Weaver Option Update 04 October 2020

**Ovation 9.1**

**Deus Ex Mechanicus**

*The majority of the Nyxians in age to live through the immediate post-Commorragh era was prompt to name the late years of the 290s and the beginning of the 300s the ‘Auramite Age’. Little did they know that their children and grandchildren would speak of giving the same name to different decades of the 35th millennium.*

*All things considered, I prefer the term ‘Auramite Age’ to ‘the Prelude to Operation Stalingrad’. I think Taylor prefers it that way too. For all the military successes won by the forces of the Nyx Sector on the battlefield and the enthusiasm they generated across the galaxy, I have never forgotten that every battle, every piece of archeotech, and every boon were too often conquered atop a mountain of corpses from courageous and loyal men and women.*

*The Battle of Commorragh brought immense benefits to the Nyx Sector. And the worst part was that it cost at the same time so much to Army Group Caribbean and yet so little to the Imperium. I knew it before the first ship departed through the Warp for Pavia, the hulls and the regiments mustered for the anti-pirate hunt were insignificant compared to certain Crusades and wide-scale operations launched on the Eastern Fringe. By the theory of the twelfth-dimensional equations, the military tithe sent to Tigrus was far, far more powerful than the Army Group, at least where its ground component was concerned. But so many of these men and women were known to us, we had seen them walk in the streets of Nyx, dance with certain Ladies, and salute the crowds before boarding their transport which would transport them across the stars. Knowing they had been cut down by the Eldar, for all the theoretical risks, was a pain which never truly healed, and would return back with a vengeance during Operation Stalingrad.*

*Sometimes, I just wish Taylor had not this damnable luck following her everywhere. It can’t be only the power of the Emperor gifted to her. The old Chinese curse ‘may you live in interesting times’ is so perfect to describe her it failed to be funny after Commorragh and many comments of Missy on the question.*

*Commorragh. Even decades after Captain-General Anubis Excelsor placed the flag of the Matapan 1st in front of the Eternity Gate, I don’t think that I’ve been able to reflect how much it changed things.*

*People will rightfully remember the dozens of Ovation ceremonies celebrated for the Basileia, the living, and the dead. Or they will marvel at the Gaius Mausoleum, Cyrene Versailles’ successful attempt at resurrecting the Taj Mahal and the Terracotta Army, and add their prayers to the ones uttered by billions of pilgrims.*

*In my draconic opinion, it was the opportunity to remember so many ancient technologies thought out of humanity’s reach which was the greatest triumph of the expeditionary force. The space elevator, to give one of the most visible templates, was still something the Mechanicus Tech-Priests when they were commissioned to, but in reality their creations were inferior and crude versions of the human engineers who had worked on this project millennia ago. This wasn’t by incompetence or by malice. The metallic men and women I am charged to oversee – even if sometimes the verb ‘babysit’ describes the problems better – just lacked the comprehension of certain scientific and industrial processes, because the ancients left no traces of it. Therefore before Commorragh, the ancient space elevators having survived the Age of Strife, the Great Crusade, and the Horus Heresy had better continue working to their usual performance, because the Adepts of Mars wouldn’t be able to repair them if they failed. Finding the STC template of this gateway to the stars broke many limits which had chained worlds bound to Terra and Mars. Numerous alloys could be mass-produced again. Malfunctioning elevators returned to peak performance. New titanic projects of engineering could be authorised every year. And the number of accidents fell massively month after month.*

*And yes, as Dennis sufficiently teased me, this victory gave me a promotion and the time to tinker on new Dragon Armours with a budget that anyone humble could only call fantastic. Salamanders, White Scars, and their Successors instantly gained my favours. They had recognised the greatness of the draconic machine, and I never forgot it. Some engines may have more acceleration, some jetbikes might evade enemy fire more swiftly, and some Knights have more firepower at their disposal, but a Dragon Armour concentrates dozens of qualities and gives out none of the weaknesses.*

*Of course, even during these times of Ovations and parties, there were more problems piling up.*

*At the top of them were the Noosphere bureaucratic data-reports, an insidious threat I was not able to appreciate the full magnitude until it was too late...*

