

The arrival of half a dozen Custodes in the compartment at this very moment was a curious *coincidence*, of course...

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Malfi Warp Crown**

**Malfi System**

**Malfi**

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

**Warlord Malicia, the Unwritten Destiny**

The day hadn’t certainly been boring.

There had been nine hundred and ninety-nine assassination major attempts upon her person alone.

Ax’senaea had not been forgotten, with close to three hundred lethal attacks.

Nearly everyone who had survived the Tyrant Star had faced a monster, a trap, or some unpleasant sorcerous stratagem. Dozens had already perished.

Tzeentchian cultists’ greatest trait was too often their ambition. Alas, their greatest sin was also their ambition.

And it made them blind.

Yes, she had suffered a defeat in the war against the King in Yellow. But most of the covens and conspiracies who had decided to strike had absolutely no idea of the *why* and the *how*.

They had practised with daemons, heard the word defeat, and concluded she wasn’t a leader which wasn’t worth following.

On the one hand, it was a relief. Those idiots rarely made valuable warriors, servants, or whatever role was important among her forces. It was better to purge them before they were elevated to a position where their incompetence would do *real* damage.

On the other hand, the number of conspirators who had been caught red-handed was still incredibly concerning. Malfi had billions of Tzeentchian worshippers, so approximately nine thousand cabals eager to kill her were a slim minority. But many of them had been middle-ranked sorcerers, not the failures that were so common in a sorcery-dominated society. Real powerhouses had supported these attempts with reagents, lore, and souls. They had not been willing to test the waters in person, but at least a few dozen Magisters of Q’Sal must have been involved.

Malicia had waited until she retired to her private quarters and cast several protection spells before her visage showed her apprehension.

The Tyrant Star had been a defeat, that much couldn’t be denied, but it had been a tactical one. The only ship whose loss would have really hurt was her flagship, and it had survived intact. Of the ground forces, the only things the blue-eyed sorceress couldn’t replace were Ax’senaea, the Space Marines, and of course her own life.

The rest? Many of the cults chosen for the ‘honour’ had been chosen to be sacrificed in the first place. The King in Yellow’s forces had just accelerated their demise.

That the most powerful sorcerers and influential souls of Malfi knew this for sure and yet were already to turn on her was not something promising.

Many plans would have to be modified.

“But let’s begin with things I can change for the next days,” the platinum-haired parahuman whispered. “Assassins and the so-called reinforcements we received will wait for another round of conspiracies and betrayals.”

The successive victories the Imperium had won over Lorgar and all the forces of the Black Crusade had had very unpleasant effects for all the servants of the God who had launched their insurrection as the Grand Armada had sailed past Cadia.

Be they corrupted Medicae in service of the Grandfather, genocidal butchers of the Blood God, or ambitious nobles serving Tzeentch, there were many billions of humans and non-humans rebelling against the adamantium fist of Terra.

A large majority had expected help to come, if not from the Seventeenth Legion, at least from some warbands able to provide orbital support and heavy weapons.

This support, needless to say, had never materialised.

And now, they were all fleeing the vengeful retribution of the Imperium. As the defences of Cadia and the nearby Fortress Worlds included an impressive number of Battlefleets and pirate-hunting Squadrons, the Calyx Hell Stars were looking more and more like a nice alternative to the Eye of Terror.

The next years were certainly going to be interesting in that regard...provided she survived them.

“The loss of all the Rubricae was a particularly painful blow,” the sorceress acknowledged to herself as she got rid of her blue armour, “I can’t trust them to be my bodyguards...and most of them were part of the coup which was prepared in the seventy-seventh plot.”

The ex-Rubricae had been given a chance to leave, but few of them had taken up her offer. Well, they better should have, because Malicia wasn’t in the habit of giving second chances, and the Thousand Sons would not be an exception.

“At least I was able to gain valuable insight.”

The blue-eyed parahuman sang a spell of nine syllables, and a secret passage was revealed.

Seconds later, the Tzeentchian female warlord was entering one of her own magical ateliers.

Unavoidably, a not-insignificant amount of time was spent checking no one had been able to access the room.

A rival or an assassin having found his – or its – way here could have trapped this atelier in dozens of way, and all of them could result in a titanic explosion of power that would kill her instantly.

But to her relief, there had been no intrusion.

“Now the list of the ‘ingredients’...first, one empty Power Armour of the pattern used by an arrogant Thousand Son Astartes.”

To be honest, it had taken more time to clean up the armour than to kill the Astartes and make a lesson out of him. Had you any head how many places blood could go when you slaughtered someone with a barbed blade?

“The second critical part is the Eye of Transmutational Changestone, with nine souls of psykers bound to it.”

Obviously, it was far bigger than a human eye. It was as big as one of the Necron ‘Orbs’ Malicia had stolen from the Ymga Monolith. Incidentally, the Tzeentchian-changed Noctilith was coming from the same location.

“Nine wards crystallised and poured into the symbols of lapis-lazuli and gold.”

It had been far more time-intensive to create than to alter the Changestone into an orb-shaped form.

“An arcano-engine in form of heart.”

This one was truly a marvel of sorcerous inventiveness...and this was the only thing the young sorceress hadn’t been able to fabricate with her own magic and hands.

It had required the expensive services of a Q’Sal Magister...and though it was a question of survival, and no fault had been found in the work...Malicia didn’t like owing anything to anyone.

The heart was blue, and pulsating like a true heart.

“And last but not least...the tablet the sons of Change dug many ruins to find.”

It had been divided in many parts, and the Astartes and many warbands had to travel and fight across the entire Calyx Hell Stars to find them all.

From an inexperienced eye, it seemed hardly worth the effort.

The stone used was seemingly very ordinary, a light shade of grey, and many lesser glyphs had been erased by the ravages of time.

But there was a word which remained carved in the stone.

A single word.

In High or Low Gothic, or any language used by Mankind since the third millennium, this would have been a historical curiosity, nothing more.

But what was on this tablet?

It was as much a tool as a weapon.

It was *Enuncia*, and its origins may have been linked to the mythical Tower of Babel, though even with the support of several Greater Daemons, Malicia hadn’t been able to acquire the evidence to support her theory.

“Now,” the Unwritten Destiny steeled herself, “the creation of the Majestryx Golem can begin.”

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Tanstar System**

**88 Tanstar**

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

**Typhus the Traveller**

“BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!”

“The leader of the Khornate forces is the priority. I want him alive.” Typhus would not waste his dignity trying to out-shout a small army of bloodthirsty madmen screaming like if it was a question of life or death for them.

“And these strange corrupted tech-savants, Herald?” gurgled one of his more recent conversions into a Plague Marine.

“Kill them and quickly,” the being who hosted the Destroyer Hive inside himself replied. “We will wonder how many the new favourite of the Skull Throne rallied to her banners later.”

“By the will of the Grandfather.”

“Decay will reign supreme. We are in position, First Captain.”

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!”

The horde of Khornate nearly tripled in size as Bloodletters and other red-skinned servants of Khorne poured into reality.

It was a respectable force, but Typhus had expected nothing else.

The Tanstar System was one of the ‘Gates’ of the Calyx Hell Stars, one of the rare nodes even a Nurglite fleet like his was forced to go through if it wanted to enter the war zone with intact Battleships.

Years ago, Lotara Sarrin had punched through its defences and captured it, profiting from a severe degree of unpreparedness of the Tzeentchian garrison. The new conquerors had then transformed it into a massive slaughterhouse.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR**-“

*Lakrimae* struck, and the first marauder had his two arms removed.

The roar of defiance rapidly died, as the Death Guard Marines struck relentlessly their mortal opponents, and the Khornate warriors quickly realised they weren’t bleeding.

*Lakrimae* struck twice more before the next predictable battle-cry was screamed.

“**KHORNE DOES NOT CARE**-“

“Yes, your God does not care from where the blood flows.” Typhus said out loud with a twinge of sarcasm. “That’s why all the Manreapers of the Grandfather’s Chosen have been blessed by an absolutely delectable substance which cauterises your wounds, making sure not a single drop of your blood will irrigate this wasteland.”

*Lakrimae* struck again.

The Death Guard advanced.

“**BLASPHEMY**!”

“No,” Typhus countered, “I use my strengths to win a battle. And I try to deny my enemies theirs.”

The rest of the battle devolved into a one-sided massacre.

There had been only seven hundred and seventy-seven Space Marines to take the field today, with each of the Seven Great Companies represented, by the will of the Grandfather and Mortarion.

The Khornate army had been, of course, deploying far greater numbers, but not a single Astartes.

It was an excellent sign the Blood God’s Champions had not anticipated their arrival. There were arrogant warlords serving the Conqueror’s Mistress, but none were sufficiently stupid to believe their mortal Bolter-fodder could stop an assault of hundred of Death Guard veterans.

“BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!”

This was a good harvest, and Typhus grunted in satisfaction as more and more Bloodletters were disappearing without a fight, all the while the Death Guard’s artillery began the long bombardment of highly-contagious diseases it was famed for.

The lack of blood on the battlefield was a disaster for the Khornate army, and as Typhus took step after step, Warp-spawned flies began to answer his act of devotion. The grandfather was watching, and he was finding his work *good*.

Typhus felt the power pouring in his two hearts, but he didn’t release the Destroyer Hive or the Winds of Chaos. There was a plan, and it didn’t involve showing his power to these weaklings.

Besides, what would be the point? The battle was over, and the servants of the Blood God had lost it.

“Herald,” a Captain of the 2nd Great Company gurgled joyously. “We have him! Intact and protected from our Blight, as per your wishes!”

