**Decision 5.4**

**Shadow of Legion**

*There is a master-thief at work in this galaxy and his name is Trazyn the Infinite.*

*According to the very discourse this Necron spoke in the entrails of Wuhan, his titles are Victorious Hero of Txalataq, Strategist of Firan, Survivor of Hierek, Chief Archaeovist and Supreme Overlord of Solemnace.*

*It would be extremely easy to say this ‘abomination against the Will of the Omnissiah’ – Lankovar’s words, not mine – is a metallic clown who forgot he wasn’t funny a few thousand years ago.*

*On the other hand, clowns, whether they are of flesh and blood or created in regenerating alloys, are usually not able to command tens of thousands troops, go through walls like they don’t exist, generate illusions able to fool the sensors of the Mechanicus and demonstrate technologic skills able to fool and capture eldritch entities like the one we met under Hive Asao...*

*Insane individuals are not known to succeed for long in their endeavours. Yes, a mad thief would succeed by sheer audacity for a few years, but sooner or later his chance would run out and the authorities capture or kill him.*

*And crazy or not, there are few people in this galaxy who are able to say they own a twenty kilometres long battleship.*

*All of this to say Trazyn the Infinite, by all rights, is a statistical impossibility, as several Archmagi informed me. Logically, either his own race should have put an end to his thieving ways, or other races like the eldar should have terminated him the moment they had the chance. Since he is still alive after all this time, it is evident they have all failed.*

*And to my greatest regret, I am no closer to discover how to disable his silver metallic carcass.*

*There are anti-teleportation jammers on every floor of Hive Athena’s Spire, but this thief doesn’t seem to be even slightly inconvenienced by them.*

*It is a meagre compensation, but he appears to be well-intentioned when he is in my presence. I say ‘meagre’, because it is not enough to convince him to stop his thieving ways a single second. While he appears to have seriously acknowledge my threat on the fate he would receive should one of the Astartes I am allied with ‘mysteriously’ disappear, carpets, paintings, vases, golden forks, silver spoons and a long list of priceless items too long to proper list in a life are not and will never be on the ‘not-stealing list’.*

*And if someone read these lines, for the love of the Emperor, never accept one of his gifts. The Nebula’s Shard is one of the most lethal blades in this galaxy, but having it gave me the eternal enmity of hundreds of thousands eldar. I’m not sure if it honestly slipped his mind, or if it was a ‘detail’ he judged without importance, but the fact remains he didn’t warn me and used this ‘coincidence’ to capture an entire eldar fleet at the Battle of the Death Star.*

*I have no doubt Trazyn the Infinite is stealing something as I write these words. I just hope it’s not something too important...*

Extract from Archive A-2350-T-100, secured in the Fafnir-Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by Lady Taylor Hebert between 294M35 and 296M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

\*\*\*\*

“*Armies of the Phoenix King, my brothers and sisters of the Flame Host! Take up your arms for the situation is desperate. Our outpost at Caliidarion has fallen to the slaves of the Yngir, but before its complete destruction, our valiant defenders had the time to send us a lone messenger and we know at present that Trazyn himself is leading the charge.*

*Yes, the Infinite Thief himself has come to our redoubt. We all know what his goal is. We all know what this malevolent creature wants. It is our great duty as Aeldari and as the greatest warriors of the Old Ones to ensure he never grabs it! Seal all our vaults and increase all defensive measures to their utmost capacities! Raise our armies and prepare our allies with the firm order to kill everything looking like a Necron in disguise! The Thief wants our jewels, our art-lore, and our very lives to fill his damned collection! Swear on the name of Khaine he will not have them*!” final war-speech of King’s Spear Faenarion before the Fall of Nandriel, a very infamous battle fought during the War in Heaven.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.815.289M35**

Thought for the day: Knowledge is half the battle.

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

“Oops. It is exactly what it looks like?”

Odysseus was not an Inquisitor belonging to the Ordo Xenos, but he could recognise a dangerous xenos when he saw one. Anyone who owned a technological device to present a human appearance when the one hiding behind it was nothing of the sort would be targeted by the Mechanicus as soon as it came to their attention. Combine this to an energy shielding able to stop bolter shells and laser fire, and you had the making of a grave threat. He had read the reports on the Battle of the Death Star and the Inquisitorial disaster at Wuhan. It didn’t take much brainpower to realise it had to be the same creature.

Before he had the time to deliver a warning, the Chapter Master of the Iron Drakes roared and drew a knife that for non-transhumans would have served as an average sword while charging at the xenos.

The next seconds were painful to watch.

The green armoured Astartes ran towards the creature, but like they were in one of these cheap fight vid-casts, the action seemed to slow until stopping completely. Pontiac Dupleix was struggling and losing against thin air...and then his opponent decided the fight had lasted long enough.

The sceptre struck the Astartes with an implacable swing, and the Space Marine was thrown aside like he was made of foam and not clad in heavy power armour. When he missed the wall by less than a metre and crashed on the ground, it was loud and destructive. Seeing no trace of heavy damage on the armour, the Lord Inquisitor was expecting the Chapter Master to stand in the next seconds, but while Dupleix twitched and tried evidently to return to a less humiliating position, it was clear he wasn’t successful.

The small green sparkles coursing from his helmet to his armoured feet were undoubtedly responsible for this predicament.

The one-sided beating the Iron Drake had suffered had not been in vain, however. No matter how the xenos had successfully deceived the security teams of Nyx, the ruckus was not someone could ignore unless they were deaf. As the green armoured Astartes struggled against the dangerous skills of the creature, over a dozen Astartes stormed the throne room, followed by at least fifty or sixty guardsmen and PDF troopers.

“Don’t move, xenos!”

Astartes being Astartes, the order was preceded by several bolters and plasma guns firing. They met the same amount of success Dupleix had, which was to say none. Odysseus had his weapons in hand, but didn’t fire. The insects massing in the room had not yet attacked, and the Dawnbreaker Guard was not firing...

“Why?” the xenos asked in a voice that could be described as amused. “Because I am easier to admire at this distance?”

The remark could have been hilarious, if the speaker had not profited from the total inability of the Space Marines and the rest of the shooters to throw a silver device like a grenade.

But it was not a grenade. There was no explosion. Instead, everything just...paused. Half of the throne room, the one where thankfully he wasn’t waiting, was completely silent and immobile.

This had not been a grenade. It was a stasis device of a prodigious size, and judging by the sinister green colour and the dimensions of the newly created time-stopped field, it was not something the Inquisition had in its vaults.

Odysseus stared for a second or two. The first devices could have been passed as flukes, but with this last demonstration, it was obvious the creature had access to a technology far superior to what the Imperium had ever taken for granted.

“I hope for your sake no one is dead, Trazyn. I am rather fond of the Astartes and men protecting my life every day.”

The swarm had grown to a stupendous size in mere seconds, and now had several massive centipedes, spiders and other insects he had no interest in learning the names of. And the annoyance in the Basileia-Saint’s voice was not feigned at all.

“Had it been anyone else, my dear friend, I would be almost insulted!” The silver metallic xenos raised his sceptre-weapon in a dramatic movement, before interrupting it as a few thousands flies, beetles and hornets buzzed and shrieked. “But your fear for your peons has no grounds to be. They will all be released when this audience is over...I promise it on my honour of Collector!”

“And why do you want with this...audience?” Lady Weaver didn’t even bother to take the ‘honour promise’ seriously. By the Golden throne of Terra, Odysseus wasn’t taking it seriously either. “Besides trying to steal more things for your personal collection, of course.”

This time, the creature – which apparently was called Trazyn and believed itself to be of the ‘Necron race’ – tried to stand right and agitate his violet cloak like he was an important dignitary. If the intention was indeed to look like an important political herald, it was clearly missed by a few light-years.

“I was sent by Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten of the Nerushlatset Dynasty, who has heard of your exploits against the perfidious Aeldari.”

“Eldar you failed to mention in your previous message, Trazyn,” if some words could freeze water, the remark of the woman who had defeated the Angel’s Bane would have frozen the Dark Ocean of Nyx.

“Oh, you aren’t going to say I am responsible for what these long-eared pests do?” By the expression on the face of every human and Astartes not in the stasis field, the answer was not polite to express in public.

“Tell me the message, Trazyn,” the Lady Nyx said, evidently struggling not to release her gigantic swarm in one terrible attack.

“As you wish, as you wish. The noble Phaerakh is aware you search for the ancient system of Terrathens, where ancient technology of humanity’s past may have survived.”

“You hacked into the Mechanicus’ Archmagi system...”

“I prefer to call it...overseeing the progress of their Quest for Knowledge,” the infuriating Trazyn corrected with a smile even the most stupid Governors he had ever met in his long life would have mistaken for something good. “But it is a happy coincidence, no?”

Once more, nobody answered. Personally, Odysseus knew that every word which came out of his mouth would be a variation of ‘Die, xenos!’ and unfortunately recent events had proven the firepower present in this room may not be enough to disable the metallic construct this creature used for a body.

“Anyway. If you are interested, Phaerakh Neferten will await you in a system on the borders of your Imperium,” an ancient scroll in a yellow-green colour was thrown in the direction of the throne and Seraph Gamaliel intercepted it before it reached his charge. “The coordinates are on this hyperscroll. The date of the meeting has been fixed in seven of your standard years.”

His interlocutor wasn’t impressed and particularly willing to cooperate with the crazy xenos. Which was good. Odysseus had no particular wish to see if the contingencies to remove a Living Saint from this reality worked.

“Why should I trust...this Phaerakh Neferten?” The name was literally butchered in her voice, the language evidently not made for a mouth used to Low or High Gothic. “You will excuse me if I am not willing to run straight to a Battle-Barge in orbit and sail immediately to these coordinates.”

“You are entirely forgiven,” replied the xenos, which had somehow not noticed the irony in the Basileia-Saint’s voice. “But to answer your first question, the honour of Phaerakh Neferten is great, as befits her mighty titles and achievements. For as long as the War in Heaven raged, her word was stronger than any metal and her vows absolute. As long as you respect the conditions of safe-conduct on the hyperscroll, Phaerakh Neferten will respect hers. To do anything else would be deeply dishonourable and un-Necrontyr.”

This sounded far too convenient. Nobody, not even some prideful Knight riders of the Imperium, held their vows and oaths in a so stringent manner.

“And aside from this, there is absolutely no catch.”

“No...well, the system has a few pirates, but I’m sure it will be no problem for someone of your strength! My dear friend the Hammer-Primarch with his salamander armour had no problems with them the last time he was here!”

Did...did the xenos had just called the Primarch Vulkan ‘Hammer-Primarch with his salamander armour’? That was it. Odysseus was not one of the Inquisitors who though it was necessary to kneel every time a Primarch statue was gazed at, but this disrespect and these lies couldn’t be tolerated.

“Really,” The swarm shrieked and buzzed, ready to strike the moment the silent order was given. “We are speaking of a few pirates, and a system on the frontier of the Imperium. Trazyn, whether your ‘Phaerakh Neferten is honourable or not, sending fleets outside the Sector cost a lot of resources, and I am not going to waste my time for a meeting which may, for all I know, be targeted by a new fleet of bloodthirsty eldar.”

“Ah yes, I can see the cost-effectiveness would be...problematic.” From nowhere a sort of black cube appeared in the metallic hands of Trazyn and the xenos began to speak to himself. “No...no...not this collection...no, not the Calth one...this one is priceless and it would be the crown of my presentation...ah, this one could work.”

The green eyes were artificial, but there was emotion behind them. A word was uttered, the cube flashed in green light, and suddenly a canister appeared by the side of the annoying xenos.

It was a large canister, and it was human-made. If the aquila painted in purple wasn’t sufficient proof, there were serial numbers on the lower section which looked like the real deal. And the technology shown from the outside was unmistakably human.

“Are these?” One of the Dawnbreaker guards asked.

“There is one progenoid an Apothecary needs to create a Space Marine in this box.” The smug tone was impossible to miss. “Meet Phaerakh Neferten at the agreed date, my dear Lady Weaver, and I will consider selling you the others.”

The cube disappeared from the metallic hands and the creature turned his head to watch the still-struggling Chapter Master Dupleix.

“Unless you want to exchange it against an Iron Drake, I think I have not added one of these brutes to my collection for the last couple of centuries...”

“Trazyn, if you try to acquire Space Marines allied to me, I will find your collections and I will drown them in a swarm so massive it will darken the sun!”

One spider jumped in front of the Necron and agitated threateningly its claw-like extremities.

“I was just making an honest proposal...” Trazyn sighed theatrically. “But there is no prohibition for the five Menelaus antique vases and the three tapestries I found on Floor 31?”

“FIRE!” The bolters of the Blood Angels’ descendants went into action and the swarm was unleashed.

But when the time-stopping field dissipated seconds later and the Astartes and the guardsmen shouted in anger, there were no metallic debris or anything proving the infiltrator had been destroyed.

The thief known as Trazyn the Infinite had escaped. And much as Odysseus wished it not be so, he had a feeling he would see the silver creature again.

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The construction of the great gene-labs in the depths of Hive Athena had only begun ten days ago, but Gavreel was impressed by what his Mechanicus escort was allowed to watch.

A maze of extremely elaborated defences was now operational, and the reason of this fast building was thanks to the endless columns of red robes of the Mechanicus speaking in their secretive language everywhere his transhuman eyes turned to. Moreover, the construction was not just fast; it was also an event where quality was the order of the day. The walls were in some alloy of adamantium, the number of layers was properly amazing. There were massive protections for the outposts of guardsmen and Skitarii, and their bunkers were five metres-deep in plasteel and ferrocrete. The armament of the turrets was plasma more than lasers, and the main batteries had been delivered by several Archmagi of key Forge Worlds.

All in all, at the first warning of attack, Archmagos Biologis Rob-Eta-Leo Osier of Megyre could ask and receive over a million troops to defend it, and this didn’t count the sheer number of tanks, fortifications, nuclear mines and the like that could be used to blast their enemies apart. It was rumoured the Archmagos kept over a hundred Thanatar-class Siege-Automata, but for the time being Gavreel had not seen the first shadow of them. But this was his second visit to the gene-labs, and he had never asked for a full tour.

One thing was sure: when the first gene-lab was going to be completed, it was going to be almost as impressive as the gene-facilities at Caliban. It was a fact which should have filled his chest with pride, but since eight hours ago, it was a reminder how everything he held for granted could crumble in an instant.

This was all Trazyn’s fault. This awful creature had the gall to invade Hive Athena, and thousands of Tech-Priests were working at this very moment to discover how he had managed to break through the defences. Yes, the Spire of a Planetary Governor was built to make sure the billions of workers trimming in the manufactorums remembered who was their master, not to stop a xenos incursion, but since the election the Astartes, Magi, and workers had spent countless hours to make sure a siege would be required if any enemy wanted to threaten the life of their oath-mistress.

The fact Trazyn the Thief had strolled around, stole several thousand years-old artworks, and entered the throne room like a trusted advisor was so bad the words failed to describe the situation. And after the end of the confrontation, Lady Taylor Hebert had not been shy to let them know how unimpressed she was by their contribution.

Kratos had described it as ‘Volcanic Tearer Rage’. Thank the stars and the nebulas the insect-mistress was not in the habit of shooting anyone when they failed in their duties.

Just for this humiliation, Gavreel burned to take a hammer and pulverise the face of Trazyn until the Necron was nothing but a silver metallic platter. This xenos was nothing but trouble, and the evidence the thief had technology the human defences had no parade against was one more point to hate him.

After Wuhan, the former Dark Angel had hoped to never meet this miserable silver abomination again, but evidently this was all for naught.

“Too bad we don’t have any phosphex around...” The Sergeant grumbled before enduring a new succession of tests including blood-scanning and complicated passwords. Yes, the Heracles Wardens Apothecaries were heavily involved in the gene-labs project.

“Tell me you have good news, Galen,” Gavreel said after ten more minutes of security measures, walls and checkpoints, as he entered the waiting rooms of the gene-lab proper, avoiding more and more red-robed Tech-Priests running everywhere. “Our Lady was not happy at all, and I think we will need good news when she wakes up if we do not want to clean the gargoyles of a few churches for the rest of the week.”

The Red Seraph Space Marine chuckled, and his smile lightened what was seconds ago a pretty dour face. Unlike the majority of the Blood, the Seraphs did not keep the angelic looks of their gene-line every time. Oh, about one third of the Astartes of this Chapter that Gavreel had seen following the Battle of the Death Star had blonde hairs or blue eyes, but the two traits rarely appeared together, and in general their skin was a deep brown, indicating their homeworld may turn around a star giving above average levels of radiation.

But while Gaven did not look like a Blood Angel with his red hairs and dark eyes, he was of pleasant company and he and Gavreel often sparred together when he wasn’t teaching swordsmanship to Taylor Hebert. He was also the senior Sanguinary Priest – the name the Blood Angels’ descendants gave to their Apothecaries – among the Dawnbreaker Guard.

“I have good news and bad news, Gavreel.”

“Why am I not surprised?” The black-armoured Space Marine demanded rhetorically. “I prefer to have the good news first. After seeing this Necron-thief again, I need something to cheer me up.”

“The most important thing is that no one has been seriously harmed...if one does not count the ego of Chapter Master Dupleix.” The two Astartes sniggered. “We have been given a warning not to let our guard down, and I think the price we paid for this warning is rather cheap.”

“It may be. I would have preferred to learn it in a different manner,” and he wasn’t going to admit in front of a crowd.

“As do we all,” Gaven shrugged. “The security problems are not my area of expertise, so I will leave the issue of how the intrusion was done to the Techmarines and the Magi. The canister, on the other hand, is my responsibility. And I can tell you the progenoid inside the container is of premium quality. If we wanted to implant it into one teenager having already received the first seventeen implants, we could begin at once.”

“That is...raising interesting questions.” The Space Marine replied to his cousin. “I had thought at first this was a diversionary tactic used by the Necron to diminish our vigilance in the throne room. But if he really has gene-seed stocks to sell...”

Both Astartes exchanged a long moment of silence as Tech-Priests directed servitors pushing large nutrient baths and large cargo-haulers full of expensive medical equipment.

In a galaxy where too often rare objects and technology could be acquired if one was ready to pay the price or muster a sufficient amount of resources and firepower, the Progenoid Glands of the Adeptus Astartes, more commonly known as the gene-seed, were worth more than entire Sectors.

During the Great Crusade, gene-seed had been worth far less. The Primarchs were alive, and with one litre of Primarch blood, the Genetors and the Gene-Masters of the Emperor could create entire Chapters in less than one year. There were even rumours that during this time, the Emperor and his closest advisors had imagined tech-methods to create Space Marines without access to one of the Primarch’s blood or flesh.