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“*The problem, to be bluntly honest, is that we need more information than a list of names and some spatial coordinates. We have Necron Dynasties’ names like Atun, Mephrit, Thebekh, Maynarkh, Charnovokh, Sautekh, Hyrekh, Nihilakh, Sarnekh, Thokt and their equivalent of glyph-banners and general appearance. But this isn’t enough. The firepower a World Engine and its ground-based garrisons is capable of overwhelming in short order a Battlefleet and the greatest defences emplaced to protect critical worlds. Going after a Necron Tomb-World and failing to destroy it in less than a few days would be synonym of disaster, and not just for planet where the metallic xenos are lying dormant. If the Imperium leaves the attacked Dynasty the time, nothing save Him on Earth would be able to protect the local Sector from the sheer amount of destruction unleashed by the Necrons*.” Extract of a conversation between Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach and Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal, 296M35.

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“When I said I wanted an unlimited budget for my pet projects Taylor, I did not expect you to take me so literally.” Magos-Draco Dogma Dragon Richter to Basileia Taylor Hebert, late 296M35.

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“Yes Missy, you’ve point has been made. Now stop bringing me these ‘I told you so’ sculptures. It’s not funny anymore.” Basileia Taylor Hebert during one of her Council of Ministers, 297M35.

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Transmitted: Holy Terra

Received: Astropath-Ultima ‘Mirabilis’

Destination: Kar Duniash

Mission time: 1.243.296M35

Telepathic Duct: SA-TT-1012101012

Reference: [CLASSIFIED]

Author: Fabricator Locum Decimus Osmium-Five-1111

Priority: Vermillion

*Chosen of the Omnissiah*,

*The final votes and deliberations about the future Thirteenth Founding have ended, and the news are excellent, with each of the twelve new Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes will receive the war assets and the genetic facilities their Founding deserves. Unfortunately, given the rapport of strength in the Senatorum Imperialis, the Adeptus Mechanicus was unable to sway a majority of the High Twelve into authorising a new Successor Chapter of the Blood Angels. The presence of every chapter descended from the Ninth Legion into your Dawnbreaker Guard proved a political drawback and only patience will allow us to abate the illogical obstacles on this path.*

*Out of the twelve new Chapters, eleven are nothing for you to worry about, although the choice of privileging the Ultramarines’ gene-line again so fast after the Twelfth Founding is raising some queries in Mars’ forges and Jupiter’s shipyards. The Magma Spiders, the Fists of Roma, and your yet-unnamed Successor of the gene-seed recovered will be based on the Nyx Sector, charged to defend the southern frontier of Ultima Segmentum, and the Eastern Fringe if the situation in this direction worsens. The Death Spectres – Raven Guard gene-line - and the Ebon Knights – Dark Angels’ gene-line - have been chosen to defend the Imperium against the threat coming from the Extremis-level region known as the ‘Ghoul Stars’. The Solar Hawks is a Chapter of White Scars’ Successor which has accepted the noble duty of reinforcing the defences existing north-west of Medusa in Segmentum Obscurus.*

*The four Successors to the Lord of Macragge’s legacy are the Thunder Barons, the Cerulean Guard, the Praetor Watch, and the Blue Panthers. For the present time, these Chapters have been assigned to reinforcing several war zones in Segmentum Pacificus, where the collapse of Nova-Terra demands a firm cog to restore productivity and loyalty.*

*The only Successor Chapter of the Iron Hands, the Angels of Iron, will be deployed in western Segmentum Tempestus to secure former space lanes which until recently were made unusable by Eldar pirates.*

*As for the twelfth chapter, we ignore everything about it save its name: the Exorcists. The Holy Inquisition blocked every investigation and query to learn the gene-line used to forge the new Astartes, their homeworld’s location and every other information regularly communicated to our Forge World in order to give the best adapted weapons to a Space Marine Chapter. All assistance to help us understanding this mystery – the Inquisitorial Representative went so far as to declare the servitors sent to deliver the supplies would suffer complete erasure of data-banks – will be welcomed.*