“Excellent!” Typhus complimented the other officer. “My word is the Grandfather’s. The blessing will be yours. Bring him to me. I am approaching the Convergence Site.”

The Herald of Nurgle had never doubted victory would belong to the Grandfather’s today. Seven Battleships against a tiny flotilla? No one could really lose with an advantage that massive. And on the ground, while the world had been in the grasp of the Blood God, it had not been fully converted into a realm of the Gods.

And, of course, the World Eaters weren’t here.

“The Bloodthirsters will make a mountain of your skulls! The Axes of Murder will play with your entrails! The-“

The eyes of the Khornate leader, a tattooed brute almost the height of a small Astartes, flinched as he saw Typhus for the first time. And his imprecations ceased immediately, which was somehow satisfying.

“You are the Traveller.”

“So you’ve heard of me. I would say I am flattered...but you are too insignificant for that emotion to reach my rotten hearts.”

The last servant of the Blood God to remain alive spat. Being completely at his mercy, it wasn’t like he could do anything else...but Typhus made sure nonetheless the blood that was spat ended on *Lakrimae* rather than one the ground.

“You took Tanstar today, but you will never keep it. The *Conqueror* will learn of your presence. It will come. And it will devour you all. No one runs away from the *Conqueror*.”

Typhus didn’t bother wasting words with the prisoner. Instead, he merely nodded to the Captain that had been given the holiest duty of the battle.

The Legionnaire immediately knelt, before opening a small reliquary – formerly one made by the worshippers of the False Emperor, it had been desecrated for centuries before playing its key role today.

The moment it was done, the Grandfather’s miasma came into existence. It was the same pleasant colour as the shade of the potion brewing in the Grandmaster’s cauldron.

Naturally, the ground around the reliquary began to transform into a swamp.

Such was the power of what he had been given to accomplish his God’s purposes.

“What heresy is this?”

“Heresy? Be polite, wretch. The warlords of this region have used Changestone and Haematia for their childish purposes. You should have known it was only a question of time we would use our own version in our rituals.”

By the way the servant of Blood God paled, it didn’t seem to have crossed in mind. But then, this warrior had clearly not been chosen for his brains.

“With the blessed contagion of Jaderot,” Typhus proclaimed so that mortal, Astartes, and Gods alike heard him. “I claim this planet in the name of the Grandfather! And I rename it 77 Cholera...a far better name than this Tanstar nonsense.”

The Herald turned his again to stare at the prisoner.

“Prepare the final ritual, brothers.”

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Morwen System**

**Morwen VI**

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

**Magister Immaterial Nouakchott**

The world of Morwen VI was dead.

It had not already been that way. The fossils of long dead lifeforms were easy to recover as long as you bothered to search for them. There were considerable deposits of fuel and natural gas, that many of his disciples were busy harvesting, so that they would eventually be sold to various parties on Malfi.

But while life had existed on Morwen VI, it had clearly been very long ago.

The estimates of the Magister Immaterial, founded on several pacts with his patrons and long archaeological researches, were that thirty thousand or so years ago, an unknown cataclysm had wiped out all life on Morwen VI.

Nouakchott still didn’t know much about it. All he could say for certain that no human was responsible, and that it had been in a very short of amount of time, a couple of years by the longest estimate.

The post-apocalyptic effects were easy to study however. The entire atmosphere of the planet had become nitrogen.

Fortunately, it was rather easy for a Magister of his seniority to deal with this. The Great Mutator’s boons had proven once again without equal; the warband he had led to Morwen VI saw their lungs and bodies modified until they could breathe nitrogen effortlessly.

Where the pathetic slaves of the False Emperor would have been unable to make a first survey without cumbersome protection, Nouakchott had been able to build a true fortress and underground facilities in record time.

This was necessary, for while many of his slaves were utterly disposable, the rest of his warband wasn’t, and a lot of them needed food and water.

Thus large food production facilities were expanded right now as Nouakchott admired the mystery he had come to study and claim in the name of the Great Mutator.

Morwen VI was dead.

But its ruins had survived the ravages of cataclysm and entropy.

Though to call ‘ruins’ what he could observe with his improved eyes was almost a sacrilege, really.

The two-tiered ziggurats of Morwen VI were intact.

Whatever comics disaster or super-weapon had annihilated all life, it had had no effect whatsoever on the structures.

It was...impressive.

Yes, the ziggurats were made of thick plates of metal. But that shouldn’t have been sufficient if the equivalent of an Exterminatus was performed.

There wasn’t one scratch on any of the nine ziggurats that represented his main ‘archaeological study site’.

No alloy known to the slaves of the False Emperor or those bathing in the knowledgeable light of Tzeentch was capable of that.

And Magister Immaterial Nouakchott had already verified; no, it wasn’t Necron structures.

Ever more surprising was that the first studies had revealed that while the ziggurats had no entrance, the structures were really how, and regular electronic pulses were generated within.

But with the strange metallic alloy impenetrable to the tech-sorcery of Q’Sal for now, the mystery was not going to be easy to solve.

It didn’t bother Nouakchott, really.

The favour of the Great Mutator was not something to dismiss, ever, but the Magister Immaterial had not come for Morwen VI because he thought there were secrets here that after one year or two, would instantly elevate him above his peers in the treacherous sorcery courts of Malfi.

No, Morwen VI was always to be intended to be a long-term project.

“Lord Magister! There is a major problem!”

“The ziggurats? The food reserves?” Nouakchott asked, his instincts of self-preservation on the move again.

“No, Lord Magister. It is...some kind of Cruiser has come out of the Warp incredibly close to the fourth planet of the system. And well...”

“What? Get on with it?”

“They have sent a single message. They claim to be here by the will of the King in Yellow...and they want our surrender. Otherwise...they say our deaths will be proportional to the seconds we forced them to waste.”

Magister Nouakchott sneered. Well, the enemy had style, if nothing else.

“Alert Malfi we have a slight skeleton problem here. We do not officially request reinforcements,” given how predatory his peers could be, that would be the equivalent of cutting his own throat, “but inform our colleagues the Usurper has for the first time deployed a warship deep into the Morwen System.”

“Yes, Lord Magister! But...we don’t even know what the enemy is after...”

“Don’t try to make yourself dumber than you already are,” Nouakchott answered. “The only thing that is worth the presence of a military force here is the ziggurats. And they won’t have their secrets. Morwen VI belongs to the Great Mutator! Activate all the defences, and muster the warband! In the name of **Tzeentch**, we will be victorious!”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Urum**

**Consortium Primary Headquarters**

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

**Lord Commander Primus Eidolon**

Eidolon didn’t believe he had ever hated a single being like he hated like now Fabius Bile.

It was a maelstrom of negative emotions powering him. It was an ocean of violence he was dreaming every second to unleash against his tormentor.

It was pure hatred.

And he couldn’t lift a single finger to accomplish it, despite being clad in his immaculate Power Armour and his arms being present in their scabbard and holsters.

“I am the Lord Commander Primus.”

“Yes, what a lovely weather we have today, my dear.” Bile didn’t even turn his head away from the alien he was vivisecting. “The thing that pretends to be a weather wizard told me we will have acid rains before the day is over.

“I am the Lord Commander Primus!”

“I know, no large field test for your forces today. I hope you will survive the disappointment!”

Eidolon went silent and glared. This wasn’t what he wanted to say, and the eternally-cursed ‘Clonelord’ knew it!

But there was no way he could shout it out loud.

Once he had risen once again alive from the surgeon table, Eidolon had realised all the horror of what Fabius Bile had done to him.

The only words he was physically capable of saying were ‘I am the Lord Commander Primus.’ He could change the tone. He could change the accent. He could change the pace. But no matter what he thought he was saying, the end result was always the same.

Bile had rewired his brain and deliberately limited it in many ways. His body obeyed Bile’s commands immediately now. Sometimes he couldn’t even breathe as long as Bile didn’t give him the permission!

And most frustrating above all, his evident hatred was nothing to the Lord of the Consortium.

The treacherous ex-Chief Apothecary of the Emperor’s Children continued his work, torturing aliens, examining the organs of his ‘patients’ while they screamed in agony or were frozen by strange toxins.

There was nothing to do but wait, and think about all the ways Eidolon could make the insane madman scream when one day he would be free.

After several hours of long and boring vigil, a four-armed mutant entered the lair of Fabius Bile, prostrating himself the moment he was past the vats containing various misbegotten green-shining organs.

“Master,” the male mutant croaked. “A Dark Apostle beg for a moment of your time.”

“A Dark Apostle, really?” Fabius abandoned the corpse of what may have been long ago a human, but now had grown a chitinous carapace and at least ten eyes on each arm.

Eidolon too began to feel a slight interest. Most rumours which had begun to spread told the sons of Lorgar had been exterminated to the last at Macragge, along with their idiotic Primarch.

If there was a Word Bearer here, clearly the rumours may have been just that, rumours...

“He has the armour of the Seventeenth, Master.”

“Very well,” one could easily recognise when the eyes of Bile shone with curiosity, “bring him here.”

“Yes, Master.”

The wait was rather long. For all the fact this very citadel was the primary headquarters of the Consortium, no one was really safe here if your name wasn’t Bile. The mutants and the other breeds of ‘new humans’ – or whatever name the Clonelord gave them – would never act their creator, but the Marines who weren’t able to enjoy the favour of the ‘Primogenitor’ would rapidly discover Urum could be really, really dangerous for the newcomers.

At last, the four-armed ‘guide’ was back, preceding a Word Bearer.