But rumours or not, this Age was gone. Terra had been transformed into a slaughterhouse by the Siege, the Emperor was sitting on the Golden Throne, and the Primarchs were gone, unable to deliver more of their genetic legacy. If someone had managed to copy the work of the Emperor after the Heresy, he or she had never shared this knowledge. The only method to create a Space Marine was by cultivating the existing Progenoid Glands, whether by creating more Space Marines or using advancing Biologis secrets in a gene-lab.

“Assuming the thief did not present us the sole canister he has in his possession...how many Progenoid Glands are we speaking about?”

“A lot. This is a canister which was returning to Terra aboard a Legion warship, Gavreel. We don’t have the figures anymore, I suspect it was an incident covered up or deliberately erased from the archives, but the lowest estimate is about three thousand canisters like this one.”

The former Dark Angel whistled between his teeth.

“With this kind of resource...one could rebuild entire Chapters. Or create the embers of a new Legion.”

It was like the STC all over again. It was a prize worth killing a few planets as long as you got what you wanted in the end.

“What Legion did the gene-seed belong to?”

“And here comes the bad news. After two hours of testing, we have a 99.2% percent certainty that what the gene-seed Lady Weaver was ‘gifted’ is from the Third Legion.”

Gavreel cursed Trazyn loudly and vocally for several minutes.

“This damn xenos gave us a prize the Emperor’s Children are ready to murder the galaxy for...”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Sometimes, she regretted abolishing the Menelaus laws. The previous dynasty had its share of idiots, but they had passed numerous edicts forbidding their subordinates to tell them bad news until they had finished their breakfast.

It was tempting to reinstate it. It would be horribly short-sighted. Bad news were rarely considerate enough to wait after breakfast to manifest themselves.

“Let me sum-up the situation,” Taylor said as Gavreel finished his explanations. “Trazyn used a combination of advanced teleportation in the Lower Hive and some dimensional-time phasing to bypass our defences. Once on Floor 54, he proceeded to steal about half of a collection from the Menelaus dynasty I had displaced in favour of nicer artwork. Then he disguised himself as a Guild Leader, stunned a Magos, stole his identification codes, managed to convince the machine-spirits somehow he had an audience with me at the end of the day and arrived in the throne room without anybody raising the alarm. He did this by creating a sort of vid-cast loop for a good third of our monitoring system. And last but not least, the thief has probably enough gene-seed to build an entire Astartes Legion in his possession.”

She had known there were problems in this galaxy, but...what had she thought it was a good idea to take this job?

“I will finish my breakfast, first. Then I will go to the strategium and see what we can do. My usual is schedule is ruined for today. Captain Arav will reschedule all my appointments and audiences next week. Any questions?”

“One, my Lady.” Gamaliel stood up. “If the Inquisitors demand entrance in the next twenty minutes, what are your orders?”

Taylor winced and in the privacy of her thoughts cursed Trazyn twenty times. Maybe if the damn thief-collector had done his intervention in front of a minor noble or two, she could have kept it quiet. But no, he had to arrive when she was meeting a Lord Inquisitor and a Chapter Master of the Adeptus Astartes.

“Escort them to the Great Strategium. I don’t like it, but they have a right to know.” Trazyn was definitely the kind of threat which could be fatal for your long-term health, and even knowing about him had proved to be insufficient yesterday.

In the next fifteen minutes, she tried to eat a normal breakfast, but her appetite failed her today. Five minutes of conversation with the cooks and her employees, and she descended thirteen levels from the breakfast hall to the place the Archmagi in her service had named the Great Strategium.

It was a pompous term to say this was the level where they had installed for her ten massive hololithic devices, hundreds of screens showing twenty-five hours a day endless data on the military, political, social and economic state of the Nyx system, and plenty of technological devices Dragon had been close to kiss when they had been presented to her.

The herald announced a few of her titles, two of the Astartes who had preceded her opened the doors, and Taylor entered the principal node of the strategium. And already, the differences from a normal day jumped to the eye. The Great Strategium was never empty during a normal day; this section was the size of a great amphitheatre. No, it would be more correct to say it was an amphitheatre, with the seats and the elevation, only the gigantic hololith reserved for her personal use was where the scene and the actors should be, and in the ranks of spectators there were plenty of tank-sized screens and uncountable Mechanicus control stations.

It had been three days ago when she had visited the Great Strategium, and that time there had been maybe five thousand officers, administrators, Tech-Priests, Ecclesiarchy representatives, advisors, and emissaries of the Merchants Guilds. It had been far from empty, but the amphitheatre-strategium had definitely sounded empty.

Today, it was not the case. Every seat was occupied, and this didn’t count the hundreds of PDF troops and the dozens of Astartes standing guard near every exit and forming neat lines against the walls. And they weren’t the only forces to be present. In a few seconds she had noticed close to forty Frateris Templars elite troopers, and thirty of black-armoured men and women and whose single identification symbol was the stylised ‘I’ of the Inquisition.

Maybe this great session should have been opened with a long discourse and lot of ceremonies, but frankly after the mess Trazyn had created, there was too much to do.

“This emergency council is now in session,” she said crisply, after everyone had bowed and saluted, and she had ordered those who had prostrated themselves to return to their seats. “Seraph Gamaliel, please recount the details of the intrusion we faced yesterday.”

And for the next hour, the Blood Angel spoke. Much of it was about the flaws which had been exploited in the security by the collector-thief. The golden-armoured Astartes was good and far more charismatic than she would ever be: by the end of the discussion, despite having glossed over many of the most disturbing ‘talents’ of the Necron, all the audience, the Tech-Priests especially, were ready to rush out and hunt the self-proclaimed ‘Infinite Collector’ wherever he hid his treasures.

New security procedures were put in place. New equipment was going to be brought from the warships in orbit to make things more difficult for any second intrusion. The Heracles Wardens and the Magi were going to devise new stratagems. Nyx was not going to forget any time soon the ‘visit’ of Trazyn the Infinite.

Finally, the Blood Angel announced to the audience.

“The next session is opened to persons having a level of authorisation of Crimson and above.”

Instantly, the amphitheatre emptied itself. Most of the non-transhuman soldiers left too, the exception being the Fay 20th and some Nyx troopers who had been involved in the incident yesterday. Due to the fact Crimson accreditation was not handed before you were a top commander, the average amount of deeds per heroic head had to be truly spectacular. The three Space Marine Chapter Masters were here, with Chapter Master Dupleix flanking like a dark shadow Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor and Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper. The Ecclesiarchy had Cardinal Lumen Prescott and Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius. The Administratum had Tithe-Master Carl Blum and his Senior Administrator on-site. The System Defence Fleet had Admiral Genseric Florentine and the Navy had Lord Admiral Danvers Alexandros. For the Imperial Guard, there was Lord General Militant Klaus Bach and Lord General Philip Ziegler. Arbitrator-Judge Joseph Anderson had come himself for the Adeptus Arbites. The Adeptus Astra Telepathica had an eminent figure in the person of Choir-Master Largo Assyrian, a blind and bald man like many Astropaths.

The Planetary Defence Forces had their three top post-purge commanders in the strategium: General Jonas Maniakes, General Leo Argyros, and Strategos Alexi Komnenos, the latter serving more or less as her chief of staff where the Nyx PDF was concerned. And of course there was the Mechanicus and her government. For the former, Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar was unquestionably the best choice, since he had already met Trazyn, and Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan was the other red-robed leader. For the latter, Vista, Dragon, Clockblocker and a few of her ministers had been summoned to attend.

This was a lot of people...and this was the absolute minimum she could talk to without angering one of the powerful factions existing inside the Imperium.

“Sergeant Forcas, give everyone the full report of the events having unfolded on Wuhan and Nyx where Trazyn the Thief is concerned,” Taylor commanded once the non-accredited spectators had left the Strategium and those who remained took their seats around the hololith. And yes, she was aware there was a certain amount of risk coming with it. Many people in this room were at best allies of circumstances.

“Yes, my Lady. It began...”

The next best thing to one hour was spent explaining the past events of yesterday and their little excursion at Wuhan where they had fought Iash’uddra. It was exasperating to see her subordinates at the end of it had adoration in their eyes wherever they looked at her. So much for giving them the opinion she was not a Saint-Angel or whatever they believed in. The closest she got from a compliment was Clockblocker saying ‘it was arch-typical for her to humiliate a huge eldritch entity’. And yes, these were his exact words. It was also followed by Vista giving him a slap. At least it lightened the atmosphere after a lot of bad news.

“Thank you Sergeant for these extensive revelations,” Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper was the first to speak when Gavreel concluded the facts and the suppositions they had found concerning the annoying Necron. Inquisitors didn’t sigh or manifest any expressions of lassitude, but there were hints the old steel-faced Lady was not far from this hypothetical point. “We are going to take this xenos very seriously and we are going to search our oldest libraries for more evidence of his stealing.”

“Assuming he didn’t steal the books too,” Chapter Master Dupleix commented bitterly, towering over the audience like a giant as he had refused to take one of the seats built for the Space Marines.

“Yes, assuming that,” the Inquisitor woman agreed. “The most urgent preoccupation is the subject of the gene-seed I’m afraid. Now I am Ordo Xenos, I am not one of the Inquisitors who investigate Astartes Chapters or their secrets, but it looks to me this discovery is absolutely capital.”

“It is, Lady Inquisitor,” Jeremiah Isley of the Heracles Wardens replied. “Any stock of Astartes gene-seed is a magnificent prize for loyal Space Marines and those of our cousins who have broken their oaths to the Emperor. Since this is pure gene-seed, devoid of any mutation or generational degradation as it comes fresh from either the Terran or the Luna gene-labs, the value of this stock is priceless. The reason the Third Legion was so small during most of the Great Crusade was a combination of a genetic sabotage and losing the ship transporting their stocks to Terra. If Trazyn really found the hulk or stole it himself in the first place, he has the gene-seed reserves of an entire Legion in his possession.”

“Your estimates of these reserves?” Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor asked, his stern face giving the impression he had aged a couple of years since the disastrous ‘audience’.

“I don’t think His Majesty would have settled for a gene-seed reserve of less than five thousand progenoids, Lord Inquisitor,” the former Harrowmaster said. “At the same time, the Emperor’s Children gene-seed was far less compatible than the Ultramarines...I don’t think there would be more than forty thousand canisters in one hull.”

Still, it was a sobering affirmation. Assuming there was a quarter of the maximum proposed – ten thousand progenoids – this was the equivalent of ten full Codex-compliant Chapters. It was not the end of things, because said Astartes would have to be armoured, given proper weapons and endure long years of training, but once unleashed a force of ten thousand Astartes was something that would make an entire Sector burn.

“If Trazyn is ready to sell them to you, Lady Nyx,” Rafaela Harper affirmed in a tone that tolerated no debate, “we have to buy the gene-seed. At all costs. I don’t trust the motives of that thief. If bribed with enough ‘collector items’, the danger is high Trazyn would sell it directly to the slaves of the Ruinous Powers.”

“Then let’s muster our forces and attack his homeworld,” Pontiac Dupleix thundered. “This abomination will be killed and we will recover every object and man this vile creature stole to Mankind!”

“While your doctrinal position is worthy of respect, Chapter Master,” Desmerius Lankovar began, “I have met the infantry Trazyn the Infinite commands and it is a fearsome force. The cannons we designated as ‘Gauss weaponry’ will disintegrate any armour in our possession, save maybe the new model of Angel’s Tear. Mark VII power armour will not resist more than five shots of this abominable xenos technology. Sending anything less than a Crusade Fleet would result in a short and one-sided defeat. And we haven’t the first clue where the Necron thief has built his collection-base.”

“And we don’t know how many of his species are in the vicinity to give him assistance,” Lord General Militant Klaus Bach intervened, projecting an aura of competence and indomitability forged by decades after decades of war. “Assuming his words have any value, the xenos was the emissary of one of his kind yesterday. It is entirely possible an attack against one of them will be interpreted as an attack of against all of them.”

“We don’t know how many heavy battleships these abominations have waiting in their secret shipyards,” Lord Admiral Alexandros said after drinking a glass filled what looked to be powerful liquor. “Kar Duniash will not deploy a Battlefleet if the chances of victory are inexistent. This monstrous battleship dominated and wiped out many eldar ships with frightening ease and while our ships are superior in armour to the long-ears, our battleships are slower and less manoeuvrable. Any engagement with a Necron fleet has to end with our victory, because their agility and their firepower guarantees we will not be able to break engagement close to a planet.”

Everyone who listened to the Admiral knew this admission had cost him a lot. The Imperial Navy loved to repeat that its domination of the galaxy was unassailable. True, the eldar were threats, but too often it was their speed and their psyker powers which guaranteed the human warships could never catch them. The battleship Trazyn had used was a completely different thing. It was something that could match the biggest warships of the Nyx Sector and destroy them without suffering crippling damage in return. If this ‘Phaerakh Neferten’ had more battleships, they could crush squadrons after squadrons every Monday and there would be nothing they could do. There would be nothing she could do. Her insects were bigger, but against a battleship of this size, it was the same situation faced in all the Endbringer battles.

“The position of the Inquisition has always been that xenos species are better dead than conspiring against the Imperium,” Rafaela Harper said bluntly, “but in this case, my colleagues and I will not pronounce judgement for the time being. The loss of gene-seed could be tolerated, but we don’t know how many worlds are in Wuhan’s situation. For all we know, there are thousands of these underground fortress dispersed across the galaxy, waiting for one signal to wake up. These ‘Trazyn’ and ‘Neferten’ could have the means to convince them to rise up and provoke a series of planetary massacres.”

“In this case...there is another problem, Lady Inquisitor.” And it was her voice who had spoken. “The star map, Gamaliel.”

The hololith stopped giving the images of Trazyn and his ‘exploits’, and was replaced by a map detailing the part of the galaxy the Imperium had named Ultima Segmentum. First it focused on Nyx, before moving westwards and nearly touching the imaginary point where the border of Ultima Segmentum joined the eastwards frontier of Segmentum Tempestus.

Archmagos Lankovar taped a series of instructions in binaric and the brilliant display zoomed before shifted a few light-years south-west outside the area of space humanity controlled.

A new zoom and all the military commanders and representatives could look at the image of a giant blue star.

“The spatial coordinates given by Trazyn are proposing the Pavia system for the meeting with this ‘Phaerakh Neferten’.”

“What do we know about this system?” Choir-Master Largo Assyrian, the blind Astropath of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, asked.

“A lot of things, none of them very rejoicing,” Gamaliel answered, his angelic face presenting none of his usual benevolent nature. “The system was found close to the end of the Great Crusade by the Eighteenth Legion and their Primarch. They named it Argo. It was a battlefield during the Heresy, and forgotten for several centuries before being colonised once more in early M32. The system became known as Pavia and its planet as Pavia Primus, designation Civilised World. The system was lost during the great ork incursions of mid-M32, reconquered and purged of xenos infestation in M33, before being lost again in early M34 when the Planetary Governor declared secession from the Imperium. The forces gathered to reconquer Pavia Primus fought a two hundred-years long war before being withdrawn to other fronts. Mechanicus and Astartes reports of a millennium ago noted the heavy support of xenos in favour of the traitors. The Imperial Navy moved several Starforts and squadrons in the region, but never managed to go again on the offensive. Today, Pavia is a pirate haven and a refuge for all the outlaws who have refused to recognise the authority of the Emperor.”

“We fought a campaign forty years ago some one hundred light-years away from this vermin’s nest,” Agiel Izaz commented with a disgusted expression, answering her silent question how the Astartes had managed to find the information in less than twelve hours. “Due to our depleted fleet and the lack of cooperation from a Vice-Admiral,” Lord Admiral Alexandros almost jumped in indignation at this, “attacking Pavia was never seriously entertained. We know for sure there are human and eldar capital ships using whatever shipyards the pirates managed to keep in one piece. The enemy numbers are highly speculative, but several naval commanders believed that two Cruisers and three Light Cruisers or their xenos equivalents could be taken for granted.”

And as it became evident as everyone around the table began to give her or his point of view, Nyx had not the surplus forces to send so far away to eliminate pirates in their lair.

“There is still a Martian fleet on the way,” Dragon proposed after an argument between Tithe-Master Blum and Lord General Ziegler.

“Indeed,” Arithmancia Sultan agitated all her mechadendrites at once, “and they are certainly not going to demand a light percentage of the possible gains if their fleet forms the core of the expedition.”

“You don’t know this for sure,” argued Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius.

“We have a working STC database and a possible clue to find more,” retorted the Archmagos of Ryza. “If they refuse to send less than ten ships to the pirate’s lair, we will have to be worried about them being imposters...”

\*\*\*\*

*The victory of His Most Holy Majesty forces at the Battle of the Death Star unquestionably gave the rest of the Nyx Sector an overwhelming military advantage. In less than a week, the greenskins lost their Warboss, the near-totality of the ork sub-commanders involved in the carnage, millions of troops, their great forge-planetoid and an unlimited source of fuel, ammunition. The coordination the loathsome xenos had used for the better part of the war was now gone.*

*The war was not yet over, but the valiant guardsmen and garrison forces could feel the outcome had been decided in their favour. Colonel Clayton of the Megaran 6th Rifles, somewhat euphoric after the final extermination of the orks at Harbin, did not hesitate to proclaim this war would be won by the Sanguinala.*

*Unfortunately, this timetable was too optimistic. Over five planets were still the scenes of violent battles against the orks, and the final victory was not proclaimed until 7.095.290M35 and the destruction of an ork raider destroyed by a frigate squadron fleeing the Fagus System. Thus it was not the Sanguinala, but the holy day of the Emperor’s Ascension which marked the end of this brutal but defining conflict for the Sector.*

*There were many notable battles during these last months. The Battle of Kalavgrad in the Torch System is one of them. Aside from involving the noble Astartes of the Iron Drakes Chapter, this brutal engagement saw the first deployment of the Nyx Penal Legions. The order of battle also included several Mechanicus formations and Fay regiments...*

By retired General Tereyev, *The Ocean of War*, 510M35

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Torch System**

**Lusitania**

**7.837.289M35**

**Chapter Master Pontiac Dupleix**

The orks, thought the Chapter Master of the Iron Drakes, were truly something abominable for this galaxy. By all rights, no species which couldn’t count to twenty – and most orks were lucky if they understand the concept of the number five – was supposed to be able to reach the stars.

But the orks were there. They were stupider than a noble who had spent a century of life abusing forbidden stimulants. They were incapable of understanding the concept of peace. But their method of reproduction – spores infecting the soil of the planets they were landing upon – made sure every war against the green tide was never the last one.

And the inhabitants of Lusitania, Administratum Designation Torch Secundus, had learned in pain and death the brutality of the greenskins in the last years.