*To return to the status of your Space Marine Chapters, as you so logically pointed out, it is mechanically advantageous the Magma Spiders are given the priority in warships and infrastructure building. Logically, the Fists of Roma and the other Chapter will need several years to be built to operational strength before needing starships and the most expensive assets anyway.*

*Glory to the Omnissiah and may the Quest for Knowledge be once more in your favour.*

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“*No, the planetary government of Nyx isn’t using the hololithic game ‘Call of Duty’ to boost massively the recruitment rates of the Imperial Guard and the Planetary Defence Forces. No, we aren’t using more propaganda than the rules given in File BB-5. And no, the rumours of our next game being a potential source of recruits for the Inquisition and the Assassinorum are just that, rumours*.” Extract from a conversation between an angry noble and Lady Missy Byron, 296M35.

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Acacia Sub-Sector**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**1.250.296M35 (Approximately three hundred and thirty hours after the Mark of Commorragh)**

Thought for the day: The industrious may escape death.

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

“I had not truly understood how many archeotech weapons and relics the Adeptus Mechanicus had managed to recover from Commorragh,” Master of Siege Saul Agamemnon said as he re-read the data on his data-slate, his tanned near-black skin and his dark green eyes accenting his serious expression.

“When the Skitarii squads and their Tech-Priests realised how many ancient weapons and precious metals and resources they could retake from the Commorragh’s vaults, their raiding knew no end,” Taylor replied without raising her eyes from the documents she was busy affixing her seal to. “The biggest surprise in this affair was that the Tech-Priests of Gryphonne IV were the worst, not that the Adepts of Mars pillaged so many vaults.”

The worst offenders had been punished severely after the battle. Like she had repeated endlessly before the bloodshed started at Pavia, the black-haired General could accept the Mechanicus attempted to save precious archeotech, but not at the cost of weakening the defensive lines or withdrawing military support when other, more important goals were achievable.

“Tech-Priests will always stay Tech-Priests,” Epistolary Forman of the Emperor’s Swords agreed immediately. “At least they are happy with you for the abundance of archeotech, my Lady.”

“Yes, and they continue to debate endlessly on the divide of the spoils.”

And like for the arguments said before, there wasn’t much surprise about that. The Guard’s saying about two Tech-Priests quarrelling for a rusted cog was maybe a bit exaggerated, but it had been created from serious incidents. And there was more than a rusted bolt. Thanks to her excellent memory – which she had a feeling was becoming better and better as Commorragh was over and the golden wings shone on her back – the newly promoted Lady General had the complete list, and it was impressive. By category of weapons, the Mechanicus had salvaged from the Dark City’s utter destruction over ninety thousand projectile samples, fourteen thousand-plus missile and ordnance archeotech, one hundred and sixty thousand lasguns and variants, twenty-six thousand plasma guns, forty-five thousand flamers and the list went on and on.

And these were the firm numbers confirmed that the Mechanicus negotiated and bargained with Astartes supervising them. Despite her best efforts, the commander of Army Group Caribbean was sadly certain some ‘interesting pieces’ had disappeared in the secret vaults of the red robes the moment there wasn’t one of her insects to keep them honest.

At least Lankovar and the other subordinates acting in Nyx’s name had been able to secure sixteen Volkite relics and many plasma and exotic technology. Dragon and the rest of the Mechanicus Council were going to have fun studying and experimenting for the next decade with all the data and archeotech she was bringing back. As long the debates didn’t spiral into violence and the most dangerous toys had been relinquished to Inquisitorial and Custodes’ representatives, this would be good enough for her.

If only this didn’t generate so many data-slates and other bureaucratic nonsense, this would truly be a perfect world.

“My Lady, forgive me, but Ancient Pierre and Lieutenant-General Paul Dundee await your pleasure in the waiting room,” Sergeant Wilbert Loris of the Iron Drakes informed her returning from his patrol.

A look at the ruby-gold clock of her working office in the Enterprise, and Taylor groaned realising that one more time and despite her best shot at it, the boring and unattractive part of her Guard duties wasn’t going to be finished in time.

“Escort them in.”