For all his own pathetic situation of lab rat and bodyguard, Eidolon felt his lips twitch.

The son of Lorgar had been punished by the Gods. A lot. Horns had grown upon his head, but while they could have been a sign of favour, here it was clearly not the case.

The horns were enormous, so large that even with the extra-large door, the Dark Apostle had to be wary of not slamming them against anything.

It didn’t stop there. Part of the left arm had clearly been turned into black crystal. The right leg had a mass of purple tentacles covering it.

This was not the worse mutations Eidolon had ever seen – this honour belonged to a few Chaos Spawns – but it was not good at all. And it was sure as the Warp painful; black ichor was dripping on the ground now that the Word Bearer had stopped walking, and the ugly teeth were constantly grinding in pain until there was an attempt to speak.

“Lord Bile. Thank you for giving me an audience so promptly.”

“I was curious,” the former Chief Apothecary admitted quite candidly for once. “I had heard Weaver had exterminated your entire Legion at Macragge...your presence here tells me quite clearly the news I received weren’t completely accurate.”

As a professional when it came to hatred, Eidolon didn’t miss the one which dominated everything in the Word Bearer’s eyes when ‘Weaver’ was uttered.

“Her armies came quite close to finish us,” the son of Lorgar confessed after what was an ugly grimace. “Guilliman killed our gene-sire after she toyed with him. And the armies deployed on Macragge inflicted us a severe defeat. We had already lost a majority of our forces, but we lost close to thirty thousand Legionnaires between the battles for Macragge City and Pharsalus. The Gods saved a few of us at the end. That’s how I stand in front of you today.”

Eidolon was used to considerable butcher bills. Yet here, he could only stare aghast. Huge losses like that one had never been reported since the Siege of Terra. Yes, the Emperor’s Children had died recently, but it had been because Slaanesh was dead.

“I heard the Naga and our dear Lucius went with you.” Bile pressed on.

“I don’t know what happened to them,” the Dark Apostle replied. “The Naga went missing on Fenris. Lucius sided with Erebus, trying to use a Webway Gate somewhere on Laphis. We know Erebus perished. His screams are heard everywhere in the realm of the Blood God.”

“That’s very good news.” Fabius grinned. “I’m thinking I will throw a party for the occasion. The Vile One’s getting what he so richly deserved is worth a good celebration, I think.”

The son of Lorgar stayed silent as Bile turned to examine some of his experiments, singing a tune Eidolon didn’t recognise.

It didn’t take a lot of imagination to know the Priest of the Dark gods was seething, though. Not because of Erebus – the Vile One was hated by everyone, his death a reason to celebrate across all Legions – but because of how little the former Chief Apothecary visibly cared that the Seventeenth Legion was on the edge of extinction.

It wasn’t a surprise for Eidolon; the Lord Commander had seen firsthand Bile was absolutely not concerned that the Third Legion had been wiped out.

“Weaver is an existential threat. You need to-“

Fabius Bile raised a single finger in admonishment.

“I’m not a military specialist, dear, but I think Weaver taught you quite a lesson. If you don’t want her to finish the job, I would advise staying at least ten-thousand years away from her at all times. But that’s just a modest suggestion of mine, I am just a humble scientist with little knowledge of military matters.”

Eidolon silently scoffed at the enormity of the lies...humble scientist...no knowledge of military matters...really next thing was Fabius going to insist next he was just the lab janitor?

“We want to rebuild the Seventeenth Legion.”

“And I want an authentic coffee before I begin my arduous day of work,” Bile sarcastically retorted. “The true coffee we transported at ruinous logistical costs from Terra during the Great Crusade, not this abomination of ‘recaff’ everyone seems content to mix with Martian oil.”

“I am not joking, Clonelord!”

“Son of Lorgar, I am not joking either. Your desires are absolutely not my first, second, or third priority. In fact, I think they don’t figure *anywhere* in my list of priorities. Eidolon! Please escort our guest out! Preferably through an alley that doesn’t hinder his...formidable horns the parasites gave him!”

As always, Eidolon tried to resist. Once again, he failed. The Lord Commander felt like a puppet on strings as he walked towards the son of Lorgar.

“Wait! We can make a bargain!”

“You have no expertise whatsoever in the art of genetic experimentation,” Fabius proclaimed with this annoying voice of ‘I am so great, why anyone can’t understand it?’. “But all right, I will humour you. Bargain, Apostle. And if I don’t find it interesting, you’re the next test subject I will experiment upon today. The Lord Commander Primus can confirm it is not an enjoying position. Please talk, my dear.”

“I am the Lord Commander Primus.”

The Word Bearer’s horror at what Eidolon had suffered was...something. The Emperor’s Children officer didn’t really know how he should take it.

But at least the son of Lorgar realised how perilous his situation was.

Immediately a little flask was revealed from a cache hidden by the cape of flayed skin he wore.

The little armaglass container was clearly near-empty.

“The Blue Bacta I was able to obtain at Macragge,” the Dark Apostle explained, “we had to kill twenty Space Marines to reach the Apothecary, and even then, the guardian tried his best to deny it to us.”

“Melusine.”

As if she had always been there and reality only registered it now, the daemoness-looking ‘daughter’ of the Clonelord was there.

“Father?”

“Is he saying the truth?”

There was a...Eidolon didn’t know how to explain it. It was if the entire lab froze for an instant.

“Yes. Yes, it is Blue Bacta in this flask. I advise...extreme precautions into wielding it. Even diluted, it would be quite lethal for you, Father.”

“Duly noted, my dear.” Bile’ eyes returned to the Word Bearer’s emissary. “Very well, Apostle of the Seventeenth Legion. It seems I made a mistake. You have something worthy to bargain. Here are the terms I ready to propose...”

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Civitas**

**2.850.310M35**

**Legate Galatea Dumas**

Galatea has seen the vid-picts of Macragge City looked like after the last heretic was killed.

It had not been a pretty sight. A large part of the city had been spared the house-to-house fighting, but even there, tanks and Knights had barrelled forwards, giving little thought to the marvels built to commemorate the holy victories of the Great Crusade.

And wherever the battle had been truly fought...the Legate winced at the memory. Heavy artillery and Space Marine assaults had torn apart the blue marble and the columns the homeworld of the Ultramarines was so renowned for.

Today? It was difficult to say it was the same city which had endured the worst the heretics could throw at it.

Crowds were everywhere, cheering and applauding, as the military parade entered its third hour of celebrations. The traces of the carnage had all been removed, be it debris, corpses, or the explosives the Imperial Guard had used.

It went without saying that Macragge had not been rebuilt. One of the reasons there were vast locations where over one thousand men, women, and children could assemble with ease was that many buildings had been declared unsalvageable and razed shortly after.

Galatea had thought it would be impossible. After all, while Macragge City was not declared a Shrine City by the Ecclesiarchy, there had been a lot of voices against it.

“To be honest, your Celestial Highness, I’m a bit surprised the Primarch let you dismantle so much of his city.”

The black-haired Living Saint chuckled.

“I think that the number of hours I promised that my ants could demolish the ruined buildings played a large part. Well, that and the Inquisitors wanted Lisa to illuminate everything with no stones left unturned. The corruption of the Traitor Seventeenth is no small matter, after all.”

An enormous mouth opened next to them...along with a pitiful sound that would have been quite comical if it wasn’t so loud.

Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, Chosen of the God-Emperor, sighed theatrically...before grabbing a large strawberry arrived this morning from the Agri-World of Nova Thulium, and throwing it in the mouth of the avid fruit-eater.

“My Adjutant-Spiders have a honey addiction, and you, you have a strawberry one, Lisa,” Her Celestial Highness told her Titan-Moth. “You’re quite lucky Nova Thulium is cultivating strawberries. They are using them to make high-quality strawberry jam, you know.”

The rumbling sound of the immense insect could have been interpreted as a ‘please tell me more, Mistress’.

The real translation in Moth-speak must not be far from it, for the Lady Nyx snorted immediately after.

“You are incorrigible. Now give me some light, you need to amaze the children.”

The presentation of several huge strawberries – seriously, who cultivated these things, they had to be the size of an Amazonian watermelon – was all the ‘convincing’ Lisa required, and soon large orbs of pure light materialised, delighting the crowd...and did a last verification that everyone that passed the purification rituals was indeed true in his or her soul.

“That will do wonders for morale.”

Galatea coughed.

“Even a certain Dreadnought and his abnormally large hat? The Legate of the Templar Sororitas inquired politely as the Macraggian population sang the name of Lisa.

“Even him...have you seen how many decorations and pelts the Space Wolves buried the poor Rylanor under?”

“The Fenrisians are overcompensating?”

“Or more likely, they gave him the garb of Bjorn the Fell-Handed, who refused to parade and preferred to keep an eye upon his Primarch. This wasn’t announced officially, but the old Dreadnought stormed the Custodes ship before the Lord of Wolves could find a semi-adequate excuse.”

Seen like that, the red-clad officer had to admit it was a really, really plausible theory.

“I see.” Galatea watched the crowd...and the ‘guards’ making a wall of ceramite and Power Armours between the spectators and the regiments advancing and saluting Her Celestial Highness, before turning towards the Ultima Avenue. “This still feels surreal. Even after Commorragh, there weren’t that many Space Marines in a single location.”

“It is surreal, and in more ways than one. I didn’t expect to heal Guilliman, you know. Certainly not this year, and there was a strong likelihood it wouldn’t be done this century at all.”

“And yet you did it...your Celestial Highness.”