Every Admiral or General should have ignored the sole inhabitable world of the system. Lusitania was for the scribes of the Adeptus Terra a Feudal World, and the majority of its population outside the Imperium chief city had just begun to experience with gunpowder thirty years ago. The space assets consisted of a few metrological satellites and whatever transports chose to leave the Warp here for trade or the Imperial tithe.

And these tithes were anything but vital for the survival of humanity. Before the greenskins chose to show their ugly heads, the population of the petty kingdoms in this jungle-covered planet was about forty million, dispersed on five continents. The city where the Planetary Governor – a useless idiot chosen by the Lord Nyx some fifty years ago – ruled was a fortified settlement of fifty thousand souls. Tithe-Master Carl Blum had compiled the data, and by all evidence the Munitorum, may, accent on the ‘may’, have levied a regiment from them some one thousand and three hundred years ago. Whatever their performance had been, it had clearly been not sufficient for the bureaucrats to think tithing soldiers here a second time was a good idea.

On a day per day basis, the overwhelming majority of the Lusitania tithe consisted in wood. To be precise, wood of the bluish-green tree the locals called the orphidax. The scent and the colour of this wood were appreciated by the Nyx nobility and it seemingly sold at a fair price in the spaceports of the Sector.

This was certainly the only reason why Menelaus had agreed with the Imperial Guard commanders and sent over three million soldiers in ten years to ensure the orks weren’t impossible to eradicate. Casualties had been heavy, both for the Guard and the local population. A single continent had been the theatre of war, but a particularly aggressive Wuhanese General had not hesitated drafting the local in his regiments to compensate his losses. By now, the population had to be under five million, and of course the capital of Kalavgrad had been taken by the xenos in the first year of war.

“It is time to finish this,” Dupleix said to the two Captains watching with him Lusitania from the bridge of the *Honourable Shield*, one of the three Battle-Barges his Chapter had maintained over the centuries. “The Imperial Guard has repulsed the orks towards the walls of Kalavgrad, and now it’s time for the decisive strike. Wenceslas, your drop assault will land south-west of the city and deprive the beasts of their artillery train. Mons, you and your tanks will crush the tanks of the northern approaches with our Rhinos, Predators, and Land Raiders. I will personally coordinate the first engagements from the Thunderhawks before reinforcing the position most advantageous to destroy the walls.”

Some people might think him eager to throw himself into battle after the damn xenos-thief had humiliated him days ago. They were perfectly right, but the crowd of the green vermin didn’t interest him. The head of the Warboss, on the other hand...

“We will need something to attract the attention of the ork infantry,” Captain James Mons of the 1st Company stated.

Captain Ernest Wenceslas of the Iron Drakes 3rd Company smiled next to him.

“Something...or someone. Lord Dupleix, would I be correct to assume the large transports that accompanied us to Torch will solve our tactical dilemma?”

“Yes, they will.” Dupleix confirmed with a nod. “In fact, the large transports contain the 3rd and 4th Nyx Pureblood Penal Legions and five newly-inducted Guard regiments from Nyx. The former and the latter were noted for their loyalty to the old regime, I’m told.”

There were a few chuckles among the serfs and the Space Marines dutifully fulfilling their duties and the battle-preparations on the bridge. No one had been particularly impressed by the methods and the strategies that the various nobility classes had tried to adopt to fight the enemies of the Imperium. A lot of times, they had been saved by the reality the orks were about as intelligent as them.

“Lady Weaver and General Argyros insisted these former ‘Noble Guards’...and the Penal Legions, of course...are in dire need of redemption. They can win an amnesty should they survive long enough, but they will have to win them. And we will offer it to them. A nice charge on open terrain for four hundred thousand men against another infantry force does not need a lot of tactical intelligence to execute. Commissar Hodrik has received his instructions and has assured me he will...motivate properly the Penal Nobles. Any questions?”

“Just one,” Captain Wenceslas smiled so widely that his mangled dentition was impossible to miss. “We left Nyx without much warning, my Lord. Does that mean?”

Pontiac Dupleix cursed the curiosity of his subordinate. Sometimes, the Captain of the 3rd Company was really too smart for his own good.

“Yes, Lady Weaver has promised that a rapid victory in this system would give us rights of recruitment for Lusitania as well as her official benediction to build a Fortress-monastery. Eight million colonists from diverse sources have been promised to repopulate the planet, and the Mechanicus has agreed to give an assistance of no less than five thousand Tech-Priests. We will not be able to organise the recruitment operations our cousins the Brothers of the Red have in mind for Nyx, and we will have no say on the Imperial rule, but this world could be a new base for our Chapter if we triumph here.”

“We will not fail, my Lord,” Mons promised with fervour shining in his eyes. It didn’t surprise Dupleix. The Captain of the 1st Company had been one of the officers which had been the most frustrated to abandon their recruitment planets in Segmentum Solar as the Administratum began to visit month after month and demand explanations for minor or inexistent faults. “For the Emperor and the Saint!”

And he was also one of the Space Marines who had no doubt about the new Lady Nyx’s holy status. As long as he kept the worship in private and continued to perform superbly, the Chapter Master of the Iron Drakes would not tell him to stop.

Besides, maybe she was a real Saint...

“For the Emperor,” he answered. “Death to His enemies!”

**Lord General Militant Klaus Bach**

Kalavgrad had been many things in the past decade. Before this war began, it had been the chief city and capital of Lusitania. It had been where the tithe of the Imperium was gathered by the aristocrats House Menelaus trusted. It had been the only gateway to the stars, with a small spaceport. More recently, it had been used by the orks as their stronghold.

Now it was an utter ruin, and the atmosphere was one of destruction and death. Corpses were everywhere; despite the efforts of the cleaning-up columns and their Flamers Mark III ‘Heretic’ Pattern, there were tens of thousands of dead greenskins, and perhaps as many humans. When the time came to assault the walls, the Space Marines had done the most difficult work, but even two hundred and fifty Space Marines could not be everywhere. And the orks had surged forwards to kill the non-Astartes, perhaps figuring in their empty skulls they had more chance fighting the Imperial Guard than the elite of the Adeptus Astartes.

Klaus Bach grimaced as the odour of death came unbearable and placed again his rebreather mask on his face. Decades ago, such a spectacle would have filled him with a sense of satisfaction. Now? He would not admit it to his men, but he was tired and not just physically. It was more than his back killing him. The visages of his friends pursued him every night. The bodies of these guardsmen and guardswomen from Harbin, Atlas, Fay, Megara, and Nyx became when he let his thoughts wander the lifeless husks of the proud Leuthen veterans. The more years passed, the more he was convinced reaching the rank of Lord General Militant was no benediction. The privileges were nice. The pay was nice. And the faces of these pompous aristocrats with lineages going as far as the Great Crusade when were forced to bow properly and congratulate him when he won a campaign...this was beyond good.

The hab-blocks were utterly trashed and despite the filter between his mouth and the air, there still was the smell of blood mixed with promethium and even more nauseating substances. The warehouses and the barracks were riddled by so many holes the Enginseers were going to raze the entire thing and call it a day.

“Colonel Tereyev, the status of the Nyx Penal Legions, if you please,” Klaus ordered to the commanding officer of the Fay 5th Armoured. The man’s grey-black uniformed looked like he had bathed in blood, but the Lord General Militant was not going to reprimand him: a Colonel with blood on his uniform was someone who fought with his men. Above Colonel, fighting on the front lines was the sign someone had gone dreadfully wrong. Below this rank, and against the ork, every lasgun counted and the Imperial Guard was not the greatest army of the galaxy because all his officers remained safely in orbit.

“Lord Militant Bach, the Nyx 4th Pureblood Penal Legion is destroyed. The Commissar leading them reported eighty-four percent casualties before his vox went-down. The Nyx 3rd Pureblood Penal Legion has only suffered fifty-two percent of casualties, but they didn’t take the brunt of the ork assault and the Commissars were forced to detonate a few explosive collars to convince them to advance.”

“In this case, it is clear they do not deserve second chances. See that they are in the first place for extraction, Colonel. They are plenty of ork battlefronts in the nearby Sectors, and I think a lot of Generals will thank us when we provide them cannon fodder.”

“At once, Lord Militant Bach!”

“How fared the brand-new Nyx regiments?”

“They were tenacious, but their inexperience cost them. One was completely wiped out, and the other is effectively crippled.”

“Regroup the survivors in the other PDF regiments. I will assign a few experienced adjutants to prepare them for their next enemies. Maybe they will learn the tricks to survive the next battlefields.”

The opposite was also possible. Lady Weaver had not sent these men directly into the furnace of war because they were good soldiers. These men had bled and died today because they had sold their allegiance to Nostradamus Vandire or another blue-blooded master.

“This should give a casualty list of two hundred and forty thousand men overall.” This was more than fifty percent of the initial contingent which had left Nyx a few days ago. But the result was worth it, as something like one hundred and sixty thousand of the dead had been Penal troops. A lot of aristocratic useless mouths had been silenced...and Nyx could always find more of them.

“Yes, Lord Militant...or should I say Lord Hill-Knight Klaus Bach, Governor of the Torch System?”

Klaus could not help but grin. At every epoch, even the promises spoken at the top of a Hive-Spire spread faster than light-speed.

“Lady Nyx has not yet confirmed it...and I am just three months away from retiring. So let’s go for Lord Militant for now, Colonel.”

Klaus was tired. But hopefully, duty would not be the burden it was for much longer. He was old, and it was up to the new generation to rise. It was up to the young now to win the war left by their parents.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.871.289M35**

**Sergeant Wei Cao**

Nearly every time, when their commander received one of her fellow parahumans in her office, she was receiving him or her alone. Not exactly alone, because since they had arrived at Nyx the Basileia was accompanied everywhere by at least a couple of Astartes, but overall the audience was reduced to the strict minimum.

Most of the time, the rest of the staff and she had little idea what exactly was talked about. They had a good idea of the consequences, of course – edicts concerning the Mechanicus and the industrial sector were almost decided after a visit of Magos Dragon Richter, for example. But in general, the discussions remained secret.

There was, however, a notable exception.

Every time the parahuman known as Leet came for one of his appointments, the debate was...lively.

“IS IT TOO MUCH TO ASK TO YOU NOT TO BLOW ANYTHING UP FOR TWENTY-FIVE HOURS?”

“Just so you know, Wei,” Valeriya Petrov said, “we absolutely blame you for bringing this vox-magnifier insect to our Lady.”

“Don’t worry,” she replied with her hands desperately searching the earmuffs. “I already blame myself.”

Nine times out of ten, the effects of the insect-mistress was really good for those around of them if you could ignore the disturbing appearance of the spiders, centipedes and hundreds of other species.

But in some cases, it definitely was a lot of thing, but good was not one among the qualities they heard.

“YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO LEARN FROM THE ENGINSEERS, NOT BLOW THEM UP! I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT MACHINE-SPIRITS, I DON’T CARE THEY DON’T HAVE ANY PARAHUMAN ABILITIES! I WANT TINKERS AND TECH-PRIESTS TO BUILD THINGS USEFUL!”

“She’s in top form, today,” Corporal Alex Dev managed to articulate between two outbursts. “I didn’t see her scream like this since this delegation of nobles arrived ten days ago.”

The men and the women of the Basileia’s staff – a staff which never seemed to stop growing, given that they were now close to two hundred and fifty guardsmen in half-pay and civilians of various branches – nodded or manifested their agreement in several manners.

Now that had been an explosion. Many of the aristocrats had taken rather badly the fact the 80 hours-working week was now law, and they had been even more horrified at the idea of giving a free day per week to their perpetually exhausted workers. A column of men and women had thus arrived in the throne room to give Lady Weaver a pre-warning of what they thought what going to happen.

They had been able to give their first ‘reform’ before Taylor Hebert exploded. Apparently, the nobles had considered that, since these lazy wretches toiling and dying in their manufactorums had a free day, it was their duty to report the hours not worked from dawn to dusk on the rest of the week. In effect, it increased the average day of a lowborn worker from twelve hours to thirteen hours and twenty minutes.

There had also been some hints that, should the Basileia prove difficult, certain financial and material support would be withdrawn.

Most of these nobles and the cartel leaders who had the stupidity to tell the victor of the Death Star that to her face were now part of the 10th Penal Legion. Or the 11th Penal Legion. These two formations had been filled so fast Wei had difficulties to remember where all these imbeciles had ended up.

“It had positive effects,” every eye in the room turned to Captain Vladisluvius Arav, who had the arduous task to be Weaver’s chief of staff where the Fay 20th and a lot of the day-per-day topics were concerned. “I liked a lot the first try of our Lady, but there’s no shame to admit the first law was incredibly flawed. At least with this noble delegation trying to exploit many issues, we could correct it before it was fully implemented in every Hive and industrial sprawl of Nyx.”

And the Basileia of Nyx had seen no reason to coddle the nobles anymore, Wei thought. To cut the oncoming debate before it had the opportunity to unravel out of control, the working week had decreased from 80 hours to 72 hours. The support of the lower and middle classes had been...she hesitated between the words ‘euphoric’, ‘triumphant’ and many others. The new laws, this time formulated by expert lawyers and Administratum-recruited officials was in the process of curtailing the nobility ‘rewards’, diminishing the scandalously high unemployment rates and increasing the formation of untrained manpower.

Add the creation of several ‘Weaverian’ orphanages and hospitals, and the PDF soldiers who presented their findings to them at the end of every day were sure that the rate of approval for their Governor was above ninety-nine percent...with the nobility included.

Some people continued to manifest doubts Lady Weaver was not a Saint. The Nyxians didn’t share this opinion at all. For them, the new Lady Nyx was the best thing to happen to their world since the Great Crusade had reunified the Sector with Terra.

“YOU WILL KEEP YOU HEAD DOWN AND YOU WILL STOP INSULTING THE NICE TECH-PRIESTS! AM I UNDERSTOOD?”

All of this to explain Leet was spending a very bad moment in the Governor’s office.

“Maybe someone should go and save the poor man,” Egor Artyomiv suggested. Too predictably, not a single person stood to accomplish what he had just advised.

“FOR THE NEXT WEEK, YOU WILL WORK IN THE CACTUS FIELDS! I DON’T CARE IF YOU BUILD MACHINES IN YOUR SPARE TIME! FOR ONE WEEK, I DON’T WANT TO HEAR AN IMPERIAL ORGANISATION COMPLAIN ABOUT YOU!”

“It’s the Officio Agricultae who supervises the cactus plantations,” said Matthew Reiner, one of the rare Ulm veterans to have accepted a support position. His two legs had been lost in a furious melee against the Arch-Enemy aboard the Magos Laurentis, but the Tech-Priests had managed to stabilise fast enough and to evacuate him before he perished. And like every survivor, his medical bills and his two bionic legs had been paid from Lady Weaver’s pocket. “Should I warn them a storm is coming their way?”

“I think they will like the warning, if nothing else,” replied Captain Arav with a smirk.

“AND I HAVE ALREADY FOUND A NAME FOR THE BATTLESHIP! I DON’T WANT YOUR SUGGESTIONS!”

And on this words, the door opened with one of the massive Dreadnought-beetles ‘escorting’ Leet out. In case anyone had missed the loud conversation in the office, the fact the Tinker-parahuman was held by the neck by the massive black insect for the half-minute it took to cross their work place was a good indicator of their employer’s mood.

“Help me!” Leet tried piteously. “I’m sure she is going to throw me to her PDF minions or some of the Tech-Priests from the Magisterium! Help me!”

Unfortunately, all the men and women present were too busy chuckling at his predicament to come to his rescue. Plus it was a Dreadnought-beetle. Every person in Weaver’s staff had a lasgun and a melee weapon she or he could reach in the next couple of seconds, but forcing the armoured insect to release its captive wasn’t something you did in one shot. These things were tough, and under their Lady’s control, they could take a huge amount of punishment before dying.

“Sergeant Cao, your presence is required,” one of the Dawnbreaker Astartes passed the door to make the announcement.

“Someone is in trouble,” sang Valeriya to her right.

“I will tell the Brothers of the Red you have stolen their sweet stocks,” Wei retorted with a vicious smile.

“Low blow, Wei, low blow...just that you know the bets are saying you won’t be able to do it...”

The Sergeant stood, took her principal data-slate and walked towards the Basileia’s office. Or to be accurate, one of her offices: given the size of her possessions and the Spire, there had been several work places like just this one created in the last month or so.

As she approached the desk, Wei remarked there were a few chairs today. She took it as a good sign; the informal saying which had spread beyond Nyx was that Lady Nyx didn’t offer a seat to someone she intended to remove from her office in the next minutes.

Today Taylor Hebert was wearing one of the green dresses she and a few cloth-artisans had imagined. It was good...and not just because the price for similar dresses was going to go through the Spire. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, the heroine had the body to wear very nice things, with her long legs and her height.

“I think everyone on this floor has heard your melodious voice,” she teased, “just to warn you.”

The insect-mistress huffed in exasperation.

“I should not have screamed like this,” the Basileia of Nyx admitted, “but Leet...he exasperates me. Whether I speak with Dragon, Vista or Clockblocker, this is in good fun...but with him, I become angry too easily.”

It was true. And it had not escaped the inhabitants of the Upper Hive that of all the parahumans, Leet was the next best thing to an outsider. It was not because his powers were useless; to the contrary, from the partial knowledge she had, Wei knew Leet had probably a power-skill as useful as the one Dragon had. Vista and Clockblocker’s powers were impressive visually, but they could not be used in the construction of a hab-block or the development of new tanks.

The problem was the man’s personality. Leet, to say it in a polite manner, was not a pleasant individual to live with. Wei did not like him, the rest of the men and women of the Fay 20th did not like him, the Tech-Priests, the Magi, the Archmagi did not like him, the PDF troopers did not like him, the Guard officers did not like him...the list could go on and on. But when Dragon and Vista, two very nice persons known for their kindness and their willingness to give second chances, were caught insulting Leet in private, force was to admit the man was a problem.

“But my problems with Leet can wait he has found some humility in the cactus fields.” Her superior continued. “If he manages to make a mess here, there will be simply no hope for him. If I called you, it is because I want to speak about the negotiations with Quayran, the next strategy of the nobles, and the income generated by the insects.”

Wei nodded and read the latest news on her data-slate before answering.

“The offers to Magos-Adept Makagourza-something,” no way she was able to utter the full name of this member of the Adeptus Mechanicus, “have been accepted after their fourth revision. It was not without a certain sense of irritation from Ryza and Stygies VIII, I was told.”

“What did you expect?” was the philosophical answer she received. “The Archmagi and Magi were so sure the Quayran shipyards were going to jump on the possibility of obtaining a STC template-copy that they never truly contemplated that what the Magos-Adept wanted above all was a semi-independence from the great Forge-Worlds.”