“Cawl deserves some of the praise too,” the commanding officer of Operation Stalingrad saluted the Indigan and Catachan guardsmen parading next to the high platform installed for Lisa. “But yes, I did it. And now we have a large assembly of every Successor Chapter the Thirteenth Legion founded since M31.”

The Living Saint didn’t need to say it was a spectacular sight. It was obvious.

Some of the Space Marines were from Chapters whose Companies had bled and paid an enormous price during the war many were already calling the Cataclysm of Macragge: Iron Hounds, Genesis Chapter, and Brazen Consuls to name just a few.

But there were entire Companies which had arrived since the Tyranids were annihilated. The Nemesis Chapter alone had arrived this morning with two full Companies and a Battle-Barge. Two days ago, it had been a Company of Black Consuls and Novamarines each.

Aurora Chapter, Mortifactors, Scythes of the Emperor, Inceptors, and Tome Keepers were just a few of the names that had just transformed from names on sacred vellum to a reality of Bolters, Power Armours, and Land Raiders.

“Perhaps I’m a Sororitas who knows how to hold a grudge, your Celestial Highness, but I can’t but help the campaign would have been far easier if we had all of those Astartes with us when we fought the Ymga Monolith and the other horrors. I trust the Chapters of the Blood, but here I see as many Ultramarines Successors as they were Astartes present mustered in the Nyx Sector.”

“A bit of an exaggeration, that,” the Macragge heroine said while petting distractedly Lisa, who swallowed strawberry after strawberry. “We had a lot of Space Marines, even if most were not deployed alongside Battle Group Volga. And many paid the price.”

Galatea nodded with a grimace. The operations against Necron redoubts had been conducted in an exemplary manner; the Howling Griffons alone had won many splendid victories to add to their rolls of honour. But when it had turned badly...the Space Marines were good. But too often, when an entire Necron Tomb-World awakened, ‘good’ was not enough.

The Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes had been key in winning new legendary battles with Lady Weaver. But it was going to take decades before they restored their full potential, for many of their veterans had died killing Necrons, Daemons, Traitor Marines, and Tyranids.

“I won’t deny it would have been nice to have them, though the key thing that would really have helped considerably would have been a logistical hub on the doorstep of all our operations. Tigrus and the other Forge Worlds were more than adequate for the first phase, but the moment the fighting moved towards Damocles, more or less everything relied upon our supply fleets.”

The Living Saint smiled serenely.

“But if anything, their numbers here today prove that while their prestige is not what it was, the Ultramarines Successors form an essential part of the Adeptus Astartes’ effectives, and it isn’t likely to change...not with their Primarch returned.”

Galatea would lie a lot if she had not considered some of the implications. Roboute Guilliman, Leman Russ, Corvus Corax. As many gene-lines of Space Marines that suddenly had the opportunity to create new Astartes...though in the Ultramarines’ case, they might have to wait for a bit, given that their Primarch was imbedded in his regeneration-armour-device.

“Let’s cheer for everyone, most particularly the children,” Lady Taylor Hebert said softly, throwing one more strawberry to the Titan-Moth, who made a sound of absolute joy. “We won this war, and tomorrow will come soon enough with its headaches...”

**Brigadier-General Tanya Sevrev**

War was a brutal affair, and when the Traitor forces had tried to storm Macragge, they hadn’t made a difference between the administration buildings and the places where the citizens of Macragge spent their evenings drinking.

This had demanded a great deal of adaptation when the guns went silent, though guardsmen were nothing but adaptable.

Of course, since the Fay 20th had been on Laphis, the best accommodations had already been taken when they returned from Ardium.

That was a minor inconvenience, really. A commercial centre had been promptly turned into a respectable tavern after its owner was convinced by some good sums of Throne Gelts, and when the Lady General Militant and Lord Commissar Zuhev turned a blind eye to some requisitions of beer and other drinks among the supply fleet, everything was possible.

“And we pushed the barrels! For this was a matter of honour! There may be ten times our weight in this ugly steel no proper Smith would accept, but we pushed! This was the Royal’s Fair, and the honour of Ur-Tabriz was at stake! My back ached, my beard was telling me to stop, but I pushed the barrel...and I won!”

The story of the Slayer – not Borek, the troublemaker had disappeared somewhere with Leet – finished his story under thunderous applause.

“BOY!” The Squat roared, generating more hilarity, for the ‘boy’ was a Catachan guardsman who had the muscles of a small Ogryn. “BRING ME ANOTHER BARREL! THIS STORY IS MAKING ME THIRSTY!”

“Splendid oration skills,” someone whispered, and Tanya jumped on her feet...before realising the identity of exactly who had sneaked upon her.

“Lord Corax,” the Brigadier-General saluted in a hurry, “forgive me I was-“

“You were having a good time, it’s me who has to apologise.”

“Err...yes...” What did you say when on the little alcove on the third floor of the commercial centre-turned-tavern, you had to converse with a Primarch. I love your raven feathers? You are perhaps the first man in my life I find somewhat attractive?

“You...you aren’t with Lady Weaver?”

“No, and neither I am with my sons,” the Primarch of the Raven Guard said with a melancholic expression. “Their joy of seeing me, speaking with me...I wonder if I am worthy of it.”

“But Lord, you are...”

“A Primarch? That much isn’t in doubt.” Shadows swirled around the Ravenlord’s hands, and a cup filled with some Macraggian drink materialised in each. “But is it something to be proud of? In this day and age, we aren’t part of the Imperium you live in every day.”

“AH, MY BARREL! The Squat roared in pleasure, before beginning to empty it at a speed that was frankly either admirable or incredibly worrying. Pick your choice. “Where was I?”

“The third round of the Royal Fair!”

“The Royal Fair is simple, boys!” The Slayer managed to explain between two cups. “The Judges give a barrel to each of the Champions! You drink it! You ask another! When you’re the last Champion to ask for another barrel...when the other little drinkers are having nice dreams and are snoring loud enough to imitate a grox...YOU WIN!”

At least it provided a nice change of idea, and for a second or two Tanya almost forgot there was a Primarch next to her. Almost.

“They have changed the name, I think.” The Primarch said, for once a smile appearing on his pale face. “Father told me a few stories about it once. I think they called it the High King’s Fair millennia ago.”

Tanya blinked.

“The...the Emperor Himself was among the spectators of a Duardin’s Fair?”

Corvus Corax scratched his raven-coloured hair.

“The way he told us the tale, I think he wasn’t the Emperor when it happened. And he wasn’t among the spectators. He was one of the participants.”

This definitely caught Tanya aback...but only for a few seconds.

“Well...” the Fay guardswoman said weakly, “I suppose the first two trials aren’t impossible...they were trials of strength, after all...and he’s the Emperor. The third, however...err...I have seen Duardin drink, and...err...”

The Primarch chuckled.

“I believe my father said it was an excellent training to challenge Russ and Vulkan in drinking contests. Especially Russ. My dear brother has a talent none of us ever managed to equal in that domain. We joked several times during the party after the Ullanor Triumph he should have been made the Ale-master or the Tavern-master.”

That was...well, it was good to know.

“BOY! I AM STILL THIRSTY! WHERE IS THE NEXT BARREL?

**Esquiline Senatorial Forum**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

Roboute Guilliman had changed.

Some of these changes, Aeonid thought, were quite obvious and his father was undoubtedly aware of them.

Some were not and may be evident to only someone like him.

Of course, when you went so close to death only to come back millennia later, the changes were not so surprising.

Still, it was quite something for his father to ask for a drink while the meeting had not even begun.

As handling a bottle was beyond the ability of someone forced to stay in a Power Armour, Primarch or not, it was Aeonid who filled the glasses.

“Did you know, my sons, that the sons of Russ have continued making that horrible liquid that makes you puke and devour your entrails?”

“I do, father,” Falco Tullius admitted while sipping his wine, who was not Fenrisian, but one of the finest bottles of Macraggian wine. “I had the misfortune to fight side by side some...it had to be around one century ago. I had the courage to drink one mug of it. I ever wondered what sort of acid they incorporated into that ignoble recipe.”

“A discovery like none other,” Roboute Guilliman nodded. “This was the first time my stomach urged me to vomit something. It was worse than a poison.”

The Avenging Son looked at the city celebrating around them. Or rather, the crowds celebrating in the buildings that were left, which was still a considerable number, as well as the temporary barrack-taverns and the enormous shelters built in haste by an army of massive Catachan Ants and Ambulls.

And though Roboute Guilliman had a smile on his lips, he seemed lost in his thoughts.

“I don’t think, father, you decided to invite us away from the hundreds of thousands of Macragge citizens that wish to meet you, just to complain about Russ’ personal insult to wine.”

“No,” Roboute Guilliman didn’t move; the assemblage of devices surrounding him would have made that extremely difficult anyway, with the sole exception of his arms. “I invited all of you here because you are the surviving officers of the Chapter...and I am far from pleased in the tactical actions, strategic decisions, and political-operational issues that the Ultramarines have found themselves into.”

“Theoretical,” Aulus Tiberius, Captain of the Fourth Company, predictably replied, “the entire Chapter was not sufficient to hold the Seventeenth Traitor Legion on its own.”

“Practical,” the Thirteenth Primarch replied implacably, “the Ultramarines as a Chapter should never have had to be in a position to hold the bastard sons of Lorgar here. I asked Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert, and she confirmed that if Aethergold or a Titan-Moth had been placed as part of a supply fleet in this very system, it would have been extremely difficult to open the kind of horrific maelstrom the Traitor Seventeenth bungled up. At the very least, they would have been forced to open it far further away than they did, which would have forced them to first engage the defences of Mortendar, instead of bypassing them entirely.”