It was an uncomfortable reality. The construction of the battleship they were interested in and the disinterest of the Martian Archmagos in the aftermath would not have been possible at Metalica. Quayran – or at least the Fabricator behind the negotiations – wanted to spread its production wings, so to speak. And he was going to obtain it, as his plasteel-like refusal to bulge had granted him what he wanted.

“Ah...yes, the Magi involved were a bit more vocal in their denunciations. Still, Quayran has accepted the ship’s name you put forwards. They did not take much convincing. It sounds better than ‘Hull Alpha-1-Alpha-1-Alpha-something’.”

The conventions of the Mechanicus were sometimes worse than those employed by the Adeptus Administratum. And no, it wasn’t an exaggeration.

“The insect business is booming,” she continued as Taylor Hebert didn’t object or demanded further information on the subject. “The meat of the super-lobsters has become a highly-demanded delicacy in the best culinary establishment centres of Nyx, despite its ridiculous price. I think we will able to rotate in two to three months to another type of sea food, maybe one of these blue crabs...that way we will have ‘food seasons’ and people will have novelty in their plates. The honey of the Lightning-bee also sells like the rice soups at the end of work’s day in the low markets. There was a medium purchase of Weevil’s ivory yesterday from a visiting Pontifex worth one hundred and twenty million. And of course, the spider silk may not be useful to resist the fire of plasma weapons, but the Mechanicus finds the substance fascinating for reasons they have not shared with me...and the cloth-makers all demand some to make new designs.”

“They really want me to have full wardrobes, don’t they?”

Wei rolled her shoulders.

“I know you don’t want to particularly hear it, but for a lot of master cloth-artisans right now, you wearing one of their creations is the difference between fame and obscurity.”

Between the...decimation of the nobility and the old lines, Nyx clothing market was changing, and it was changing fast. In this storm of silk, cotton and synthetic fabrics, it was not blasphemous to say that for certain shops, the Basileia shone like the light of the Astronomican Itself.

“Thank you for the pressure,” Weaver retorted in her best imperious tone as one Astartes snorted loudly. “I noticed you didn’t give me a fifth type of insect to use on...money purposes.”

“I needed a few days to search,” she defended herself. “I continue compiling the list of insects which come on my desk...and I know we are just seeing the first waves. The Magos-Explorators really want to send you a lot of their best specimens. The receptions are not limited to the thirty-fives species of spider you use for your silk...”

“I know.”

Wei smiled.

“The lobsters and the bees have generated enough interest for the food sales. The silk will be our greatest argument for the luxury clothing market. Ivory will be of use in many decorations and ornaments. I wanted something...different for the fifth type of insect.

“And you found it?”

“Yes, I believe I did.” She pressed a combination and showed the image she had prepared.

Her interlocutor slightly inclined her head on the left in answer.

“This looks like an ant, Sergeant Cao.”

“It is because it is one, Major-General Basileia-Saint Weaver,” she replied cheekily, using a few of the ‘official’ titles of the Lady Nyx.

“I suppose you have good reasons to present me this insect. What is its name?” And here the real problem began.

“It is the Catachan yellow ant.”

It took five seconds for Weaver to remember the planet’s name.

“No, absolutely not,” the reply was immediate. “Throne and lasers, Wei, there’s always a risk the insects I control escape my power if I am unconscious or otherwise indisposed. That’s why the Mechanicus has put servo-controls over all the big assets I have in the Hive. That way if something turns wrong, the Magi will be able to stop the swarm from getting out control without a bloodbath. We can’t do that with ants. And this isn’t even considering the name. Damn it, it’s Catachan! This is one of the ‘unholy thirteen’, the most dangerous thirteen Death Worlds discovered in this galaxy! Everything on this world wants is lethal to one degree or another and would be the supreme predator on another world. They don’t have any Planetary Defence Force because they don’t need one! The last time orks tried to invade, they got wiped out before seeing a human and even their spores were devoured in mere minutes. When the Guard arrives to recruit Guard regiments, they are forced to put the new guardsmen and guardswomen through kilometres-long decontamination chambers!”

The Basileia placed her head between her hands and suddenly Wei was very aware three Space Marines were glaring at her.

“All right,” the Lady Nyx breathed out loudly and resumed her normal position on her seat. “I suppose you have at least a good reason to make this proposal.”

“Yes, basically the yellow ant can generate two substances. One is the venom it injects with its bites; lethal, like everything on its Death World. But once they have managed to acquire some food, they transport it back to their...hive, I suppose, and give part of it to the Queen. And the Queen generates some kind of golden fluid. And this fluid it has...incredible regeneration and healing properties.”

“Do I want to know how the Explorator team which discovered these ants made the observation?”

“No,” Wei replied, “you do not.”

“I was afraid of that,” the Basileia confessed before taking her data-slate and watching the images and vid-casts of ants bleeding and missing limbs suddenly healing and recovering when fatal wounds disappeared from their chitin. “You forgot to mention the ‘ants’ can reach the size of a horse from Ulm.”

“Only the Queens of the colonies,” she corrected. “The workers and the warriors are half the Queen’s size, maximum.”

“That doesn’t reassure me at all.” But this time there was a thin smile as Weaver continued reading. “Does the Magos who made this discovery is here?”

“Ah...no. He was caught in the explosion of a Catachan Barking Toad before completing his escape. And his assistants were devoured by the ants aboard their spaceship. The Ryza team had to open the spaceship to the void to recapture the Ant Queen and place her into an advanced stasis-vault. Alas, their experiments were formal: yes, this substance works on humans, but the Ant Queen refuses to deliver it to anything which is not a wounded ant. As a result, they were only able to obtain tiny quantities of the substance, and its real potential remains in great part unknown.”

Wei swallowed, but frankly she didn’t like Leet so it wasn’t like she was going to ruin a friendship there.

“The parahuman you escorted out of this office minutes ago suggested the name ‘bacta’. I’m afraid I don’t understand the reference.”

“Don’t bother...Leet isn’t as funny as he thinks he is.” The insect-mistress massaged her forehead for long seconds before opening her mouth again. “Fine, we will test it just to be sure. In orbit. And with a lot of security precautions. And I won’t go anywhere near this Catachan species. Extreme limit of my range, I think. Contact Archmagos Sultan to make the arrangements.”

The data-slate was given back and the Dawnbreaker Guards gave her even more expressions promising eternal torment.

“As for the nobles unsatisfied with your rule, several think a good way to neutralise you would be to propose a marriage.”

“Marriage?” This time, the word had been shouted, no doubt about it.

“Marriage or betrothal, they are not too picky about it...”

“The stars will die before I say ‘yes’ to one of these imbeciles in front of an altar!” The poor desk was slammed violently by a fist-shaped swarm of insects. “Wei...what are you doing?”

“I am adjusting my uniform,” she was also giving her superior an excellent view of her cleavage. By the way Weaver’s visage was getting redder, the view was not leaving her indifferent. “You were saying something about marriage?”

“Get out...” the grumble was not very convincing. So she decided to push her luck. The Sergeant stood from her chair before getting around the desk and giving a deep kiss on the lips of the bewildered Basileia-Saint.

Who, for the record, did not appear to fight the kiss for a good ten seconds.

“Your technique is getting better. For the third, I will demand you use the tongue.”

The dark eyes were instantly filled with adamantium-like determination and the golden aura returned with a vengeance.

“GET OUT!”

Wei laughed and danced towards the door. The Space Marines were too busy laughing or snickering to stop her.

“If you feel the need to release some stress, I’m up to...”

“GET OUT OR I CALL THE INQUISITION!”

**Second Naval Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

Wolfgang would have dearly loved to know what had happened in the office of the Lady Nyx minutes ago, because all the staff had been whispering and murmuring like the juiciest piece of gossip had fallen on their laps.

But they hadn’t been able to learn the latest news. When Lady Weaver called, you didn’t make her wait. A considerable number of nobles who had believed the contrary were right now experiencing an illumination clearing the sewers of the Underhive. There were many things you could say about the new Lady Nyx, but efficiency was one of her top priorities. It was certainly why so many Tech-Priests were often caught praying in front of an altar representing her. Not that she knew it.

“You want to do what?”

“We want to change the order of precedence in the naval administration hierarchy,” Dennis told the Saint, who had raised both eyebrows and looked rather...flustered. “I propose Wolfgang takes my place as First Naval Secretary and I take his.”

“If I remember correctly, one of the reasons I accepted was the fact you were proponents of this idea,” the insect-mistress commented, giving a pile of official documents to her chief of staff before dismissing him. “Wolfgang wants to be the first to depart aboard a Rogue Trader ship into the unknown, and Dennis still has a lot of to learn about space knowledge.”

Sometimes, the young woman before them was too much like his father. Like him, they rarely forgot the arguments and the information explained beforehand, no matter how much time had passed between conversations.

“Unfortunately, we are facing...political problems in our duties,” Dennis admitted. “Your SDF officers are accepting us as a duo, there’s no real issue from them. But the Imperial navy is not as cooperative.”

“Admiral Alexandros does not seem to me a man to hold petty grudges,” the Major-General in half-pay spoke neutrally.

“He’s not,” Wolfgang intervened for the first time. “But he and Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer are busy dealing with the last skirmishes and the overall command of Battlefleet Nyx. Most of the time, it’s with their Rear-Admirals and Senior Captains we have to speak to and convince.”

And those were frankly arrogant blue-uniformed cretins delighting in the feeling of superiority their rank gave them. Wolfgang was reasonably sure at least a good third had passed the final exam at Kar Duniash by virtue of their family paying the examiner officers.

“They are trying – and most of the time succeeding – to make sure most of the things we propose go nowhere. With me, their main argument is I am not the First naval Secretary; with Dennis, they lose him in long and technical explanations and he is forced to wait for the end of the conference and seek my help.”

It was easy to guess why none of these spoiled idiots were anywhere near the Battle of the Death Star. Their courage was in the bureaucratic sphere, not in the military one.

“I will warn you, Dennis, Wolfgang, I have neither the time nor the motivation to begin a political battle with the Imperial Navy command.” Weaver sighed. “And even if I did, the Imperial Navy is an independent organisation. The best I can do is to divert the newly built warships to other Sectors or order the construction of monitors. And given the state of the Sector’s defences, this is something we would likely pay for in blood and tears in the next decades.”

“The situation is going to improve,” the blonde-haired young man told her. “The navy has been forced to hire a lot of unqualified personnel recently across the Sector, and a large majority of these men and women love you.” In fact, a lot of them worshipped the Basileia, sometimes literally. “I think that by the eternal arithmetic of battle-losses and retirements, in twenty to thirty years we will see the first Nyxians of this generation reach the rank of Lieutenant.”

“It will depend on how much Kar Duniash wants to reinforce this Sector,” replied in an unconvinced tone the insect-mistress.

Wolfgang shrugged.

“Segmentum Command will want to appoint its own creatures for anything involving a Light Cruiser’s command and higher. But as long as there’s peace and the performance of the crews are satisfying, they will likely ignore this theatre. There are other conflicts to wage, and quite frankly this Sector’s importance doesn’t warrant the attention of Lord High Admiral Lohengramm or one of his senior Lord Admirals.”

“It makes sense, though I note there’s a heavy dose of suppositions in what you said,” Weaver wrote something on a data-slate before her. “All right, I accept your proposal. From this moment Wolfgang, you are officially First Naval Secretary and Dennis, you are Second Naval Secretary. Congratulations, and all of that. You will have all the bureaucratic nonsense on your desks by this afternoon.”

“That’s evil,” Dennis said in a false-hurt tone.

“That’s your fault,” declared in a completely unrepentant tone the Planetary Governor. “I am already fighting to erase some nonsensical bureaucratic decrees and supporting administrative reforms, I am not going to do your paperwork. Now I want us to speak of the orders of the day.”

“Of course,” he handed her a chip which was immediately introduced in a large black box, and two seconds later a large blue-coloured screen flickered into existence. Wolfgang had written it himself, so he knew the name of the warship classes which were written on it.

*Battlecruiser: Overlord*

*Heavy Cruiser: Hecate, Crius, Perseus*

*Cruiser: Lunar, Gothic, Dominator*

*Carrier: Saturn*

*Light Cruiser: Dauntless, Endeavour, Endurance, Defiant, Defender*

*Heavy Frigate: Medusa, Griffin*

*Frigate: Sword, Firestorm, Bolo, Talwar, Rapier*

*Corvette: Gauntlet, Claymore, Shamshir*

*Destroyer: Cobra, Viper, Adder, Boa, Mamba, Python*

“These are all the classes of Warp-capable warships we have the plans, the infrastructure and the licenses to produce here at Nyx. To this list, we can add the starfighters; the shipyards produce hundreds of Faustus Interceptors, Fury Interceptors, Starhawk Bombers, and Shark Assault Boats every year. With your permission, I want to include a few other classes schematics to be included in the STC negotiations.”

“What sort of classes?” Dark eyes fixed his, and Wolfgang swore that he was never going to flirt with this girl no matter the temptation. Sleeping with the twin daughters of the Lord High Admiral had been dangerous. It was nothing compared to the nova of destruction the Basileia-Saint could unleash. One word, and they could definitely be removed from existence, and no one in the Imperium would ever care they had existed.

“The first is the Hoplite-class Destroyer, produced by the Estaban Forge-Worlds. It is relatively brand-new, but I have already heard a lot of good things from my time at the Academy and my sources. It was specifically built to decimate huge numbers of light attack craft...in particular those of the eldar.”

The vicious smile he received in return told him he had pressed the correct button this time.

“Consider the proposal agreed and sent to the Mechanicus. Any other interesting classes?”

“Yes,” Dennis continued after a brief nod. “Assuming you manage to not add any Space Marine Chapters to the impressive number you already have...”

“It is not my fault,” replied grumpily the Basileia, ignoring that at the very same moment her Astartes were raising their eyes to the ceiling.

“Yes, well...assuming you don’t have more Astartes reinforcements, the current Chapters have still a massive deficit of lighter warships. The Heracles Wardens are not trusted enough to have them for now, but the Brothers of the Red have only one Battle-Barge and two Strike Cruisers to deploy. The Iron Drakes are better on this aspect, they have three Battle-Barges and six Strike Cruisers, but they will at some point need to consolidate, and Torch will not have any industrial dockyards this century.”

“I hope you don’t want the plans of a Battle-Barge class.”

“This would not be advisable,” Wolfgang answered. “What would do with it anyway for the moment? We have not the dry docks, the licenses and the Navy support to build Battleships, and Battle-Barges are generating more political infighting than an Emperor-class Battleship does. No, we want the plans of the Maximus-class Strike Cruiser and the Gladius-class Frigate. I don’t think we will able to lay down one Maximus before twenty years, but the Gladius is within our means for the 292M35 generation, and will provide an excellent warship if the Space Marines want to mobilise a half-company or something smaller for a military operation.”

Lady Weaver gave a last glance at the list of classes before making it disappear.

“Consider these proposals accepted too. Now I want to hear about the naval construction program.”

“There have been a lot of preliminary plans proposed from different sources,” Dennis explained while handing her a dozen of data-chips. “After removing those too unrealistic and unbalanced, these are the ones we selected.”

“You won’t tell me who wrote the plans?”

“Better to judge the construction programs on their own merits,” they had already enough accusations of bias, nepotism and partiality coming from the Navy morons. That they were practising the very problems they were accusing them to practise was a bit rich, but it was better to avoid giving them ammunition.

“Hmm...” the insect-mistress was a fast reader, but even with her skills to do several activities at once, the sum-up of the plans they had delivered had a copious amount of pages and it took her a good twenty minutes to read everything.

“Many men and women who have written these plans need to have their ears checked,” the Planetary Governor said when at last she let the last chip fall on her desk. “I decreased the price of construction on average by three percent and told them the price might be adjusted by a few thousand Throne Gelts. Thousands, not millions.”

“I think this is what they call bargaining,” Dennis commented.

“This is not ‘bargaining’,” the icy voice which signalled the insect-mistress wasn’t happy at all had returned. “Asking someone to decrease a price by fifty percent when you know the livelihoods of tens of thousands souls are at stake in these shipyards is high-way robbery and sheer stupidity. Where will they buy their warships when the Nyx shipyards close? Wuhan has not the quarter of the infrastructure to support the Battlefleet.”

Dennis gave him a crisped grimace. They both knew the reason several high-placed officers wanted these cheap prices, of course. A lot of intermediaries had been caught in the last months diverting considerable sums for their own purposes, and were now either dead or serving a well-deserved sentence in the Penal Legions. But the graft they had been taken for granted could not have continued for decades if the officers of the Imperial navy weren’t finding it their benefits too. Some of the men and women wearing the blue had undoubtedly more problems to pay all their expenses by month’s end than they had been used to when a Menelaus was in power.

“It goes without saying that Plans Gloriana, Resolution, Centurion, Jupiter, Illustrious, and Dominion are totally unacceptable. Whatever their merits on the paper, I won’t ruin Nyx because a few armchair strategists think it’s a good idea to demand the impossible.”

A good half of the chips were instantly thrown into the dustbin.

“Plan Saturn is an all-carrier construction plan. We don’t have half of the licenses and resources it requires.”

The chip followed the others on a path that would eventually lead it to the data-erasers.

“Plan Exploration has merits, but gives far too much importance to the Frigates and other escorts.”

This was Archmagos Lankovar’s plan, if he remembered well.

“Plan Ruby is at least equilibrated, but we will have a lack of Light Cruisers if we try to implement it. And it is incredibly complex. We will lay down the warships in six waves, not counting the freighters and other support vessels we want to build.”

Dennis mouthed silently ‘told you so’ and Wolfgang rolled his eyes.

“Plan Sapphire will see the Navy take up arms because they will think we build an armada of monitors to protect this system,” it was the turn of Dennis to be crestfallen. “Plan Revelation sounds like someone abused Lho-sticks recently. Plan Traveller...I have nothing against being paid more for the warships we build, but we already agreed that for the next years, the priority was to rebuild Battlefleet Nyx, not sell our hulls to Samarkand.”

“That leaves Plan Star. Unlike the others, it respects the costs barriers, takes into account the numbers of Tech-priests we have at our disposal...” which wasn’t surprising since the author was Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan, “the complexity is tolerable, and it allows for some flexibility in our construction plans.”

“Yes, though you will have to order monitors from shipyards outside Nyx if you want to reinforce the SDF,” Dennis pointed out. It was the main flaw in the Archmagos’ plan, after all.

“Between ships which can only be deployed at Nyx, and ships which can be deployed across the entire Sector, I will choose the latter...even if I have to sell them to the Imperial Navy. And one week ago, I remember a certain Naval Secretary telling me we had not the manpower to crew monitors until the training programs began to churn out voidsmen...”

Yes, his superior had obviously an excellent memory.

Okay, it was not totally a disappointment. Plan Star had been conceived by the new Mistress of Ships of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Ryza Forge-World was famous for keeping its production lines incredibly efficient. In the grand lines, it consisted in building:

*Construction Start 970.289M35*

*Heavy Cruiser: 1 Hecate-class*

*Cruiser: 1 Lunar-class; 1 Dominator-class; 1 Gothic-class*

*Light Cruiser: 1 Endeavour-class; 1 Defiant-class*

*Frigate: 3 Sword-class*

*Construction Start 130.290M35*

*Cruiser: 1 Lunar-class*

*Carrier: 1 Saturn-class*

*Light Cruiser: 5 Dauntless-class; 1 Endurance-class; 2 Defender-class; 1 Endeavour-class*

*Frigate: 4 Sword-class, 5 Firestorm-class, 3 Bolo-class, 3 Talwar-class*

*Corvette: 1 Gauntlet-class, 1 Claymore-class, 1 Shamshir-class*

*Destroyer: 7 Cobra-class; 7 Boa-class*

*Construction Start 150.290M35:*

*3 Mars-type dry docks specifically for the Arsenal-class Star-Forge Galleons*

“Are there more subjects I must be informed today?”

“Yes, there are,” he pretended to not have heard the curse, or seen the expression of disappointment. “If Nyx is to become an important naval node, we need to expand. It’s not too urgent, but...”

“But the longer we wait,” finished the Basileia, “the longer it will take to begin and eventually complete them. I understand. What are the proposals?”

“For the moment, most are in the preliminary stage, but several Archmagi have confided to me it would be better to go big from the start and build an orbital ring.”

He had the pleasure to see that at least once today, he had managed to astonish his boss, who had left her mouth open for several seconds before momentarily closing her eyes.

“I’m sorry; I think I heard you saying it was necessary to build an orbital ring around my planet. A Ring of Iron-type orbital ring like the one Mars is famous for.” She said as she reopened her eyes.

“Well, it would be a far smaller one than the one Mars boasts,” Dennis told her. “And at first it would only be long to encircle a third of the planet. But yes, it would be a huge industrial effort.”

The Lady Nyx snorted, evidently having noticed his euphemism. It was more than that, and they both knew it. An orbital ring would certainly be the greatest undertaking of the Mechanicus in the Nyx Sector since the time of the Great Crusade.

“How much time would it take?” the question was asked in the end.

“Archmagos Sultan calculated one hundred and seventy-five years; most of the other Magi and Archmagi think two hundred years is more realistic.”

“And here I thought the Hagia Sanguinala was going to be a big affair,” he managed to hear the whisper before her voice returned to its normal volume. “Tell the Archmagos to continue their preliminary plans and industrial projections. It doesn’t cost too much to make long-term projects.”

She had not asked for a price, and so he won’t give it to her. But he had to say, it was a lot of zeros.

“Next issue, please.”

“The Navigator contract signed by the former Sector Lord ends in 314M35. I want to know if we prepare to negotiate a continuation of the current arrangements or if we search other Houses to guide the local ships through the Warp... “

**Magos-Draco Dragon Richter**

The first Imperium, also known as the Roman Empire, had a saying which had become rather infamous: *panem et circenses*. ‘Bread and circuses’ in the language of Latin which thirty-five millennia later had become distorted and modified until it became High Gothic.

Politically, it was a means to generate public approval. The leaders of a nation satisfied the basest requirements the populace – food and entertainment – and in exchange the ambitious men were given power when and where they wanted.

It was not a philosophy many nobles of the M35 Imperium had used a lot these last centuries. Obviously, when you were a noble of a line having ruled a planet for the last thousand years, there was really no need to think about the opinion of your subjects. The Prince and Princess-Magisters had not cared at all that while they ate in porcelain plates delicious meals, the manufactorum workers were lucky if they could eat a third ruby potato with their bowl of crude soup after a long and arduous day.

So the ‘food’ part was clearly not true. And neither was the ‘entertainment’ one. The gladiatorial games and the military parades were for the Governor’s ego and ensure his populace remained sufficiently cowed. When you knew it could be you next time butchered on the sand of the arena, you felt terror, not amusement.

No, the inbred and haughty nobles did not remember the old saying. If their rule was to be explained in a few words, it would be more like ‘fear, labour, misery and faith’.

*Timorem, laborem, miseriam, fidei*.

It didn’t sound right, but then it wasn’t supposed to. Dragon was a heroine. When she was forced to concede that villains like Accord would have probably done a better job than the nobles ruling this Hive World before their arrival, the conclusion was inescapable: the Imperium system sucked and she was sure plenty of rebellions had begun because the imbecile in charge had pushed for a last measure which convinced the harassed and tormented population there was no way their life could possibly be worse if they rebelled.

If this was allowed to continue, at Nyx or across the wider Imperium, life would become more and more unbearable. And the number of rebellions and wars would skyrocket. Ignorance, already at worrying levels, would increase to monstrous standards. No Imperial organisation would be spared.

A new way was needed.

*Aqua et Espes*

These were the massive words carved in gold in front of the throne-platform they used for the moment. In Latin or High Gothic, it translated as ‘water and hope’.

It was maybe not the most marketable policy ever developed, but it was appropriately placed in the core of the first Amphitrite hydro-plant. The sick society House Menelaus had largely contributed to create in the last centuries had used several pillars to justify its rule. One of it had been the naked threat of military intervention, and by now it had largely been dismantled. But one, more pernicious, had been the water distribution system.

Put it simply, the aristocrats at the top had not thought a single second about sharing the precious, pure water they drank or used in their weekly activities. Nowhere had it been more evident when Taylor had invited her on Floor 10 of Hive Athena. What was officially the ‘Governor’s baths’ were in reality a small aquatic park with water slides, M35-type Roman baths, Jacuzzi, and plenty of things she was sure the parahuman currently saluting the crowd below had not yet her tested in her free time.

As a consequence, the further you descended in the depths of Hive Athena, the worst the quality of water became – although she spoke of Hive Athena, but it was roughly the same for every Hive of Nyx. The nobles had water they loved to present as ‘Aqua Vitae’; the wealthy merchants, the lower nobility and the high-ranked soldiers had something a Canadian would have considered ‘acceptable water’, and one floor at a time, the quality dropped. It was not because the canalisations were poorly maintained or deficient. The workers and every person unfortunate to not have been born with an Argentamite spoon in their mouth were just in last position on the list of priorities and condemned to drink water used and recycled a few thousand times before it went near their mouths.

Dragon and the other parahumans in the know knew they had to be patient with the reforms, but water distribution was not something they had been keen to wait for a few decades. Every hour, people died in their miserable hab-blocks because the water they drank was an invitation for a cancer or another nasty life-killer to develop in your body.

“You can proceed, High Magos.”

The red-robed Mechanicus Adept on Taylor’s left bowed.

“By your command, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” High Magos-Enginseer Cathar-4-Fredrick answered. With his pincers, cogs, hammers and screws, the Metalica Magos looked like a tinkerer who had decided his body and his tools were best kept together in a single figure.

A wing of servo-owls was released, and the crowd of hundreds of thousands people gathered here today began to applause as the song of the Tech-Priests started. Nobody with a musical ear would have considered that music, of course, but there was a certain majesty to it...even if these were ‘1’ and ‘0’ in binaric. Twenty seconds later, they were joined by a choir the Ecclesiarchy. The prayer-song was more pleasant, though her position in the Mechanicus forbid her to say so in public.

Cant-algorithms were proclaimed. Rune-buttons were pushed one by one.

And from the great maw of the hydro-plant, a cascade burst into reality. A cascade of colourless water, distilled and purified by the science of the ancient technology found in the STC database.

The crowd burst into frenetic applause and the screams of approval were undoubtedly heard hundreds of kilometres away. Flags danced, some with the insignia of the Mechanicus, but far more with the double-headed aquila or the beetle, the golden flame, and the sword which had become by default Weaver’s banner.

“I think they like the spectacle,” the Governor smiled as the cascade pumped and pumped, and the cascade doubled in size. And the most impressive fact was that it was just a third of the job the *Amphitrite Triumphant* was built to do. It was going to receive a few hundred kilometres north the putrid fluids coming out of Hive Doris. It was going to begin the decontamination of the Dark Ocean and assist in the recovery of several abandoned reservoirs in obsolete industrial sprawls. “Everything is proceeding to your satisfaction, High Magos?”

“It does,” despite the metallic voice, it would have taken someone deaf not to hear the smugness of the elder Enginseer. “The machine-spirits are singing beautifully, and operational capacity is at thirty-one. In fifty hours, we will increase it to seventy percent. The pipelines are handling the pressure according to the projections. Hive Doris will have access to this water in sixteen point four standard minutes.”

There had been a lot of pressure for the Hive-Capital to be linked to *Amphitrite Triumphant* first, be it by the high or middle classes. But in this case, both logic and political imperatives had stopped that idea before it had time to gain strength. First, a lot of components had been built in the forges the Mechanicus warships took for granted. Nyx industry wasn’t – yet – capable enough to produce a lot of the extremely advanced cogitators, the molicircs, and the Primaris-grade alloys among many other things. This had the consequence of the great hydro-centre to be on the small side of what was technically possible according to the Amphitrite template. Since Hive Athena was the biggest Hive of Nyx, it would require two or three *Amphitrite Triumphant* to not meet any problems, and alas for all the considerable efficiency of High Magos-Enginseer Cathar-4-Fredrick, a hydro-installation of that size wasn’t built in a day or a week. Not to mention it had to be guarded due to the priceless value of the water – bunkers and murder-walls were in construction outside – and thousands of Tech-Priests were in training to maintain this facility and prepare the buildings of larger variants.

Politically...Hive Athena, for several reasons, was the core of the political life at Nyx. The presence of the Basileia was not helping things. But it was in the middle of the Hive-Continent, and there had been insistent murmurs Hive Athena was always served first, whether it was in bountiful reforms, security increases, nobility purges, and industrial contracts. Hive Doris being granted the first super hydro-plant would go a long way removing this source of discontent. And it was logistically easier to build pipelines for a Hive in the south-east of Moira – it was a mere eighty kilometres away from the polluted cesspit the Nyxians called an ocean.

“Congratulations,” the parahuman continued, “as promised per our accord, you are granted the title of Master of Enginseers and a place upon the Mechanicus Council of Nyx.”

“Thank you, Chosen of the Omnissiah. On the Holy Cog, you will never have cause to regret it.”

The discussion next was more about production of machine-tools, deploying factories in orbit and development of geothermal plants for the next months. Meanwhile the cascade continued to amaze the public, and it was good Vista had mustered a large force of Arbites, because some people looked like they wanted to throw themselves in the reservoir of the Class-5 hydro-plant several metres below. The Metalica High Magos was also convinced he could build another Amphitrite station of the same capacities before the end of the year with the same specifications and quality-work. In all likelihood, it would be Hive Euboea on the Dolos Hive-Continent.

High Magos-Enginseer Cathar-4-Fredrick soon descended the steps of the platform to join his peers – and no doubt receive their congratulations.

“You have made a happy High Magos, today. Any chance I can convince you to fill the rest of the seats of the Council?”

“Perhaps,” Taylor replied. “The *Amphitrite Triumphant* is coming online exactly on schedule, we successfully negotiated the sales for this very template, and I’m feeling generous. And I trust you to have verified they respect the criteria.”

Dragon nodded silently. Obviously, a seat in the highest council of the Adeptus Mechanicus gathered at Nyx was a prize most Tech-Priests were ready to kill for. While the capital’s economical influence was not as strong as it could have been in this era, she had no doubts eventually Nyx was going to technologically and industrially dominate without trying the rest of the Sector. Removing all the graft and the nobility arrangements alone was giving an enormous boost to the efficiency and the productivity of the Hive World.

But there was also a prime-copy of a STC database which could be studied, and naturally the Mechanicus Council had privileged access to it, only second to the Governor and she.

So it was not a surprise that tens of thousands Tech-Priests had volunteered for the titles and responsibilities. There were in fact so much of them they had been forced to put in place guidelines. The Mechanicus Adepts had to be of at least Magos rank or a near-equivalent – something the byzantine hierarchy of the red robes did not make easy. Their Forge-World had to be involved in the negotiations. They had to prove competent and efficient. They had not a past where they had antagonised several other Imperial organisations. And they had to work well with others.

Even if she had not insisted on this point, Lankovar would have. The new Archmagos had dozens of examples to give to her when the Quest for Knowledge or the creation of Mechanicus enclaves and outposts had turned to disaster because the leaders were far more willing to backstab each other’s efforts than accomplish their initial objectives.

“In this case, at the risk of insisting, I really think we need two or three more councillors for the next days. I can handle the coordination for the moment, but it is best I have a few figures to direct the efforts and the construction of critical infrastructure or its renovation than a thousand. Technology production is always simpler when there’s a clear hierarchy in place.”

“You have made your point,” the young woman said, drinking a glass of pure water Gamaliel had brought to her. “Tell me the names.”

“You need a Master Logis. Or a Master of Logistics, depending on how you want to call it. I know you have Captain Rhodes of the Knights Hospitallers to serve as your personal Logistician for the moment, but the paperwork never stops coming, and you need a specialised department. I think it will particularly decrease the charge of work you impose to yourself every day, and you will be far happier. For this position, the best candidate in my opinion is Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius of Triplex Phall.”

“I have never enough people to take care of a lot of the analyses, figures and statistics which come to my office every day. A few dozen Logistician Tech-Priests in my staff and more outside...yes, I could use them.” Taylor admitted. “But Triplex Phall is committed with its Ramilies Starfort and everything they have promised...are their doctrines acceptable?”

“I will be trying very hard to break their hoarding tendencies,” the Tinker AI said. “But they are far more...adaptable in their opinions than many Forge-Worlds. Living on the frontier has taught them harsh lessons about the dangers of this galaxy.”

“I won’t disagree with that. Can you tell me where is he in the crowd of red robes? I’m afraid we have not been presented...”

“He is the Tech-Priest with six mechadendrites attached to several data-banks.” There was a proverb that you shouldn’t do two things at once if you wanted to do them in an optimal manner. The Lexico Arcanus clearly disagreed; by the massive amount of data he emitted every second, Dragon was sure his implants were sending and receiving over a hundred problems and solving them before dealing with other issues.

“He’s looking like an hourglass with mechadendrites and electronic data-screens. I’m sure Dennis is going to have fun describing him.” Taylor returned her attention to the cascade and the cheers of the Nyxians for a few minutes before giving her answer. “I will announce my decision tomorrow. This day belongs to the High Magos, we aren’t going to ask him to share the light for his exploit. Any other outstanding candidates?”

“I have two. The first is heavily tied with the STC negotiations we have at the moment for the Angel’s Tear Power Armour.”

A large black spider jumped on the left side of the Basileia, and the insect-mistress caressed it without even looking at it once.

“The situation is complicated.”

It was a nice description of the entire atmosphere, yes. In the last days, several template-copies had been decided. After the Hebe Template was no longer available, the Forge-Worlds which had not yet a copy to impress their neighbours increased their efforts, motivated by the fact the stream of delegates never stopped climbing and climbing every month.

The servo-owl template-copies were the first to go. The Adeptus Administratum and the Adeptus Arbites had been the first to buy it in exchange of major concessions on the Lady Nyx’s economic, justice, and industrial authority over the planets of her domain. The Forge World of Gantz was going to deliver one hundred thousand Tech-Priests, twenty thousand Skitarii, and a dozen minor templates on surveillance systems. Solemnium had delivered less Tech-Priests and more Skitarii, eighty thousand, but they had promised twelve of the ‘Baneblade-lite’ super-heavy tanks they had re-discovered in M34, the Cataphract, and its data-construction methods. Venatoria and Helios had been more classic, promising data-feeds on their servo-skulls productions, as well as thousands upon thousands of Skitarii and Tech-Priests.

Overall, the servo-owl template had allowed them to recruit approximately two hundred and twenty thousand Tech-Priests and two hundred thousand Skitarii. And they had now a super-heavy tank in their arsenal. Granted, it was inferior in every aspect to the legendary Baneblade, but when you were forced to import at ruinous prices your few super-heavy mammoths, any super-heavy machine was better than no heavy tank.

The Mongoose Analyser had been the next to be decided, in a litany of accusations, mechadendrites and expressions it was best to banish from memory if you don’t want to stay traumatised for the next decade. The Imperial Navy, perhaps concerned it was not going to have access to future templates if it continued to act in a peeved fashion, had gritted its teeth and made an exception to its stringent rule. Taylor was authorised to own one Warp-capable starship, and the identification codes had to be transmitted to Kar Duniash six months in advance of every departure. The Officio Medicae had given the formal rights to the ‘Saint’ to build hospitals and clinics where she wanted in the Nyx Sector. Triplex Phall and Estaban had given out minor antidote-production templates, in addition to Skitarii and Tech-Priests. Straxos had been more original: they had agreed to transfer an Oath of Assistance from House Raven, a Knight House allied to the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Should Nyx come under attack, or an ‘honourable campaign’ begins, House Raven would send twelve Knights under one of their Barons to battle. The Forge World of Samech had exchanged trade and exploration rights, plus information about their electric/energy production resources. And the Imperial Guard – or was it the Departmento Munitorum? – had at last understood it may be smart to figure if the troops you sent to retake a rebellious planet were going to fight and not drop dead because they had eaten the wrong food or sneezed under the wrong tree. Nyx was able to keep for training purposes all over the Sector fifty experimented regiments for training purposes and the next decade. The regular formation of Penal Legions these last months had proven a selling argument in that regard, ironically. And between all the Forge Worlds, there were one hundred and forty thousand Tech-Priests of ninety different specialties to complete the deal, protected by one hundred and twenty thousand Skitarii.

And by a strange coincidence, the Amphitrite negotiations were concluded this morning. The Officio Agricultae had promised a large delivery of various seeds and gene-data for the Nyx Agri-World of Ruby’s Harvest. Palatine III had promised Logisticians and several data-templates of artillery batteries. Glasgow IV had signed for thousands of Electro-Priests and a dozen armoured protection templates. Gryphonne IV...they had just purchased it with Skitarii. A lot of Skitarii. Anvillus wanted it, and was prepared to pay several decontamination and air-purifier technology. And the Imperial Guard had agreed that wherever Taylor-Hebert went in her persona of Major-General, she could build Amphitrite hydro-plants wherever she wanted, and these aqua-centres would belong to her personally. There were also the usual sixty thousand Tech-Priests and three hundred thousand Skitarii – two hundred and fifty thousand of the latter came from Gryphonne IV.