Aulus immediately went quiet. Which was...not surprising, really. Of all the Ultramarine Captains, the Captain of the Fourth Company was the only senior officer who had been extremely supportive of Captain Cassius Bacurius to survive in perfect health...something that had to do with the fact the Fourth was too far away to do more than to take part in the clean-up and purge actions of the post-Cataclysm.

“I will not search for culprits. I am not going to purge anyone.” Roboute Guilliman said gently but with a gaze filled with determination. “But the state of affairs that existed before the Word Bearers tried to kill us all can’t be allowed to continue. The worlds of Ultramar can’t be allowed a resumption of the disastrous ‘splendid isolation’ policy. Otherwise the next battle, be it against the Tyranids, the Traitors, the Orks, or any threat that might rear its ugly head...it will be our end, my sons.”

“Will it include...revisions of the Codex?” Aulus Tiberius asked with great hesitancy.

“It will.” The next words of the Primarch were not so surprising. “Though in the short-term, the revisions will be minor. The greatest change will be for all of you not to trust my words like there are holy texts! It is bad enough I have to witness the religious fervour of a cult we did our best to ban in the Great Crusade. I would very much prefer not to sleep another four thousand years and return with my sons worshipping my books.”

Falco Tullius and Fabius Decius seemed to take it rather well, all things considered. Naturally, Aulus Tiberius was the big problem, but that it was their father delivering the message was a neat critical point in the...revisions’ favour.

“I understand Captain Antillar and the Fifth Company will be here within the week.”

“Yes, father,’ Falco replied in their name, “the Wardens of the Eastern Fringe have already reported their last war against the Orks was a success...which unfortunately was not achieved without losses. They are down to eighty-two battle-brothers.”

Two out of the four Captains present grimaced. Eighteen Space Marines lost was not a big number for the kind of long campaigns the Fifth specialised in, but never in the last millennium had the Ultramarines brought so close to annihilation.

“Thank you for the confirmation, my son. What I have in mind is to take several of the veterans of the Fifth and Ninth Companies, and to merge them so that we have a special training cadre of skilled Astartes who will be charged to devise tactics and strategies to defeat the Tyranids. A force of twenty-four should be adequate, I think. And I think,” the smile his father gave him was very ironic, “they may be as well noticed by painting their helmets red for the time being.”

The Red Mark that had been a mark of shame, then a badge of honour, was going to take a new life, it seems. Yes, Aeonid could taste the irony.

“At the same time,” their father had clearly far from finished, “we need another training cadre to train and prepare for large-scale battles against other Astartes. The battles fought between Illyrium and this city proved that a lot of battle-lore was lost when it comes to fighting the Traitors. This mustn’t be allowed to continue. Elements of the First, Third, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth, in addition to the Fifth, will form an adaptable specialist force who will prepare the Ultramarines to hunt mercilessly the oath-breakers. I have good hope that the bastard sons of Lorgar have suffered a blow they won’t recover from, but even if they are out of consideration, the other Traitors are still out there.”

“But father,” Aulus intervened, consternation clear on his face, the Chapter is heavily understrength. If we pull off the cadres of these Companies, where are we going to find the training cadres to expand the ranks of the Neophytes?”

“A fair question,” Guilliman acquiesced with a nod. “Some of the training cadres will come from veteran instructors from the Successors. I have spoken with them today, and many have plenty of good things to teach the new generation of Ultramarines. The rest of the training cadres will be provided by Ultramarines themselves. Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert promised me a full Company of Ultramarines...though she was evasive about the how. There was only a mention about extracting concessions from a thief. Aeonid?”

“Trazyn,” the veteran of the Horus Heresy cursed. He was forced to elaborate since the name evidently meant nothing to his father or his fellow Captains. “This is a Necron thief who has been around for the last sixty million years. He seems to delight in stealing everything that meets his notion of ‘art’, which include Astartes and artworks alike, and placing them in his time-preserved collections.”

“Is there a precedent?” Aulus asked, clearly unconvinced. “Because if there isn’t-“

Aeonid felt like placing his head in his hands. Someone had evidently not read a single page of the after-action report he had written from Commorragh.

“After Lady Weaver destroyed the Dark City of the Webway, there were several important negotiations with various Necron parties. I wasn’t personal part of it, but I saw with my own eyes the return of one hundred and ninety-four Salamander battle-brothers who had been thought lost in the thirty-third millennium. Something called the Klovian Disaster, if I remember correctly. This is one of the reasons among others the Magma Spiders based on the Nyx Sector were founded so quickly.”

The other being that after the golden-winged General had recovered several Artefacts of Vulkan, the sons of Vulkan would have followed her anywhere in great numbers...

“That’s...quite promising.” Captain Fabius Decius agreed, looking relieved...not so surprising, when he was the Master of Recruits in charge of the largest Chapter rebuilding in living memory. “Any idea which era our lost battle-brothers will be from?”

“Not a single one,” Aeonid Thiel shrugged, “as I said before, Trazyn has been around for millions of years. The battle-brothers Lady Weaver negotiated the return could be from any period between the moment the Legion took the name of Ultramarines and today.”

“No point in making a lot of theoretical, then,” Falco seemed to take it in good humour, at least. “Is there another major point you wanted to wanted to speak of, father?”

“Yes, there is one.” Roboute Guilliman cleared his throat. “With the true sacrifice of Chapter Master Cato Valens and Captain Gaius Pompeius likely unable to return to duty due to the extreme gravity of his injuries, the Ultramarines Chapter has lost his two highest officers.”

Honestly, it was already miraculous enough Gaius was alive. Trying to kill a Primarch in close combat and living to tell the tale was not something many Astartes could boast...thank Bacta for keeping alive.

“I need a new Chapter Master.”

And his eyes fell upon Aeonid.

The Captain of the Eighth shook his head, looked at the three other Captains...and winced internally as they all looked at him in approval.

“This isn’t something you’re going to allow to me to refuse, father...”

“Indeed not. Congratulations, Chapter Master Thiel.”

**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Solemnace World Engine**

**9.858.310M35**

**Somatek the Patient**

There were days were everything was boring and slow.

“This will be the jewel of my new Macragge Collection. No, it will be the jewel of ALL my Collections!”

And there were days where you regretted an exasperation mode had not been included in your engrams during biotransference.

“With the greatest respect I have for you, Overlord,” Somatek began, “the last fifteen times you returned, you spoke the same words.”

And by all the C’Tan, the next fifteen ‘acquisitions’ would result in the same words or very close ones being uttered in his presence.

After millions of years, Somatek had long given up expecting something new from his Master.

“No, no and no, Somatek! Look at this fabulous subject! A Primarch! Lorgar of the Word Bearers is honouring Solemnace of his presence!”

Somatek looked at it. He wasn’t impressed. Once you had seen the Krorks and some of the other enormous things that had been stolen during the War in Heaven, it was hard to feel in awe.

“Congratulations, Overlord,” he answered, “you have acquired a big...very big specimen of the ‘transhumans’.” He made a pause to assess the new body which had been almost certainly stolen. “And I note it is in two parts.”

Someone had decapitated neatly the member of this young species. Professional work, that.

“I told my good friend that our mutual good friend in blue could have been a little more delicate with poor Lorgar! Also to be noted is that someone seems to have extracted a heart before I happened to visit the morgue of the Fortress of Hera. Anyway. The Primarch of the Word Bearers is going to be the golden goose of my new collection, as the humans say.”

Well, the humans were still beings of flesh and irrational...and Somatek wasn’t going to trust his Overlord when it came to the knowledge of other species’ language.

“Somatek, loyal servant, place our dear guest and Primarch in a large and highly visible Prismatic Gallery along with the one hundred and thirty-three Word bearers that were collected in my name.”

Somatek really couldn’t wait for the boring part of his duties to return. At least, the Necron of Solemnace acknowledged, these specimens were quite dead. Basic security measures and anti-Warp precautions should be enough.

There was only one significant problem.

“Overlord, I regret to inform you that all the Galleries of the size required are already filled to the brink. There is no place there anymore...”

“Not to worry! My good friend Weaver has purchased some specimens. You know, the big ones in blue.”

“The Ultramarvins? Blue paint, white symbols?”

“Those are the ones!” Trazyn approved before making a grand theatrical pose with his purple cape and his long sceptre. “We still have them?”

“We still have them,” Somatek confirmed after briefly checking the interminable list of specimens contained in the Galleries mentioned previously. “Yes. You gave it the name the ‘Calth Gallery’, for some reason that escapes me. I notice there are already a non-insignificant number of ‘Word Bearer’ specimens there...”

“Excellent!” Trazyn declared. “Remove the blue specimens, make sure they are alive and in good condition, and we send them back to my good friend Weaver! We will place all the new Word Bearers and Lorgar here! The ‘Calth Gallery’ will become the ‘Tragedy of Primarch Lorgar the Decapitated’.”

“This is a ridiculous name, Overlord.”

“Well, find a suitable one!” The Chief Archaeovist peevishly retorted. “This great collection deserves only the best!”

Somatek was tempted to tell his Master that in his opinion, placing specimens of different periods in the same collection was not the mark of great historical accuracy...but only tempted, for Trazyn would nod and then forget about it seconds later.

And besides, the solution found by the Overlord of Solemnace was solution which wasn’t going to force him to open other galleries elsewhere.

“I am going to transfer the one hundred and two or so of specimens to your ‘good friend’,” Somatek also promised himself to check other galleries in the vicinity. His engrams remembered plenty of ‘Ultramarvins’ in blue armour in different collections. Not in extraordinary numbers, but it would allow him to make some place in very crowded Galleries. And the Overlord would likely congratulate him when he returned from his latest thievery campaign.

“Good! Now I leave you, I have to plan my next travel! A new artistic opportunity has arisen for the Solemnace Galleries!”

Somatek thanked the stars that there was only one Trazyn in this poor and unfortunate Galaxy, and went to work.

**Macragge System**

**High Orbit over Macragge**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.861.310M35**

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

“Did I tell you how pleased I am you recovered this Replicator Forge, Isley?”

“Frequently,” the Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens replied with a genuine smile before chuckling. “Twenty time in the last three days alone, my Lady. But who’s counting?”

“Who’s counting indeed...”

The golden-winged ruler of Nyx chuckled in turn. The exhaustion which had been so overwhelming when the Tyranids were finally annihilated had finally begun to disappear from her face.

Sign that things were settling down, aside from the great parade in the streets of Macragge City, the *Angel’s Tear* Power Armour was in the hands of several Archmagi and Magi aboard this very Battleship, so it was correctly repaired and several new technological improvements could be added to it.

“Were the advantages really that huge?” the former Harrowmaster asked as several Adjutant-Spiders fussed up about the beautiful red cloak and dress of their ‘Webmistress’. “I don’t think the negotiations lasted that long.”

“Oh, the negotiations haven’t really begun.” The Basileia of Nyx answered as they left her private quarters. “Aside from the boons I wanted to gain from Trazyn, and that Neferten endorsed after a few long debates, the proper negotiations haven’t fully begun.”

“No mention about the state the Replicator Forge was delivered in their metallic hands?”

“To be honest, Isley, I think the Necrons were impressed you managed to steal it from the Szarekhan Dynasty, especially when the opposition included the famous Overlord-now-Phaeron Zahndrekh. From their revelations, he’s not an enemy you manage to often get away with your lives, never mind some spoils of war.”

“From my own experience, I can say that I would rather avoid a second round with Zahndrekh, my Lady. Crazy or not crazy, my long military career tells me Zahndrekh is the kind of commander who is capable of learning very quickly from his mistakes or his defeat.”

“Well, he’s sworn to the Nerushlatset Dynasty now, so unless there’s a massive problem in the future, I don’t foresee a war against him.”

“And the gains from Trazyn, my Lady?” The Chapter Master of the Heracles Warden asked as they entered one of the hangar bays in the *Enterprise* that had been emptied from Landers and other types of orbital and void-faring craft.

The reason of this absence was a Necron-made structure that looked very much like a portal shining with green energy...and as a Necron went through it, the purpose of the structure was indeed confirmed.

“I hope to recover certain relics of STC origin from our thief,” the Victor of Commorragh and Macragge revealed to him as the Dawnbreaker Guard took position. “But it is Phaerakh Neferten insists to speak in my name for these...necessary recoveries. My part in this affair is limited to the sending of ‘gifts’ to Solemnace.”

“Thus the reason why so many Word Bearer corpses were released into Necron’s hands?”

“Trazyn already stole Lorgar’s corpse,” the black-haired insect-mistress said with unhidden amusement, and Jeremiah Isley stopped breathing...and realised that no, it wasn’t a joke.

“Isn’t it a bit...err...risky? My Lady?”

“How is it risky, Isley? I made sure Lorgar won’t be coming back. His soul is gone, and though Trazyn will undoubtedly use some stasis technology for his private museum, I don’t think he can do more than stick of the equivalent of Necron glue to Lorgar’s head.”

“Ah...you’re right, my Lady. Forgive me, I was speaking...too hastily. And yes, I can see how Lorgar’s corpse would be useless. I think a lot of high-ranked people would object rather loudly if someone created new Astartes with his genetic patrimony.”

“They would do more than argue, and you know...ah, our first guests are coming through.”

Indeed, the Necron Gate which had remained open for several seconds was now letting visitors arrive inside the hangar bay of the *Enterprise*.

And these ‘visitors’ were Space Marines.

Isley saw the confusion on their faces as the moment they were welcomed by their battle-brothers, they removed in a hurry their helmets to breathe for the first time in decades, maybe centuries or longer.

Astonishment got even greater as their first words were met with answers, and stupefaction was too small a word to describe their next expressions.

Thankfully, all of them had been disarmed and many were outright trying to get out of their Power Armours as fast they could.

One thing was sure, however: those Space Marines were all of the line of Guilliman, Ultramarines in legacy and colours.

But some markings...

“My Lady,” Isley hesitated before going ahead, “judging by the crests some have on their helmets and the non-Codex markings of several armours, plus the functional Mark IV Power Armours, my guess is that several dozens of the Ultramarines that were sent back are from the late great Crusade-era. They are from the Ultramarines *Legion*, not the Ultramarines Chapter.”

“Your guess is most likely right.” Taylor Hebert snorted. “For once, I won’t hold it against Trazyn...I don’t even think he’s aware of the noticeable difference. And Ultramarines are Ultramarines, in the end.”

“Indeed. And the promise of ‘one Company’ seems to have been respected.” Isley added as the Necron-made gate flickered out, and the Crypteks around it began to disassemble it. The Chapter Master of the Heracles Warden noted that after the Great Crusade-era Marines, there had been no true coherence with the markings of the Ultramarines...there was everything from Mark V to Mark VII, and the last two Astartes...they had been in the black of the Deathwatch.”

Then the music, some kind of martial symphony composed and play for Macraggian ceremonies, began to play out.

The Space Marines chosen for the honour of welcoming those long-thought-lost Space Marines saluted with their fists striking their armours.

And then Roboute Guilliman revealed himself.

For today, the medical devices had been temporarily removed, thus the Primarch appeared very much like a true Demigod of War.

“My sons. Welcome home.”

The first tears began to fall mere seconds later, and the Ultramarines broke pretty much every part of their ‘dignity-above-all’ reputation in the next few minutes.

**The Webway**

**Shaa-Dom**

**Manticore Palace of Tyranny**

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

**Tyrant Kharsaq El’Uriaq**

Unlike his peers of Commorragh, Kharsaq had never believed his lineage and the artefacts he had taken by force were sufficient to guarantee his hold upon his realm would last an eternity.

The Aeldari Empire had fallen into rampant hedonism and been eventually destroyed by Slaanesh. If the oldest and most powerful Empire to have ever existed could crumble from the inside, then the line of El’Uriaq could fall too.

That was why instead of hiring quantities of mercenaries and useless pieces of filth, Kharsaq had established a professional army to defend his interests well before *Maelsha’eil Dannan* triggered the events which saw countless billions of Drukhari die along with She-Who-Thirsts.

The course of events had proven it was the right decision.

An army of one million superbly trained warriors might seem absurdly expensive at first glance for a single Webway City’s treasury, and one had to account the Executioners’, the other military faction specifically recruited to discover internal dissent to his rule and permanently neutralise it before it caused any trouble.

The destruction of Commorragh and every pocket realm nearby had only accelerated his military preparations.

Xelian, Yllithian, and all their haughtier-than-you idiots had believed they were safe in their Commorragh palaces, and look at how that particular delusion had ended.

Shaa-Dom’s defences had to be increased, both in potency and numbers.

Many Webway Gates had been sealed, not because they were linked to some realm too close to Commorragh’s former location – though thousands had already been closed during and after the Second Fall – but because *Maelsha’eil Dannan* had taught him the hard way that leaving a potential enemy too many avenues of attack was sheer stupidity.

It was, of course, just the beginning.

Shaa-Dom had to change if it was to survive, and so Kharsaq El’Uriaq had ordered for it to change. It helped that with the blessings of Addaioth, his subjects were more inclined to work than to torture frenetically for the greatest part of the cycle.

It had not been easy, and a lot of blood had been shed to force everyone to...cooperate.

But Shaa-Dom had begun to transform into a black orb – his black jewel, a supremely-fortified citadel where hundreds of millions of Drukhari fled to, attracted by the promises of security from the Helspiders and the vengeful purges of the Harlequins.

There were only fourteen gigantic Webway Gates to allow someone to enter Shaa-Dom. Each of them led to a well-fortified Port, stuck in a pocket dimension. That way, should *Maelsha’eil Dannan* or one of her lieutenants trying to reedit her victory at Commorragh, Kharsaq would activate his first contingencies and destroy the Port after sealing the Gates. And it could be done in mere heartbeats.

Behind the Gates and the Ports, the level of defences increased, not decreased. The Manticore Fleet, a strong force including a third of the Shaa-Dom Battleships was patrolling the space around his back orb, ready to slaughter those who tried to break his laws.

The only alternative was to use one of the great Bridges of Shaa-Dom, of which there were fourteen of them. Many templates of the defunct Aeldari Empire had been dug up and spirit stones tortured to discover their secrets.

The Bridges had been built, dark lines suspended above the abyss to tie the Ports of Shaa-Dom and his City.

They too were well fortified, and just in case...they could be blown up too.

Kharsaq had been confident that once the first phase of this colossal fortification effort would be complete, Shaa-Dom would not suffer the same fate Commorragh was on the receiving end of.

Even *Maelsha’eil Dannan* was likely to abandon a siege when the cost in lives became too much to bear.

Unfortunately, the Gods laughed on the plans of mortals, and Kharsaq had met the new Empress of the Aeldari personally...and the fight had not been in the realm of Shaa-Dom per the conditions he had imagined.

She had cursed him. She had defeated him like he was one of her tiniest insects.

Kharsaq loathed the very memory of this defeat.

The Tyrant of Shaa-Dom would never forget this humiliation.