And this brought her to the negotiations of the Angel’s tear template, which had become in the last months some sort of Holy Grail for the Mechanicus...especially they had see the sort of acrobatics and sprints the first model could do without reaching its limits.

“Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund proposed...”

“Ah yes, your girlfriend,” the other parahuman interrupted.

Dragon spluttered out in indignation.

“Excuse me? Lydia-Beta Rosamund is not my girlfriend!”

“Really?” The expression of Taylor Hebert was too innocent to be honest. “But I have hundreds of witnesses which confirm you spend twice the number of hours you spend with any of the senior Archmagi...”

“I fail to see how this makes her my girlfriend,” Dragon sniffed as guardsmen and Space Marines chuckled behind her. A second later, the reason of this remark became clear. “This is vengeance for the compromising photos of you and Sergeant Cao, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you’re speaking about, Dragon. Surely, I, the great Basileia of Nyx, am above this sort of petty revenge.”

The smile was so large the insect-mistress was about to burst into laughter at any moment.

“I’m sure you are. And to repeat, she is not my girlfriend.”

“Too bad...the evidence seemed so convincing...”

The Magos-Draco – who also happened to be Minister of Industry and Public Works - was liking less and less where this conversation was going.

“You used Morkys and Lankovar to spread rumours in the Noosphere data-banks, didn’t you?”

It was going to take her days to find and erase the pict-casts...assuming it had not gone viral. Which it certainly had. The Tech-Priests could present a facade of inhumanity, but at their worst they could be the worst gossips of this galaxy if it concerned information they found interesting.

“I have no implants to access the noosphere,” this unconvincing protest just meant that indeed, one Tech-Priest nearby had been used for this crime.

“Of course,” Dragon sighed theatrically. “Are you interested in what I have to say or must I leave you to propagate rumours about your exciting liaison with a former Wuhanese noble?”

“Go ahead,” the former supervillain said after a minor blush.

“Thank you. As I told you before, the Angel’s Tear armour is extremely coveted. It’s not like Mars will sell it to any Forge World who makes the demand for a cheap price. And given the complexity of the armour, it won’t be as easy to reverse-engineer as a lasgun. And there will be millions of Larkine lasguns in the hands of the soldiers of the Imperial Guard in a decade. I very much doubt there will be one million power armours operational in the same amount of time. As a consequence, a lot of Forge Worlds are making alliances. Tigrus and Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund are leading one of these factions.”

“Really? As I understood it, she’s rather junior and young compared to hundreds of the Archmagi and Magi currently present at Nyx.”

“Talent does not wait old age,” she replied. Taylor chuckled.

“I’m not going to argue with that. So which Forge Worlds are we talking about, and what sort of prices are they willing to pay?”

“The Forge Worlds of this coalition are mainly situated in the Gothic Sector. Mezoa, Vindalex, Mpandex, Goth, and the Gothic capital Port Maw, Tigrus of course and they have added the recently-arrived Tech-Priests of Lucius. As for what they propose...three Explorator fleets, to begin with. The warships, infrastructure and headquarters would be moved to Nyx, and swear their allegiance to you.”

“I am interested. More Tech-Priests and Skitarii, I suppose?”

“More Tech-Priests and Skitarii,” the Tinker confirmed. One hundred thousand of each, if one wanted to be accurate. “Also included in the bargain are orbital habitation and farm modules, magma extractors and forge-fanes, orbital transit tethers, several minor healthcare and industrial templates, mining extractors...plus the very good stuff.”

“That was not the very good stuff?” The insect-mistress asked seriously. “Because it seems to me that with this amount of resources anywhere in the galaxy, you can transform a backwater colony into an industrial titan.”

The surprise effect should be in force, then.

“The ‘Gothic’ alliance is willing to build a Ceramite Forge at Nyx,” not sharing the design and the secret data, unfortunately, but she would take what was offered, “and between them they will send one thousand and two hundred renowned Artisans if you accept.”

Taylor was a redoubtably intelligent young woman. She understood in less than five seconds where the suggestion went.

“We would be able to build Astartes Power Armour.”

“I have taken the liberty to add the Mark VII Aquila Power Armour schematics on the list, just in case. Besides, they were all ready to agree to a minimum quota of two thousand armours of the Angel’s Sword, the inferior variant of the Angel’s Tear, and one hundred and fifty Mark VII Astartes Power Armour, per year.

“And I suppose there are no other alliances which are able to put this on the table.” This was more an affirmation than a question, in Weaver’s voice.

“No, and there is no one else who wants – or has the industrials skills to – produce twelve super-heavy Fellblade tanks.”

“All right, all right,” Taylor smirked. “I will accept the deal, although I will give a look or two to the other alliances’ proposals this evening. And assuming you’re right, I will name your girlfriend as Master of the Artisans.”

Lydia-Beta Rosamund was not her girlfriend. And her vengeance for this insinuation and this rumour-mongering was going to be terrible.

“Who is the next potential candidate for the Mechanicus Council?”

“You see the three-meter tall Skitarii with white robes? This is Alpha-Archmagos Epsilon-10 Blue-Crimson of Gryphonne IV, and his skills would be very much appreciated to coordinate, command and garrison the thousands of Skitarii we see arriving every day...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.931.289M35**

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

Isley had never seen a Blood Angel try to tear his blonde hair in frustration, but Seraph Gamaliel with some encouragement seemed all too ready to learn.

“Our Lady is going to make us crazy before the decade is over.”

“She wants to be close to the common people,” the former Harrowmaster of the Alpha Legion said. “There are worse traits to find in someone.”

“True,” agreed the golden-armoured Astartes, “but it’s a nightmare for us when she ‘forgets’ to inform us she is descending into the Hive with only minimal escort and no warning.”

This was a bit exaggeration, of course. Four Astartes of the Dawnbreaker Guard and over three thousand men of Guard and PDF regiments was not a small amount of firepower, and this didn’t take into account that, save a few orbital strikes, the woman ruling over Nyx was largely able to decimate an army of assassins and psychopathic killers.

Even the nobles, after weeks of losing their best hired blades and watching thousands of their cousins and relatives drafted for the Penal Legions or another unpleasant fate, were starting to understand opposing Weaver on something looking like a battlefield was tantamount to dig his own grave.

“I will try to find her and convince her to go back to her quarters,” Jeremiah Isley told the herald of the Sanguinius. “But I don’t know how long it will take. My Wardens are all busy dealing with the screening and the monitoring of the landing pilgrims. There are also tens of thousands Nyxians making their last preparations for the festivities of tomorrow, and even the largest avenues are in effervescence.”

“Just try to bring her back before dusk. She has a speech for the opening of the Sanguinala to write, and I don’t think several...influential men and women will be happy if they can’t see the final draft before she opens her mouth in public.”

And by several ‘influential men and women’, Gamaliel meant the Inquisitors and several branches of the Administratum and the Navy. The insect-mistress had not hidden her distaste for censorship and anything related to it, and sometimes she ‘forgot’ to transmit what she intended to say to her adoring subjects.

To be fair to them, the Basileia was with little to no training a charismatic orator when she wanted to be one, and the Heracles Wardens and the Brothers of the Red had raised their glasses several times since their arrival at Nyx to thank the Emperor Lady Weaver was not crusade-focused like too many Saints and the Black Templars. If the new Lady Nyx had truly wanted to wage wars across the stars, there would have already be a couple more billion fanatical Nyxians on their way to the frontlines.

“We do the impossible every day for the Dawnbreaker Guard...”

And on this they separated, Gamaliel marching towards the Strategium, and he taking one of the priority magnetic elevators to descend into the Upper Hive. All in all it took him only three hours, the assistance of five Nyx PDF officers and a fifteen minutes search on Floor 63 to find the first signs of the escort the insect-controlling parahuman had taken with her.

“Yes, the Basileia-Saint is in this museum, Lord Astartes,” a Captain who looked incredibly young for his rank spoke after a respectful bow. “But she commanded that no one was to disturb her for the next hour, and there is still thirty minutes before this deadline. I’m afraid I can’t let you pass.”

The young man looked extremely uncomfortable at the idea of blocking the passage of a Space Marine, but the very fact he was apparently willing to enforce the order spoke well for him.

“Don’t worry, Captain, I will wait in a nearby park,” the Chapter Master reassured him. “However, I am curious what sort of museum is this? It isn’t named as such on my map, and I will evidently need to update the Hive-map when I will present my report.”

“Oh, this is the museum of Flavius II ‘the Hunter’ Menelaus,” the officer was all too happy to explain to him. “I don’t think it is listed as a museum because the entrance tariffs are so high that no one save the nobility really visits this place.”

And it was in a hive-section mostly certain big families of the Nyx aristocracy had considered their private gardens, so high tariffs or not, the near-totality of the population would never have been able to see the doors, never mind enter the hall to inquire about the entrance fee.

Thanking the soldiers on station, Jeremiah turned back and walked two hundred metres before plunging into the small streets the nobles of Nyx were fond of building for the passage of their servants. Yes, they were that arrogant. Emphasis on the ‘were’.

The security the Dawnbreaker escort had placed around the museum was tight and well-conceived, but Jeremiah had been infiltrating fortresses when the parents of these Space Marines were children. They had done a correct job...but they had left holes in the outer perimeter. Five minutes, a passage in the sewers and two control-injunctions to the machine-spirits of what looked to be one of the many noble’s escape tunnels, and he was in the museum.

For once, the ruinous price to see the inside was somewhat justified. Once he was out of a curator, he arrived in Room 15-C, and had to suppress a whistle as he looked at the two massive skeletons of giant lizards. The explications on the nearby wall explained this was a hunting trophy brought back from a recently discovered Feral World. Recent when it had been written, of course. By the date, this had happened roughly five hundred years ago.

Trying to be as silent and discreet as possible, the former Alpha Legionary advanced in direction of the wing containing the 17-X rooms. In a few minutes, he was able to make some assumptions. First, this museum was somewhat well-maintained, certainly on the Menelaus purse – there were traces the cleaning personnel and the curators had vacated the premises a few hours ago to let their mistress visit alone the collections. Secondly, it was not often visited. The list of donations for organising certain collections in Room 17-2 was practically devoid of name, and the last name ‘ Glorious Duke Abraham’, had been ten years ago. As Imperial aristocrats could not help but spending their vast reserves of money in futile endeavours, the lack of affluence spoke for itself. Third, Flavius II Menelaus had really deserved his nickname of ‘Hunter’. The man had killed – allegedly – practically one specimen of every species having scales, feathers, fur, chitin, or fin on at least a dozen worlds, and brought them back on Nyx, either as stuffed objects or as skeletons. Fourth...

He heard at last a large door opening, voices and movements some two rooms away, and immediately proceeded to hide himself. He was on the first floor of an exhibition room where a gigantic reptile reminding him the monsters the primitive eldar loved to ride was threatening the visitors with enormous fangs, but there was a stair reserved to the curators and he used it before taking position behind a presentation of smaller lizards and activating a few more of the cloaking devices he was used to. Let’s see if the Dawnbreaker Guards could notice him in less than ten seconds.

But it was not a Dawnbreaker Guard who went first into the room. It was not one of the massive insects all Astartes had slowly accepted the presence of. It was Pierre, and he was remarkably speaking low compared to his usual voice. Well, low for a Dreadnought.

“THIS IS CURIOUS AND PRODIGIOUS. ASTARTES ARE LUCKY TO LIVE MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS, AND GENERALLY ONLY THE GREATEST HEROES ARE ABLE TO ENDURE THE RAVAGES OF TIME AND REMAIN DEFIANT.”

“You realise this is just speculation,” Lady Weaver replied in a conversational tone while she read the descriptive texts of the museum. “There could be a simpler explanation, and it begins with ‘Ruinous Powers’. Since rejuvenation treatments do not allow someone to live four thousand years, there must be something unnatural at work. Normal humans die of old age.”

Jeremiah frowned. What in the name of Alpharius were they talking about? And why was Pierre here? Isley had agree to put him into a stasis vault at the end of the Sanguinala, but nowhere he had certainly not been supposed to be on Floor 63 or in the Basileia’s escort today.

“I DO NOT THINK THE RUINOUS POWERS ARE AT WORK HERE. UNLESS THEY LIVE IN THE WARP STORMS, TRAITORS DO NOT LIVE THAT LONG. THEY BECOME GREATER ABOMINATIONS, THEY STAGNATE, OR THEY BECOME CHAOS SPAWNS. THE WARP PROMISES IMMORTALITY, BUT IT NEVER DELIVERS.”

“Still, I intend to be prudent and keep her under heavy surveillance once she arrives.”

“AS IT SHOULD BE, AS IT SHOULD BE. FOR HER TO ACT SO OVERTLY, SHE MUST HAVE A PLAN. AND IT MAY NOT BE ONE IN SERVICE OF THE MONSTERS. BUT IT DOES NOT MEAN SHE IS LOYAL.”

“Loyalty is a difficult concept in the Imperium,” Weaver commented as she and the Dreadnought left the room and Isley waited several seconds before descending the stairs. Thankfully, they were sufficiently loud for his ears to follow the conversation without effort. “The oaths are to the Emperor, yes, but he’s not truly ruling the Imperium. And the Empire is created is divided into dozens of major and minor organisations, each trying to build their private kingdoms and their private goals.”

“IT IS DIFFICULT TO WIN WARS. IT IS FAR MORE DIFFICULT TO BUILD EMPIRES.”

The parahuman groaned as they arrived in Room 18-1, a gigantic hall filled with a lot of whale-type fishes.

“Do you think it’s why the Imperium of the Great Crusade collapsed so fast? The Emperor conquered too fast, not taking enough time to build the foundations?”

“THE IMPERIUM OF OLD FELL BECAUSE SOME FUCKERS TOOK IN THEIR MIND TO WORSHIP HIM WHILE HE EXPRESSLY TOLD THEM HE WASN’T A GOD. AND THEN HORUS AND HIS BAND OF TRAITORS PRETENDED HE WANTED TO BECOME A GOD DESPITE HAVING SOLD THEIR SOULS TO CHAOS AND SMELLING LIKE GROX-SHIT.”

Isley heard the laugh of the young woman resonate loudly in the otherwise silent halls.

“Remind me, if I ever have the opportunity, to nominate a Dreadnought to the Senatorum Imperialis. I think the High Lords of Terra could benefit from the addition.”

“WE CERTAINLY CAN’T LOWER THEIR EFFICIENCY MUCH FURTHER,” Pierre answered smugly.

There was a minute of silence after this, with irregular stops and walks in the last room. And at last they drew near the last hall and the artificial blue-white lights outside of the museum could be seen again.

“This conversation was illuminating. We will continue it when the next military campaign will begin and I will order them to release from your stasis vault. Farewell, Pierre.”

“FAREWELL, LADY. YOU ARE NOT TOO BAD FOR SOMEONE WHO LOVES SPIDERS.”

Isley heard the heavy rumble of the Dreadnought going away...and it was at this moment he realised the decoration he was hidden behind had already a large cousin of the wasp just above his help.

Seeing no point in discretion anymore, he shrugged and switched off his sound-dampening devices.

“How long did you know I was here?” he demanded as Lady Weaver came into view.

“From the moment you came into room 15-C,” was the answer. “I left insects all over the building, and you were still in my range when you entered.”

It was a bit humiliating. He still didn’t know how far her range went, all the people he had spoken until now didn’t know or were unwilling to reveal anything to him without scandalous information to share.

“Gamaliel wants you to return to the Spire, my Lady.”

“I’m sure he does. With a new Master of Logistics in place, I am spending far less time into my office than in the first month. And there are quantities of pilgrims crowding the streets.”

“They are a security risk, and not a small one.”

“They are the people of the Imperium,” said tersely the dark-eyed Heroine of the Imperium. “If we do not take their desires into accord, what right do we have to rule over them?”

The Chapter Master decided to not speak more on the subject. He had a feeling there would be a lot of philosophy involved, and he didn’t like it much.

Weaver searched for a moment the contents of the bag she had on her shoulder before handing him a small data-slate that he took with curiosity.

“I wanted to give it to Pierre and let him deliver it to you, but since you’re here...” She inhaled loudly. “Congratulations, you have now Astartes recruitment rights in the Toulon System. The Iron Drake Dupleix sent there has determined there’s close to 95% compatibility with your guidelines and the gene-scans, and the Inquisition has made no objection. Your first thousand candidates will be recruited once we’ve finished the Sanguinala.”

“This is very good news. Thank you.”

The tired expression became a grin, and suddenly Jeremiah knew that for this positive answer there was going to be some payback.

“Since you are all too eager to disobey my order and test my security, you will be by the Cardinal’s side tomorrow when he celebrates the mass in the Cathedral. I’m sure this will be a refreshing experience for you...”

Staying all day by the Cardinal’s side in a sea of pilgrims that were sure to consider a holy icon and a symbol of good luck? There was one word to describe this punishment, and it was ‘horrific’.

“This is evil,” the former Harrowmaster protested.

“I prefer the expression ‘just retribution’...”

**Cyrene Valantion**

She was not blind.

She had not been blind for several thousand years.

But there were too many times when it was easier to pretend.

Cyrene was a Perpetual, one of those beings cursed to be immortal. And yes, ‘cursed’ was the right word. Living unchanged centuries after centuries could not be a blessing. She had watched her home city of Monarchia burn when the Emperor had ordered it to be destroyed. She had lost her eyes that day. She had become a Confessor of the Word Bearers under the name Blessed Lady. She had heard over half a century of confessions from Astartes, clerics, and soldiers alike. She had died at Isstvan V and her soul had been tortured for a year in the Warp, something that would still torment until her immortality failed her.

She had been resurrected, only to lose her protectors and escape. Escape, and see the ruin the Word Bearers promised to the rest of the galaxy. Escape, and see that there had been no winners in the greatest civil war of humankind. Escape, and realise there was an outcome the followers of the Warmaster had ultimately not envisioned. The Emperor of Mankind was going to be worshipped as a God, in the end. Not because he wanted to be recognised as one, but because there was just no other certainty in this galaxy. There was no other protector against the monsters waiting in the Warp.

Cyrene had travelled a long time in the galaxy after the Scouring. She had nothing better to do, really. And she had wanted to forge her own opinion on the Great Crusade and the atrocities the Seventeenth Legion had confessed to.

What she had learned had not pleased her. Cyrene had known there were lies in the confessions, but Lorgar and his Word Bearers had been particularly champions in the art.

That or they were all ready to lie themselves in order to embrace further their damnation. On this point at least, being blind had been a neat drawback. She had not seen the faces of the monsters. Not replacing her blind eyes with augmetics had allowed her not to stare at demons and creatures of unnatural sorceries. In this, at least, she was ready to admit she was a coward.

As the 31st millennium died and the 32nd millennium began, Cyrene had begun to admit there was nothing she could have done. Lorgar and his rats of followers were not going to be discouraged in their folly by a weak and feeble Confessor just because she told them they were in the wrong.