But there were problems more urgent to resolve.

For the battle of Shaa-Dom had already begun when he returned to his Palace, and the forces of *Maelsha’eil Dannan* were not part of the opposition.

No, the enemies today were a far more familiar foe.

“Did you really think the Army and the Executioners were going to be loyal to you, my son?” Kharsaq asked with mild disappointment, fending off the pathetic assault of several weaklings. “I thought I told you better than that.”

“YOU LIED TO US!” Kharsaq had always thought Pythilliach had a flare for the dramatic, and in this regard, his eldest son did not disappoint. “YOU TOLD US TO WORSHIP THE WRONG GOD!”

Kharsaq sneered...before grabbing an abandoned Klaive and using it to dispatch the last opponents one by one with a single strike each.

At last, Pythilliach was alone...alone on the throne he had tried to usurp.

“My son. I am a Tyrant. I can tolerate many things. Long tirades about my cruelty, for example. But if there is something I profess myself disgusted by, it is hypocrisy.”

“YOU LIED TO US!”

“And yet, your guards and the rare fools you mustered in a vain attempt to overthrow me...I didn’t see a single red, green, or blue skin among them. At best, they had embraced the curse sufficiently to be dark grey...at worse they were black. And let’s not speak of their eyes. You say I lied to you. Yes, I did. But you all chose Addaioth above the parvenu Goddess *Maelsha’eil Dannan* forged in her hubris. Don’t pretend you didn’t. I heard her. I listened to her weak attempt of unconvincing seduction to make me renounce Addaioth. If I did, then all of you have.”

His other children began to stream into the throne room. Naturally, all of them bore his colours. The majority had the good sense to come with blades covered in traitor’s blood.

“You didn’t revolt, my son, because I was unable to stop *Maelsha’eil Dannan* from killing Khaine or cursing us with those darkening skins. You did attempt usurpation because you were furious the power of the High Priest of Addaioth hadn’t been granted to you. You wanted to become the Manticore Emperor...and though Addaioth was impressed by your ambition, your skills were proven definitely lacking.”

“I won’t listen to your moralising voice anymore! Duel me, Liar!”

“As you wish.”

Kharsaq charged his son, who jumped from the throne, screaming his fury. Five heartbeats later, it was all over.

The battle would not have been fair before he gained the power of a Muse, and now, it was even less so.

Kharsaq turned to look at his children, his nobles, and his Generals.

There was no need to say a single word.

All kneeled.

“My beautiful Shaa-Dom is infested with traitors, it seems. This state of affairs is not allowed to continue. Many Ports have tried to declare secession. Many Bridges are in rebellion. I give you a Black Sun’s cycle to resolve the situation. Otherwise I will enforce the justice of Shaa-Dom in person. Restore my Tyranny. This I order. Obey or suffer the consequences.”

The small army who was present in the throne room stormed out, eager to prove its loyalty.

Soon enough, there was only the Manticore Guard, elite of the Shaa-Dom Army, and his most fanatically devoted servants.

No, it wasn’t completely accurate.

There was another being.

It was a huge black-armoured Mon-keigh, and Kharsaq had been forced to bring back with him to Shaa-Dom.

And naturally, this...this ‘emissary’ was not shy giving his opinion, alas.

“Now you see why the Warmaster suggested his Plan.”

“I heard the...suggestion, Emissary.” Unleashing his fury on the primate would be easy. Kharsaq could easily kill him with one hand tied behind his back. “But I assure you, the situation is under control. A few malcontents are not enough to threaten even temporarily my rule. The traitors who rallied my son’s banner will all be put down by the sword before another cycle ends. The four billion Drukhari of Shaa-Dom present within the realm of Shaa-Dom will accept my tyrannical rule.”

“You are the Emperor of the Manticore and the High Priest and Muse of Addaioth,” the primate that called himself a ‘Black Legionnaire’ said courteously.

The words ‘for now’ did not leave his mouth, but Kharsaq heard them nonetheless.

“Escort the Emissary to the quarters which have been prepared for him.” The Tyrant proclaimed after silently making sure that no one was to touch him.

The irony of his son’s words was particularly cutting at that moment. There was no longer any possibility to hide Addaioth, and no real need to anyway. The Drukhari would worship their true God, or they would not. But the exact nature of the relationship forged with the Black Legion...it was better to hide it. Let his followers imagine he was humouring the Warmaster while exploiting mercilessly military opportunities behind his back.

“Lord Tyrant?” One of his Generals rushed. “The Basilisk Port has fallen.”

“A point I was aware, thank you,” Kharsaq snarked. “That was why I ordered you to send your troops there. Is there some confusion within your head? Or the number of traitors who went to support my son’s claims diminished your courage?”

“No, Lord Tyrant! It’s just...the traitors who fell for your son’s lies...it’s them who lost the Basilisk Port! Several Masques of Harlequin have seized the opportunity to launch a sneak attack while...while the defenders were distracted.”

Cegorach. It had to be Cegorach in person who had commanded the attack.

It was too precise, too surgical.

The coup was too recent, and Addaioth’s power should have protected his realm from the Farseers of Ulthwé’s scrying attempts.

“Muster the Iron Manticore battalions.” This was a lot of his reserves, but they should be able to stop cold the Harlequin assault before the enemy reached the Basilisk Bridge.

The General hesitated.

“What?” The Tyrant of Shaa-Dom hissed in anger.

“This is more Harlequins I’ve ever seen, Lord Tyrant. And...they are led by a Phoenix Lord.”

The worst part...was that it made all sense.

A new Empress had been chosen. And as an Empire soared...the old must disappear. And there were not a more old and useless symbols than the Phoenix Lords.

“Which one?”

**Outer defences of the Realm of Shaa-Dom**

**Basilisk Port**

**Phoenix Lord Asurmen**

“The first steps of the dance were a success, oh First and Last of the Avengers. We are starting our next monologue. Are you ready to make your grand entrance?”

Asurmen had never liked the Masque of the Dance Without End. Yes, they were defending violently the Webway from all intruders, but their deeds had no logic whatsoever, and if someone had managed to ever decipher the true meaning of what they spoke, Asurmen had yet to meet him or her.

Yet today they had done exactly what they had promised. They had fulfilled their oath.

And thus it was time to fulfil his.

“I am.” When Asurmen spoke again, it was not for the Harlequin, who had already vanished in the shadows. “IN THE MEMORY OF ASURYAN! WE ARE THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS! WE ARE THE JUSTICE LONG DENIED! WE ARE LIBERTY RISING AGAINST TYRANNY!”

The Sword of Asur was drawn once more, and the chains of the slaves of the Basilisk Port broke.

Immediately, Asurmen felt more confident, more clarity of purpose. Khaine was dead, but the first of the Phoenix Lords knew that his mission was *good*.

“TAKE UP YOUR ARMS! FIGHT AGAINST TYRANNY! HELP IS ON THE WAY!”

They looked at him with brilliant eyes. Some were young dwellers of Shaa-Dom who had chosen Atharti and been dragged in chains by their neighbours or their own families. Others were Asuryani who had been captured in raids across the Webway. The majority, though, were not part of any Aeldari civilisation...Humans, Sslyth, and many other races were used by the Shaa-Dom slave-masters.

While cruelty for cruelty’s sake appeared to have neatly diminished, the City which dreamed to be the New Commorragh had great need of slaves to keep its odious machines functioning, lest they be forced to send Drukhari to take their place.

“Death to the Tyrant!” A male human was the first to shout the words. The unfortunate captive had been mutilated: his nose and one of his eyes were gone, and everywhere ugly scars that needed no explanation were present.

A Harlequin Trouper materialised next to him, and the former prisoner flinched...only to receive a Lasgun in his arms.

“Justice has been delayed,” Asuryan explained. “But no longer! Fight and you will be led out of the Webway!”

The souls enslaved by the masters of Shaa-Dom needed no more encouragement. They had suffered for many cycles, but now suddenly, the whispers of Commorragh’s resurfaced.

“LIBERTY! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

The Asuryani ex-prisoners were not long before shouting their own battle-cry.

“FOR ATHARTI! WE WILL BE FREE!”

More and more voices were raised in defiance, and each slave pen of the Port was stormed more easily than the previous one.

The fact the different Masques were delivering human-made lasguns by the thousands, along with the necessary ammunition, made sure that the losses of the freed souls remained minimal.

Asurmen wondered while decapitating several sword masters hurling imprecations at him where the followers of Cegorach had found such a stock of weapons...before deciding there were more important things to worry about.

Like the fact there were more figures in black armour strongly reminding him of Incubi rushing from the opening where the City of Shaa-Dom awaited.

“KILL THE PHOENIX LORD!”

“THE LIGHT AND LIBERTY!”

The sword containing the soul of his brother and himself were one now.

They danced, and all around them the foot soldiers of the Tyrant died.

“BETRAYER! YOU BETRAY YOUR OWN RACE!”

“I am the protector of the weak.” Asurmen corrected. “And I should have done long ago what I did. My shame is already great enough that the new Empress was the one to burn Commorragh.”

Many times the first of the Phoenix Lords had found himself excuses not to deal with this pit of evil. That many other Lords would not help him. That he alone stood no chance against the different noble Houses of Commorragh. That slaying so many children of Isha would make him a pariah.

In the end, those had been just pathetic excuses.

Asurmen should have acted against these evil-doers. That was what being the Hand of Asuryan was supposed to be.

The *Bloody Twins* fired, their shuriken ammunition proving devastatingly effective as the worshippers of Addaioth had thought remaining out of reach of his sword would be their salvation.