And yes, the rat was the appropriate description for what the Seventeenth Legion had become. Calling them dogs would have been an insult for the dogs. Dogs – and a lot of animal species – had loyalty to their masters. Rats, however, were powerful disease carriers, and this was exactly what the Word Bearers had become. They spread corruption, malice, and poison across the galaxy, not realising they had murdered everything that defined them as human.

The Imperium now was falling centuries after centuries in ignorance. The 34th millennium had been worse than the 33rd millennium, and given how many wars were waged this millennium and the secession of Segmentum Pacificus, Cyrene had no great hopes for the decades to come. Humanity survived. There was nothing else positive to say. Ignorance and fanaticism were at an all-times high, the proud lines which had conquered the Imperium of M30 were now nothing more than obese gluttons crawling in decadence and delighting in oppressing those weaker and less wealthy than them.

“We have landed, Lady-Architect Cyrene Versailles,” announced her guide, helping her leave her seat and descend the ramp, ignoring the expensive lenses Cyrene had on her eyes were fake.

Setting foot in the spaceport of a Hive City in the middle of the Sanguinala was an interesting experience...one she had done nine times before, but interesting nonetheless. Since she was ‘blind’, she didn’t move her head to the sides or manifested any expression other than gratitude for the escort who helped her progress to the vehicle prepared for her, but what she saw through the senses was enough to give her the grand lines.

This was the first day of the week-long Sanguinala, also known as the Day of Contemplation, the Day of Mourning, and the Day of Prayer. It was the day the Angel died.

It was something Cyrene sincerely regretted. Unlike too many of the Primarchs, Sanguinius had been a true Champion of Humanity, one Lorgar could have been inspired to emulate. Maybe if it was him who had been named Warmaster...but the past was the past and what was done was done.

It took two full hours to arrive to the destination her guides wanted her to lead her to. The avenues of circulation – the super-sized streets like the tortuous alleys – were filled with an immense crowd of pilgrims and locals. And at every corner, they were preachers and cohorts of the Ecclesiarchy reciting the words of the Lectitio Divinitatus. While her old memories with this book gave her a bad vibe, the attitude of the average worker in the street seemed genuinely faithful.

Which was a surprise, really. Most worlds, when they announced it was the day of the Sanguinala, saw hundreds of thousands people open the festivities and for a week release all the inhibitions which stayed safely under wraps for the rest of the year. The Governor-Saint appeared to have made a positive impression on these people.

Since she could not find an explanation to her guides and protectors why she would be allowed to descend into the waves of red-robed pilgrims distributing small disks of feather-like prayers, Cyrene observed at best as she could the mood and the behaviour of the Nyxians. In two hours, there were three things which struck her as out of the norm. First, the Arbites had received new equipment and new directives. On too many worlds, brutality was definitely the order of the day, and between Power Mauls, Electro-Flails, and Shock Batons, the men and women of the Arbites had many, many weapons to crush your skull should you provoke them. But here, whoever tried to break order or incite something which was best not done by loyal citizen was immediately covered in a sticky foam and then mocked by the crowd for several minutes before being evacuated towards an Arbites courthouse.

Secondly, there were many soup kitchens for pilgrims and some of the poorest citizens, too many for it not to be government-funded. And they had all ‘Basileia food kitchen’ painted in gold and red letters above them, so the provenance of the supplies wasn’t exactly a mystery.

Third...the people seemed genuinely hopeful. Something that definitely wasn’t seen a lot of times on overcrowded Hive World like this one.

This could complicate her plans like it could facilitate them.

It was ironic, but she had not met a true Saint in four thousand years. Oh, she had seen her fair share of people pretending to be avatar of the power of the God-Emperor. Too often they had been denounced as charlatans and usurpers before she met them a second time. In rare cases, the pretender had managed to fool the Ecclesiarchy and the Adeptus Administratum for years. But they could not hide the truth from her. Cyrene had seen the power of God on Monarchia.

And like the agony suffered in the Warp, this was a golden radiance she would never, ever, forget. Not for a hundred thousand years. Not as long as her mind was her own.

The travel ended in front of a middle-sized church. This was...unexpected. In principle, a Planetary Governor or any high dignitary was in his palace or the tallest religious monument of the planet on the first day of the Sanguinala. Yet given the tens of thousands pilgrims which surrounded the church, there was no doubt that there was someone of high-rank inside.

Yet as she left the vehicle and Arbitrators opened a corridor in this human sea to pass through, the former Blessed Lady recognised the symbol. This was a church of the neo-Dalian period, which was for architect specialists, between three hundred and four hundred years after the Scouring. An Age where the Cult of the Saviour Emperor was a religion genuinely devoted to the worship of the God-Emperor, and not with overweight prelates whose only ambition was to quench their power thirst and fulfil their most depraved desires.

And just before the church’s gates, in the inner atrium, there were Space Marines.

They stood idle and were their weapons were all in their scabbards or their holsters, but she didn’t doubt a single second that at the first sign of threat, they would make sure any enemy was eliminated. It left her with mixed feelings. These were not the first Angels of Death she met in four thousand years...and like a lot of times, she felt something had been irreparably lost looking at these transhuman warriors bred and build for war.

The church was a haven of calm and silence when she entered, only two of her guides escorting her. There was a Priest discussion with a Space Marine...and were these two Space Marines painting a fresco to her left? Yes, they were, and everywhere it seemed there were artisans in the process of renovating the religious edifice.

The Architect and the two men marched slowly to a stone stair and after forty marches, they stopped climbing and she was seated on a large wooden chair. Just by touching the wood, the former Confessor knew it was probably as old as this church... slightly younger than her.

“So you are the Architect named Cyrene Versailles,” two massive insect landed from the position on the ceiling where they had been waiting, and only four thousand years of self-control allowed her to not show any expression of surprise.

“Lady Basileia Taylor Hebert, I presume?” she asked with the curiosity expected from a blind woman, but internally wincing at the feeble golden halo and the single golden ray in the black hairs of her interlocutor. The power was weak...but it was unmistakably His.

Age was already difficult to determine in the Imperium due to the existence of rejuvenation treatments, but Cyrene did not believe she was mistaken in thinking the Saint was terribly young for her current responsibilities. Younger than she had been when Monarchia burned, and she had not been ready by any means for the life trials ahead of her.

The insects didn’t move, but their mistress did. In a few heartbeats, they were nearly touching.

“Who is asking?” The woman asked in a murmur and she frowned in incomprehension. “Cyrene Versailles, the Faithful Architect? Or Cyrene Valantion, the Blessed Lady, formerly of the Word Bearers Legion?”

She knew. She knew. Cyrene tried to stand but suddenly she had spiders on her arms and beetles on her chest.

“Don’t move. They will not attack as long as you answer my questions.”

The voice could have been of ice for the lack of warmth there was in it.

“Please answer one of mine before, Saint of the Emperor. Did He tell you who I was as I walked into this church?”

Cyrene received a cold smile in answer.

“Nothing so miraculous, I’m afraid. I have Astartes under my command, and one of them recognised you when shown your file. You should have changed your appearance, and tried to replace your eyes by augmetics.”

Cyrene shook her head before taking her hands to her eyes and removing her lenses.

“Astartes do not live that long. And for most outside of the Seventeenth Legion, my name does not mean anything.”

“Unless you have a Dreadnought of the Twentieth Legion who specialised in demolishing cultists operations.”

Cyrene grimaced as the Saint took a step back.

“You realise this...this can’t be coincidence.”

“The thought came to my mind,” admitted her interlocutor. “Now I want my answer, please.”

“I am both,” she told her possible future executioner. “I worked for the last centuries as Cyrene Versailles, Architect of the Imperium, but four thousand years ago, I was known as Cyrene Valantion of Monarchia, Confessor of the Seventeenth Legion, saved by them from the destruction created by the Ultramarine Legion, killed on the sands of Isstvan V, resurrected one year later by Traitors and in exile forever after that. If you intend to kill me, I will warn you that you lack the weapons to make it permanent.”

Most of the insects jumped away or were removed after she uttered the last sentence.

“Give me a little credit. If I wanted to kill you, I would not have invited you in this church.”

Yes, this was a good point. If the Basileia had had her suspicion for several hours or days, she would have fired upon her transport, or arrested her and made her disappear at the spaceport. No, for the moment she wasn’t at risk to be eaten inside by insects. And thank providence for that. That she was reborn didn’t mean that a death like this one would not hurt like a thousand agonies.

But there was a tone employed, an iron-like attitude forged on this visage and these bones...

“You do not believe in the God-Emperor, don’t you?”

“That’s a rather personal question,” and at this moment Cyrene knew she was right. This was so delicious ironic she almost laughed. She had at last met a true Saint, and the holy champion wasn’t a Faithful!

“I will answer if you speak your opinion on this issue.”

“He is a God.” Cyrene said, completely honest for the first time, watching with her brown eyes the dark eyes of her interlocutor. “I felt His power. This is not something you ever forget. At the time, I thought of him as a wrathful, a monster dominating Mankind, but a God. Once you have felt His radiance, there’s no doubt left in you. And his acts have only made the situation more evident. Who would stand on the Astronomican for thousands of years, watching over us, if not a God?”

“Being a powerful entity does not mean you are a God.” The counter was delivered with non-feigned disgust. “I lost my homeworld because of an alien masquerading as a golden-skinned warrior, an alien who pretended to be a hero and that many worshipped as a God. But in the end, this creature died.”

There was a pause. Then the young woman continued.

“Does the Emperor exist? Does He protect us? Yes, He does. Of this, I have no doubt. I have seen the madness of the demons scratching their claws and talons against the walls of reality. I have seen the vision of a dying hero and what the fate the Ruinous Powers have in mind for us should they defeat and break humanity.”

The two fists tightened and her interlocutor turned her heels to watch the Space Marines working on the renovation of the church.

The last murmur was delivered so low she almost missed it.

“But that does not make him a God...”

“What does it make him, then?” she demanded, piqued by curiosity.

“The Master of Mankind. The Master, the First Shield, and its Last Protector. The Sentinel in the Dark, condemned to know no respite and no joy until the end comes.”

Silence fell, only broken by the whispers and the conversations of the men and transhumans present in the religious edifice.

“I think we will have to agree to disagree in this debate.” Because what the Emperor did, no human, not ever His sons were able to rise to the challenge. Cyrene sighed. “Do you still want to hire me as an Architect?”

She moved close to the stone handrail, and yes the artwork painted by the Space Marines was a marvel to behold. The sons of Sanguinius made their father proud with their dedication to beauty. It would not surprise her if the pilgrimages to this church were multiplied by a hundred in the year to come.

“You do not look afraid.”

“I am a pretty good judge of character, if I say so myself, Basileia-Saint. You will not kill me.”

After ten seconds, the Governor shrugged.

“You’re right. I want to hear the old story from your perspective.” Spiders ran on her arms, and the Architect had to swear that if this wasn’t the strangest combination with the golden sparkles of the Emperor’s powers, she didn’t know what was going to win the title. “And while I will make sure you always have a Space Marine keeping both eyes on you, I will admit I really need an Architect who doesn’t pray ten times per day to the Gothic God.”

Cyrene chuckled lightly.

“Yes, the Gothic is strongly suppressing most of the existing movements across this galaxy. But I’ve heard something about broken gargoyles and spiritual debates getting out of hand...”

The wince of the insect-mistress didn’t escape her. She observed her for a few more seconds, before internally nodding. Yes, this was someone she could work with. The Saint was not going to shy at the first hurdle or battle lost, and in a way the lack of belief in the divinity of the God-Emperor was preferable: that way she would not wake a morning only to be dragged in chains because someone had a crisis of faith.

“I think I can work under your orders and build...the Basilica of Hagia Sanguinala?”

Receiving a nod of confirmation, she continued.

“I am ready to swear an oath to you for as long as you live and build monuments humanity will remember for the next ten thousand years. But I demand three conditions for my allegiance.”

For a second, she feared to have pushed too far.

“In the interest of fairness, and since I’m your employer, I will demand three conditions of my own, you realise. And you will have to work for your redemption, far more than the Heracles Wardens pay for theirs. But very well, name you conditions, Architect.”

Cyrene Valantion took a large breath in, and began.

“Should you stand before the God-Emperor in the Sanctum of Holy Terra, I want you to ask him the question why he thought destroying Monarchia and humiliating the Seventeenth Legion was a good idea.”

“Acceptable.” The Saint answered. “To be fair, I’m asking myself the same question. Your second condition, please.”

“If I am to become your Architect, I want a right of veto on your ideas. I can give you long and detailed explanations, but if I tell you building a certain type of monument or palace in a certain location is an awful idea, I expect my word to be obeyed.”

“Granted. But I will demand explanations, you can count on it.”

She had expected nothing less.

“As for my third condition...” Cyrene Valantion, despite thousand years of life, knew his expression had become darker and more threatening. “I have a very personal vendetta against the Dark Apostle Erebus of the Word Bearers Legion. If he comes in the region or anywhere near you, the privilege to strangle him with his own entrails is *mine*.”

**Knight-Errant Psamtic Mehhur**

Under the Menelaus dynasty, the second day of the Sanguinala was officially known as the Day of Rebirth like it was on millions of planets. But for the overwhelming majority of the Nyxians, it was Burn the Heretic’s Day.

Not that many heretics had found their way to the pyres in recent years, of course. The previous Governor had been far more concerned about internal dissenters, potential insurgents and smugglers. In short, the people who were burned as heretics were those unfortunate to remain in the prison cells of the government every year.

Psamtic was somehow doubtful about the efficiency of these methods. Terrifying people could work on the short-term, but rarely on the long-term. Between its tendency to ignore the real problems – his Astartes cousins had arrested far too many real heretics in the last weeks – its decadence and its willingness to use terror instead of governance, the former Thousand Sons was convinced the Menelaus dynasty would have had less than a century before a general rebellion began and the Imperium as a whole was forced to take control.

The Day of Rebirth of this year was different. The new Governor – though every man and woman he had talked this morning called her the Saint – had re-established an old Terran tradition called the Carnival. Some Nyxians and foreigners had taken to call it the Carnival of Fools, others wanted to proclaim it as the Day of Fake Trials. The principle, as far as he had been to discern, was for the participants to disguise themselves in bright-coloured costumes, dance, cheer, party, and then watch as enforcers disguised as Arbites or Ecclesiarchy personnel burned fake figures of heretics in pasteboard.

If the sound of the hundreds thousands voices present on the Gold’s Square were any indication, the audience was delighted. Psamtic thought it could have been a bit better organised and coordinated, but for a first try, it was fine. The ‘tribunal’ in particular had been a nice touch. A disguised Astartes and two actors had debated lengthily the crimes of the ‘Arch-Heretic’, a five-metre tall thing having a vague familiarity with a Chaos Astartes, the prosecutor and the lawyer often changing their roles during the trials as the two wanted to condemn the ‘accused’ and as the torch was thrown on the figure, several fireworks had been fired, giving a small but intense period of pyrotechnics.

Psamtic applauded politely when the actors of the ‘trial’ saluted the public, although his support was lost in the storm of acclamations coming from every direction. Thank the Emperor they were on the fourth floor of a currently empty palace, and not in the middle of this cheering crowd. They would lose hours before finding their way in all this agitation.

“She is making mistakes,” Inquisitor Contessa declared in her usual emotionless tone. Psamtic did not even ask who the ‘she’ was. “She should prepare her people for war, not these kind of...frivolities.”

Psamtic was glad he had his helmet masking his features. Being prepared for war had not helped Prospero when the Wolves had been unleashed. And since he had begun studying the recent history of the Imperium, he could recite over a thousand planet’s names which had prepared for war...for in the end see their efforts come to naught as the population started continents-spanning rebellions and decided the rule of the Imperium was more trouble than its half-muttered promises of assistance were worth.

“It is in our very soul, body, and mind to make mistakes.” He voiced at last his opinion. “Without experience, without a failure or two, we can’t improve.”

This was true for humans, transhumans, and parahumans.

“Lord Malcador said something similar,” Psamtic did not need to use some of his psyker abilities on the blue-eyed woman to know she disagreed, “something about arriving to the same solution he found, but on her own.”

The Inquisitor looked like she wanted to say more, but her mouth didn’t voice one more word.

“As for the festivities, well these are only for a week, and yesterday was more a Hive-sized pilgrim procession,” and he hadn’t enjoyed the sight. Unquestioning worship of the Master of Mankind was not and never had been what the Great Crusade had been supposed to do. It was one more good reason to hate the Ruinous Powers and the Traitor Primarchs for.

“The Paths are becoming unclear.” The admission caught him by surprise. “Something great and terrible is coming, and I know Weaver will be at the core of it. Prognosticators have incredible difficulties see more bribes of the future past five years. The future...the future is now nearly impossible to predict.”

Psamtic gave a look at the crowd before watching the Inquisitor who was as much his superior as his potential executioner should he walk away from the right path.

“Does the same problem apply to our enemies?”

“Yes.”

This was good news. For all their talk about ‘omniscience’ and ‘assured victory’, the abominations of the Warp and their slaves were not exactly inventive or level-headed when they had to rebuild everything from zero.

Though he could admit in the privacy of his own mind he was curious about what sort of action could break the ability of the most powerful entities in the Sea of Souls to see what was coming. The Great Heresy had been something obscuring everything, but it was four thousand years ago and the remnants of the Traitor Legions were still imprisoned in the Eye of Terror. The orks were still dispersed, even if the recent war had proven they would always be a threat for humanity.

“There is an Inquisition Council we are summoned to. Follow.”

Psamtic silently sighed. Even if she had given him plenty to think about, Contessa was not a brilliant conversationalist...

**Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica**

Nobody had ever dared saying it in front of a Menelaus, but the Hivers of the lowers castes had often taken to nickname the week-long celebration of holy days the Menelausia. In case you didn’t understand the joke, it was because in the opinion of millions of workers, the Governor desired the prayers and the blessings of his population to go to himself, not to the memory of the Great Angel. To be fair, his father, his grandfather and the immediate ancestors had asked the same.

The first day, the Day of Mourning, was excellent to parade in the great religious monuments of the Ecclesiarchy and ensure the high nobility saw him in his new golden clothes. The Day of Rebirth was the pretext to empty many prisons and get rid of the wretches courageous enough to badmouth his rule. The Day of Glory was the occasion to congratulate his most fervent supporters and add a few titles to the endless list of those he already possessed. The Day of Jewels saw most often than not the addition of a couple more wives to the grand harem – to the point half the Gubernatorial Court had nicknamed it the Day of Marriages. The Day of Valour, coming after the wedding or the weddings, was the scene of grand military parades and - if an Administratum or Munitorum fleet was in orbit above Nyx – the departure of the tithe. The sixth day, the Day of Loyalty, was also the Day of Gifts and if one valued his or her existence, it was best to offer a large and expensive present to the Menelaus in charge. And the seventh day, the Day of Victory...well, this one was the same it was everywhere else. Festivities, dancing, drinking and practically everything could be done for nearly twenty-five hours before the great bells of the Adeptus Ministorum returned everyone to their duties.

It had been a machine which had functioned for more than a thousand years.

It was one that for some reason Zoe Attica couldn’t fathom, certain aristocrats of the principal Hives had imagined it would be the same this year, despite the new Lady Nyx dismantling piece after part after part of the Menelaus legacy.

Zoe had, thanks to the suggestion of her spies, cancelled her plans for the Sanguinala one week before the Day of Mourning and obeyed diligently the instructions coming from the capital. As over twenty nobles of Hive Attica had proved by disregarding the pointed orders and getting arrested by the Arbites for crimes committed five years ago, this had been a wise decision. Besides, the Saint’s demands had not been that expensive or extravagant.

Piety was demanded for them the first day. For the second day, a few actors were to be hired, some monstrous-looking creations were to be burned, and a few fireworks fired. For the third and fourth day, there were Astartes recruitment games to be organised. Sixth day, there were again some fireworks and banquets to be paid for. Feasts, balls, and parades had been authorised. And of course feathers, icons of Beloved Sanguinius and red robes to celebrate the sacrifice of Sanguinius were incredibly encouraged.

Evidently, what she considered acceptable and what her nobles recognised as worthy of them was not the same thing. As dancers of the Serenade Company demonstrated their art on one of the golden esplanades reserved to the artists invited by the Planetary Governor, Zoe could see that while the attendance had to be in the five thousand people for the Day of Glory, there were maybe one-sixths of the attendants which was high nobility, and it included *foreign* aristocrats. The rest? The high leadership of the cartel, Navy officers, Guard officers, PDF officers, Guilder representatives, Ecclesiarchy Preachers, and even a few Mechanicus Archmagi...Nyx was changing, and nowhere was it more evident than this evening.

“The fun is about to begin in a few minutes,” commented the elegant blonde woman in grand military uniform to her right. Suddenly, Zoe felt very inadequate compared to her. Her very body seemed to promise seduction and violence.

“I believe we haven’t been introduced. I am Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica...”

“Pleased to meet you,” it was not technically against the conventions, but the woman nearly crushed her hand under the pretext of shaking it. “I am Governor Ilvyna Dalten of Fay.”

It was maybe idiotic, but instantly the noblewoman felt bad for the aristocracy of Fay. Because if her stance was any indication and half of the rumours were true, what the political observers had sardonically called the ‘Weaver methods’ had been put into action at Fay well before the election at Nyx.

“Forgive me, I was not aware we had invited foreign Planetary Governors for the celebration of the Sanguinala...”

The Fay Governor chuckled.

“Oh, Lady Weaver didn’t invite everyone. There is a war still going on, after all. Only Andes, Wuhan, and Fay were invited for the short term, and while I think I saw Governor Ramirez somewhere, Governor Cao sent one of his minor lackeys to play the loyal vassal.”

“You wanted to be reunited with your old regiment?”

“Hum...perhaps a bit. Sadly, between the casualties, the new heads I sent here and the new weapons...it is not the regiment I remember. And truthfully, it was always more Colonel Larkine’s regiment than mine. I was really thankful to Lady Weaver to name the new pattern of lasgun after him.”

The conversation continued for a few minutes, the Governor of Fay admitting after a few remarks she had also come to Nyx for its new hospitals and clinics. The blonde had from her childhood a well-established disgust of men wherever sex was concerned, and had come to see if the influence of the Saint could open some doors with the Biologis Magi working in her Hives and tech-facilities.

And it ended there, as debates ended brusquely and a column of guardsmen and officers advanced in parade formation. Since the Astartes didn’t intervene, this had been evidently planned in advance, but certain people, most notably Lady Nyx and a few men and women around her, had not.

Trumpets and clarions resonated. The spectacle paused. Even the large crowd outside went silent.

Military salutes were returned.

And like everyone else, Zoe stared in amazement as the man bearing the green-red uniform and the stars of a General of the Imperial Guard opened a large box with his white clothes and drew something she was sure everybody recognised at first sight.

It was a medal. It was a golden medal, but it did not do it justice.

It was a five-pointed star of gold, but it shone like a miniature sun. In the heart of the medal was a magnificent diamond, and on each of the stars’ points were rubies.

There was an inscription surrounding the diamond, and while she was too far to read it, Zoe knew the words of High Gothic written on it.

*In Dedicato Imperatum Ultra Articulo Mortis*.

Literal translation in Low Gothic: For the Emperor beyond the point of death.

This made the medal the second highest honour an Imperial Guardsman could earn in service of the Emperor, and certainly the highest by staying alive, the Order of Ollanius Pius having only been awarded posthumously in the last two millennia.

This was the Star of Terra, and the only close equivalent in valour and prestige was the Lion of Terra for the Imperial Navy.

“Lady Taylor Hebert Weaver Nyx, it is my greatest honour to announce that your miraculous deeds in the Battle of the Death Star have been recognised as worthy of the Star of Terra...” the explosion of cheers and applause was so loud Zoe was unable to hear much of the speech which followed. “...promotion of three ranks...incredible devotion...legendary victory...Hail General Taylor Hebert!”

The audience did not wait much longer to go completely wild.

“HAIL WEAVER! HAIL WEAVER!”

Fireworks illuminated the entire Hive, and suddenly Zoe hoped this Sanguinala was going to be the exception and not the new norm...

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

When a Chapter of Space Marines organised a session of recruitment, they really didn’t do things half-way. And since Taylor had placed a small army of Tech-Priests at their disposal, they had the means of their ambitions. On the very Hive-floor where the Menelaus Arena had been built, the Brothers of the Red had thus built an athletics stadium and between the number of seats, the lodges, and the beauty of the architecture, it was something which could have been seen as perfectly acceptable to host the athletics part of the defunct Olympic Games – after a Behemoth attack on Earth Bet, those had definitely been cancelled.

The ambitions had not stopped with the stadium, though. The Brothers of the Red wanted the best of the best for aspirants – though on this issue apparently all the Space Marines were the same - and apparently one or two had talked with the Dawnbreaker Guard beforehand. Undoubtedly, they had been seduced by the stories of the ‘world’s greatest athlete’.

Vista didn’t know who had supported the idea first, Weaver, Clockblocker or Dragon, but mere days later the idea of the ‘Astartes Decathlon’ was born. To be a participant, you had to be male, your age had to be between twelve and fourteen, in good health, and of course not be on the black list of the Nyx government. To the great horror of the nobility – you would think that one day these egocentric cowards would learn something from the last months – social class had been declared a non-issue, and as a result scions of Counts and Dukes were participating with boys of far less illustrious pedigree.

This was not the Decathlon of Earth, however. The sons of Sanguinius, for all their respect for the happiness of those they protected, wanted to test the candidates and find worthy aspirants. Consequently, a few disciplines had been removed or modified, in order to be replaced by trials more adapted to military-themed activities. Yesterday, thousands of young teenagers had given their best on the 100 metres, the Long Jump, a few games of fencing with a fake chainsword, the High Jump and the 400 metres hurdles.

A few hours ago, the second day, the Day of Valour, had begun for the tired teenagers with a shooting trial in the form of the 50 metres lasgun, continued with the Discus Throw, before mustering what little energy they had left in their bodies for the weightlifting trial (the old-fashioned two hand lift) and a long tournament of wrestling.

It was now the evening, and the lights of the Hive had long gone into night-mode luminosity, but the stadium was now filled to its maximum capacity – roughly one hundred thousand spectators – and the din was indescribable. There was a moment of silence – but really nothing more than five seconds – as a red-armoured Astartes raised his bolter and fired a sort of firework-rocket...and then the encouragements, the screams, and the applause drowned everything. The 5000 metres, last trial of the Astartes Decathlon, had begun, and the teenagers ran like their life depended on it – and for many of them this was certainly the case.

They did not stay long in the stadium, barely four hundred metres before storming the exit and racing towards the large avenues of Hive Athena where they would run, protected by hundreds of enforcers and Arbites, supported to their utmost by millions of supporters all over the planet. A few Magi and Archmagi had deactivated the casts of Imperial propaganda and now the final trial of the Decathlon was broadcast on three Hive-Continents and for the eyes of billions of Nyxians. In the stadium, they had a gigantic screen for all of them, and the crowd vociferated and screamed to support its favourites.

“Who’s winning?” Dennis asked, while entering her lodge.

“You took your time,” she replied. “’I will just watch the wrestling contest for an hour, Vista,’” she imitated his voice.

“The streets are crowded, and the spaceports have hours of queue, no matter your accreditation,” the time-stopping Ward tried to justify himself with an innocent air, “the Sanguinala is really the craziest period of the year, for Nyx. Now who’s winning?”

“For the moment, a fourteen-year old boy of the nobility named Gerax Dekkanas, but he has a lot of challengers.”

Indeed, the current leader had in her opinion spent too much energy in the first kilometre. Sure, like in the original Decathlon, he had a small advantage in points after the nine trials and if he won the 5000 metres, he was sure to finish first.

Unfortunately for him, the individualistic tactic was not paying. As he passed under a marble archway and arrived into the endless Dorn Street, a group of five young boys was closing the distance, slowly but surely.

“Three boys of the workers’ class and two Guilders’ sons, nice alliance,” Dennis commented. “Not feeling too bad about not being able to participate?”

Vista snorted.

“It is not my fault the Emperor recognised the total superiority of women over men, and decided we were too important in our current jobs to be transformed into Space Marines.”

Or the golden-armoured tyrant had been a macho, but given the formidable equality of sex in all other organisations, it was not exactly making sense.

“Dekkanas is finished.”

The teenager was indeed paying his earlier efforts, and despite being certainly in better health than his pursuers, he could not prevent the other participants from coming back in his heels, and then like a pack they began to place terrible accelerations. There was less than six hundred metres to go, but Gerax Dekkanas had no more mental and physical energy to give, and suddenly there were five young boys of the middle and lower classes to dispute themselves the victory. The gap between them and the rest of the participants was now so important the final victory was going to play between them, and sportily they exchanged a few hand-signs before throwing their last forces in a mad sprint at the entrance of the stadium.

The stadium burst into applause like a volcano, and Vista feared for one second the super-glass alloy of the lodge was going to shatter...but it held and the one hundred thousand spectators cheered like madmen as the fourteen years-old Pat Howe passed the finish line first and was immediately carried in triumph by several other boys who had not been sufficiently skilled in the first trials to participate on the tenth.

For a good hour, the stadium acclaimed its heroes, and then the exhausted Pat Howe slowly climbed the one hundred steps above the ground, before shaking the hand of Taylor – something that brought the poor boy to tears – and watching the laurel wreath being posed on his head by Chapter Master Agiel Izaz.

The imposing Space Marine whispered a few words in Pat’s ear, before raising his arm in salute.

“A STANDING OVATION FOR OUR FIRST ASPIRANT!”

Thank the Mechanicus for building solid stadiums, because at this moment the female parahuman thought they could have brought down the Hive with their cheers.

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

She had not imagined there was such a thing as receiving too many gifts.

Alas, triple alas, like in too many things the Imperium had changed her perspective.

“How many gifts are they in this palace?” Taylor asked and a couple of seconds later regretted to have even asked the question.

“I think the exact number is around two hundred thousand,” Dragon smirked, with the smile of someone being granted perfect revenge without lifting a finger. “There are a few other palaces of similar size where we are storing all the presents which were offered to you yesterday. This one is mostly the gifts from the noble classes of Nyx and the Sector as a whole.”

“Awesome,” yes, this was a sarcastic answer. She looked at the entire wardrobes of clothes that her subordinates were starting to properly open before her eyes. “I’m sure I was offered more clothes than I can humanly wear in a standard year.”

“You’re right,” Alya Sevrov said all the while trying to close what looked to be an entire compartment worth of cosmetics, shampoo and...well, it was probably better not to explain everything which was included. “We found already a thousand robes and over seven hundred uniforms of diverse colouring.”

“Let’s see the good side of things,” Vladisluvius Arav declared cheerfully. “We have a lot of Spire personnel doing nothing since they were supposed to take care of the Menelaus dynasty and their masters and mistresses are gone. We can use them to list everything and class neatly all the gifts.”

“You will still need to take customs officers to oversee this,” Dragon advised. “We checked at delivery, of course, and more than half the presents in this palace come from this very Hive, so the problems hopefully will be minimal, but there are other gifts which will need to be properly watched over and tested before thinking about using them.”

“Like the air-limos?” Yes, air-limos, plurals. So far, she had seen a black, a grey, and a pink one – the latter she might order Kratos to pulverise for its awful decoration.

“Like the air-limos, yes.” She hoped she was wrong, but arranging an air-car accident sounded definitely like something an odious noble would try to remove the Governor he loathed.

But the vehicles were not the big problem. Oh, they were massive, heavy, and would take a few Tech-Priests to properly scrutiny and maintain, but there were only a few dozen of them.

It did not compare to the entire libraries of books now in her possession. Nor it did make a shadow to the mountain of jewellery, fashion accessories, horology and thousands of other things that she had no idea how they were named, never mind what utility they could have.

“We might have to create a charity organisation. Hundreds of charity organisations. Gavreel and Wei with me, I want to see what is upstairs.”

The answer was: more statues, paintings, letters of congratulations, jewels, and practically everything that could be gifted and hold into a palace. And here she thought the worst problems caused by the Sanguinala were the potential riots caused by the pilgrims and the possible infiltration of cultists and their ilk.

This...this was a headache and millions of gifts she would definitely have lived for.

She finished climbing the stairs and began to walk into a gallery filled with artwork which on Earth Bet would have been more than sufficient to open five or six museums.

She turned back her head, however, because the black-armoured Space Marine had not followed her after the first minute, and as she watched the Wuhanese girl advance in a red-blue robe she had certainly hidden her grey robe minutes ago, Taylor had a good idea why.

“If you dare...”

Her hands were joined by other hands, and immediately she was tackled against the body of Wei. The kiss, when it came, was long and passionate.

“I...I don’t know...”

“Shush. I have noticed that your insects spied a lot on me when I’m trying new robes in my quarters. And yes, I’m perfectly aware you offered me a new dressing room and its contents.”

Thankfully there were no mirrors in this gift alley, because she was sure her visage was red like a tomato.

“I...I don’t think I like girls, Wei.”

“Shush. You have been running from battlefields to battlefields, and from crisis to crisis. Vista and Dragon confirmed me you never had a real boyfriend or a real girlfriend.”

Traitors. There were going punishments to remember, after the end of the Sanguinala.

“Let’s try things slowly. I don’t want to hurt you, and if you want someone else in your bed, we will stop our relation.”

The fourth kiss was longer, and Wei’s hands directed hers everywhere from neck to hips.

“I will not wait a decade, Lady Basileia of Nyx. What is your will?”

Why was it so difficult? She had not felt nervous like that when an army of orks had charge them in the high passes of Fay. She had not been so confused or wary when they had descended to face the C’Tan in the depths of an Underhive...the demons had not made her doubt her determination that way when they had surged in a column of damnation and nightmares. Her heart was beating too fast, and there was something exhilarating about touching someone so close, about admiring the traits, the curves, the breasts of...

“Yes.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Verde Sector**

**Quayran System**

**5.938.289M35**

**Archmagos Thayer Sagami**

“I must respectfully refuse this nomination, Fabricator. Praise the Machine and the Motive Force.”

Archmagos Thayer Sagami considered it a great triumph of logic over emotions he had answered without a single insult and with the proper salutations.

If Fabricator Qian-Beta thought he was going to get rid of his senior political opponent with this underhanded move, by the Omnissiah, he was going to sing another type of binaric cant tomorrow.

“My orders have the benediction of twelve Archmagi and the seal of the Inquisition.”

If he had not been surrounded by Skitarii armed with plasma guns able to breach his defences, Thayer would have shot the Fabricator, but given the current rapport of strength, logic dictated his optimal reaction was by protesting.

“But I have not worked on Quayran’s Folly! And I have not commanded a warship in two centuries! Fabricator, surely there’s someone more qualified to sail this battleship to Nyx!”

“Now, now, Archmagos Thayer,” the Fabricator’s visage had long abandoned its ability to show emotions, but Thayer Sagami was sure that, should he go in the noosphere levels reserved to the Tech-Priests of Magos and above rank, he would find the deceitful monkey laughing with his closest supporters. “It is a short assignment of ten standard years, and I’m sure that the assignment by the sides of a Chosen of the Omnissiah will be extremely interesting.”

“Extremely lethal, you wanted to cant,” the Archmagos replied angrily. “This Chosen engaged a xenos planetoid with her swarm and won! Every planet she lands on, there’s some world-ending threat to fight! You say ten years is a short time? I say it will be an eternity!”

“My simulations don’t think this outcome has more than three percent of chance of happening.” The Fabricator declared and with more Magi arriving in the Hall of the Machine, Thayer had no choice but to not scream that the Fabricator’s simulations were better done by freshly-inducted menials if one wanted an accurate result. “Change the name of the starship per the Chosen’s wishes, and prepare your crew for a departure to the Nyx Sector.”

“It will be done.” Thayer forced himself to not bark and turned around, leaving the second holiest site of Quayran for more than a decade.

He wanted to delay and delay his preparations for the journey, but here again the Fabricator had seen clear in his game: the crew had been assembled, the formidable machine-spirit of the battleship awakened, the ammunition stored, the food, the water, and the sacred oils were ready for a travel of five years.

In fact, if it had not been for the need to write the name of the ship in one hundred metres-tall golden letters, they could have left Quayran in less than forty-eight hours. As it stood, they would reach the Mandeville Point fifty-one hours after the Artisans had finished their task.

“I maintain that *Hubris of the Omnissiah* would have been a perfectly acceptable name,” Thayer said to one of the Tech-Priests who had been condemned to exile with him.

“As you say, Archmagos. But, if you will forgive me the remark, it still is a battleship.”

It was indeed, but it was not *his* battleship. And it would never be. For all the treasures of holy technology poured into this project, he could not like this starship. It was too difficult to maintain, there were far too few Mechanicus holy symbols and dedications to the holy cog.

It was eleven kilometres-long, but it was not a design he felt was appropriate for a loyal servant of the Adeptus Mechanicus and a tech-Priest of the Omnissiah.

And finally, as his personal transport made a last turn before entering the hangars of the battleship, the name was at last visible to all in the Quayran shipyards.

**HMHMS ENTERPRISE**