It was not to be.

And when it was, thousands of lasers were here to illuminate the darkness. Humans and Aeldari souls, along dozens of other races, were liberating the Basilisk Port.

“NO MORE SLAVERY!”

“DOWN WITH THE TYRANT!”

“FREEDOM!”

“DEATH TO SHAA-DOM!”

Asurmen watched for several seconds several hundreds of Harlequins help the most injured ex-prisoners flee in the Webway, before resuming his bloody work, which mainly consisted cutting a swathe of Shaa-Dom’s warriors.

They were arrogant and young, those Drukhari. Many of them were too young to have been born before the Second Fall, meaning many Haemonculi had survived the destruction of Commorragh to continue their fell arts here.

This meant the plan of the Harlequins had worked. The assault had been launched at the perfect time, when the fourteen Ports were defended by inexperienced ‘Truebloods’ with little to no experience of warfare, the fleets of Shaa-Dom were paralysed by indecision or internal strife, and the real standing army was nowhere in sight.

And so Asurmen attacked and attacked again.

Few slaves followed him as the Phoenix Lord ran towards the gigantic Basilisk Gate, but the Hand of Asuryan didn’t feel resentment.

They had helped his mission considerably; now it was time for him to prove his worth.

The Sword of Asur became a hurricane of death, and he heard the scream of fury of something that aspired to become a God.

The Drukhari died by his blade. Batteries armed with viscous things were detonated as they faced the wrong direction.

As more and more souls emerged to run towards safety, Asurmen advanced and destroyed defences that were left completely unmanned.

He almost reached the Basilisk Gate when the tumult of an advancing army arrived to his ears.

The Bloody Twins fired at every mechanism he could see, and several Harlequin Skyweavers arrived to support him.

But the Basilisk Gate began to open in a thunderous series of shrieking voices...until it stopped.

It stopped, but there was enough space for a Drukhari Noble and his bodyguards to get through.

Asurmen knew who his opponent was, of course.

Even if for a reason he had missed recent events, the sheer aura of fire and darkness which surrounded this Drukhari could not possibly be missed.

“Asurmen...it looks like you had not the decency to die with Khaine.”

“Tyrant Kharsaq El’Uriaq,” the Phoenix Lord replied. “My apologies for the slight disorder reigning in your Port. I’m afraid it was necessary, alas. You see, it was necessary to get your attention.”

“Consider you have my entire attention,” the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom hissed, “and that it will be the last mistake of the gestalt you call your ‘soul’. I am going to drag you to the altar in the heart of my city, and I will sacrifice you to **Addaioth**!”

The word hurt. Asurmen tried to stay immobile like a statue, but he was sure the Tyrant had been able to perceive his shiver.

“Not if I kill you first.”

Kharsaq El’Uriaq laughed, and the sound was withering.

In his black armour whose joints were burning with orange flame, the Tyrant was exactly everything Asurmen had sworn to fight against.

“Kill me? I am the Chosen of Addaioth, while you serve...who do you serve, really, featherless Phoenix? Khaine? No, he’s dead. Cegorach, maybe?”

“How arrogant of you,” the Avenger took an offensive stance and prepared himself for the onslaught, “to assume I need a God to deal with the likes of you.”

Cruel laughter answered him.

“Let me return you the favour. *You don’t have any idea who you are fighting, fool*.”

There was a brief spark.

Asurmen’s blade struck five times, and he didn’t miss a single time.

It was for the best, for five enormous arrows smashed into the ground all around him.

Except they were not really arrows, weren’t they?

To begin with, they were more akin to massive spears in length, and no tree, no matter how twisted, had been used to made them.

They were long, black, and they burned in orange fire. And the worst part? The things had maws and eyes growing out of them.

“That’s really disgusting,” Asurmen did try as hard as he could to keep the horror out of his voice. “You can stop hiding your arm, by the way. I’ve seen you shoot them.”

“Impressive,” his enemy complimented, revealing indeed that his right arm had become a sort of grotesque bow where flesh and metal had merged, and where five smaller orange-burning parasite-arrows were waiting to be fired. “Before the Fall, the number of Aeldari who survived Shaimesh’s first attack could be counted with both hands.”

“You have become quite a twisted monster.” Asurmen answered. “This is not the true form your God bestowed upon you, isn’t it?”

This time the laugh was more cheerful...albeit filled with cruelty.

“It is not.” The arm-bow transformed into an enormous, barbaric-looking sword. “I am your hunter, Asurmen. Try to not die too fast.”

The charge of the Tyrant was incredibly fast, and there was no time to evade.

Asurmen blocked, and immediately received atrocious pain in his arms. Nothing was broken, but at this pace-

The second arm of the Tyrant transformed into a shield, and there was no evading *that*.

The pain...it was terrifying.

But he was Asurmen.

He has sworn to stand against Evil, and contrary to what he had said to El’Uriaq, he had not come to kill the Tyrant. He had to hold. The more the duel lasted, the more innocents could escape Port Basilisk.

“You are weak.”

Asurmen ignored the pain and evaded the next series of attacks.

“Where was this arrogance, when *Maelsha’eil Dannan* taught you a lesson in humility?”

That the new Empress had managed to beat this monster practically without effort was not good for his ego, but Asurmen would try to find any edge he could to break the concentration of his enemy.

“You will scream for that...” the hiss was loathing incarnate, and unfortunately, the attacks got more unpredictable.

Worse, the Basilisk Gate was beginning to open again behind the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom and-

Asurmen tried to evade the shield, only to be struck by the ‘spear’ this time.

The pain...it shook him.

No, it was...agony.

He was...bleeding? He was...Asurmen struggled, but managed to stand on shaking legs.

“I am the Manticore Emperor, the High Priest announcing a Glorious Future!”

There was an enormous thunderous sound, and with new screams of agony, the opening of the Basilisk Gate stopped.

One breath. His blood was beginning to colour the fire-themed mosaics that they had duelled upon. Two breaths. Three breaths.

“What was that?”

“Destiny answering. You didn’t really think...you had seen every Harlequin Masque who attacked your outer defences...Tyrant?”

And with a new grinding sound, the Basilisk Gate...began to close, for all the efforts of the Drukhari to stop it.

“What. Have. You. Done.”

“By the will of Cegorach,” Asurmen should have collapsed at that moment, but two Harlequins materialised and held him by the hands, while another threw some substance over his wounds, which provoked more pain. “I have been sent...to tell you your Evil will not be tolerated in the Webway anymore. The Ports...we are sealing them all. Shaa-Dom is going to be sealed away, *permanently*. Cegorach...sent me with a message. *The Webway was not created for the likes of you*.”

“I can still kill you,” the monster declared.

“But then you will blocked on the wrong side of the Gate,” a Solitaire of the Masque of the Dance Without End joyously explained before adding a single word. “Fool.”

And the Harlequins, dozens of them, laughed.

Asurmen closed his eyes...and laughed with them.

**The Webway**

**Shaa-Dom**

**Manticore Palace of Tyranny**

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

**Tyrant Kharsaq El’Uriaq**

For all the prodigious fires the power of Addaioth gave, his throne room seemed cold and empty.

Well, near-empty, it definitely was. Kharsaq had not decided to cut his own throat. The ‘Emissary’ had been granted an audience with only guards renowned for their loyalty above all else present by his side.

When the first words uttered, this was revealed to be a very fine idea.

“The Warmaster told you that Shaa-Dom was vulnerable.”

“Maybe,” Kharsaq replied, “if I had been told that armies of Harlequins were massing around my realm, I would have been able to counter their sabotage!”

“The Warmaster’s sources of information are not known to me,” the Emissary continued with some fake courtesy, “but it did not take a great warlord to predict the...rise of your God may anger mightily the Clown God.”

Kharsaq El’Uriaq fought down the urge to kill the primate. The flesh was certainly too tainted for a proper buffet anyway.

“And while I agree with you proper information, I assume this...sabotage, Lord Tyrant, was only the first option of the Harlequins. If it failed, they certainly had other myriad of plans in reserve.”

“And if I countered these plans?”

“Then it is possible the Harlequins would have swallowed their arrogance and let Weaver’s armies enter the Webway.”

The Tyrant shivered. The memories of the golden-winged Empress defeating his God in less time it took to say it...it had shaken him to his core. If the Harlequins brought her after securing a beachhead...

“Fine. You’ve made your point clear...Emissary. And this is all speculative. The Harlequins have sealed us away from the rest of the Webway.” A single assault force had even added insult to the injury by blowing up one of the Bridges of Shaa-Dom, hurling tens of thousands of Manticore soldiers into the abyss.

“Indeed. Surely will admit, Lord Tyrant, that in this unfortunate position...you are not well-placed to satisfy your ambitions...or listen to the suggestions of the Warmaster?”

This diplomacy felt like a poison you had no antidote for.

“Yes. You are correct. Our mutual ambitions will...not be satisfied.”

“In this case, isn’t the time to use...certain extraordinary artefacts that were the pride of your race in a previous age?”

“It might.” Kharsaq El’Uriaq answered. “On the other hand, I will remark that while Cegorach may have handed me a minor reverse, he is not the biggest problem outside the Webway.”

Weaver was. And as much as he wouldn’t admit it here and now, the leader of the Manticore Empire knew for sure that the destruction of Commorragh had been accomplished by a rather small number of primates, given the effectives they could launch at a problem.

If the Empress was allowed to muster her forces and deploy them against Shaa-Dom without the Webway hindering her....

“The Warmaster has thought of this problem, my Lord Tyrant. Can I explain?”