Thankfully for one of her visitors, the Enterprise’s inner plans had been built large, and as such the large war machine in the colour of the Heracles Wardens could come here without smashing everything in its way, as long as the Astartes surviving in the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus was careful. The Space Marines present and herself obviously heard him coming long before he came into view.

Pierre had obviously not much changed; save the change of emblem to reflect his current service in the Dawnbreaker Guard, a Dreadnought was a Dreadnought. The appearance of the Indigan officer was more altered: the 7th Division had ‘convinced’ several Drukhari to relinquish in their custody several old human armours, and the Australian-looking man wore one, a rather spectacular work of emerald and sapphire decorated by the dozens of medals the newly promoted Lieutenant-General had won.

The customary greetings and offer for refreshments were quickly expedited, the non-Dreadnought was given a chair, and Taylor could give the reason she had summoned the light brown-haired officer here.

“Your performance in the Port of Lost Souls and the other battlefields of Commorragh was excellent, General, and I have read your recommendations on the anti-xenos training warfare you proposed with the greatest attention.” This was not hyperbolic congratulations or useless flattery; Paul Dundee was really one of the officers having made the smallest amount of mistakes during Operation Caribbean, and while the 7th Division’s losses had been severe, they had been caught twice in full demonic onslaughts and dozens of times on open ground by Eldar ambushes, managing to fight their way through and inflict crippling casualties on their enemies every time. “I can assure you many will be adopted. Unfortunately, while I would love to give you the duties of a senior training officer for the Nyx replacements awaiting instruction, I have need of you elsewhere.”

“I understand, Lady General.” And the calm and slightly amused voice was an excellent indicator the former Major-General had seen it coming. “Indiga?”

Was she really that predictable? Taylor banished the thought from her head a few seconds after it burst in. In the end, this was cutting the time on the explanations and she wasn’t going to complain.

“Yes, Indiga.” The ruler of the Nyx Sector confirmed. “As the latest cataclysm proved, my swarm while powerful can be reinforced by new breeds from all over the galaxy. And since one of my best officers was born on this world, I thought I might as well use his contacts to provide me more weapons in my arsenal.”

“I appreciate the confidence you’ve invested in me,” and behind the smirk, Taylor could feel the Indigan officer was really honoured by the recognition she had given where his military skills and talents were involved. “And I’m willing to return to my homeworld. However, I will need several accreditation letters for the current Governor.”

A grimace appeared on Paul’s face, just as her Fay butler was placing in front of him a glass of his favourite amasec.

“While you are certainly the first person I know to have the power of controlling a large swarm of insects, General, there have been many attempts by intrepid Rogue Traders to capture and transport to other worlds the famous super-predators of Indigan. Most of the time, these attempts ended in tragedy, and after a few more disastrous incidents, new laws were passed to forbid the capture and exportation of the breeds which make our homeworld famous. Now if a hunting-addict Governor or another big name wants to kill a hyperraptor or a pyre-porcupine, he must come to Indiga and hunt himself or herself.”

“I’m sure hunting tourism must be booming,” Taylor could not help but give her interlocutor a thin smile.

“Before I left on the Guard transports, I understand it had become a very profitable part of our planetary economy,” Dundee smirked. “Of course, the experts we provide always insist our tourists pay first before going hunting.”

Six years ago, Taylor would have been left with her mouth wide opened and likely been aghast for several minutes that there were people ready to travel thousands of light-years to satisfy their hunting hobby. Now, it wasn’t something that deserved more than the raise of an eyebrow.

Besides, the ‘tourists’ were certainly nobles for more than ninety-nine percent of them, so if a few were devoured, this would hardly result in an efficiency loss for the Imperium.

“You will have the letters and the authorisations signed at the highest level,” the Baroness of Pavia promised. “A couple of Astropaths will be sent with you, just in case the Governor or certain politicians decide to be difficult.”

“This should be more than sufficient,” Paul Dundee nodded. “Now I must clarify a point. Do you want me to hunt and capture psychic insects, or should I exclude them from the list of targets?”

This Taylor hadn’t expected, though in hindsight, given how many failures the Menelaus Dynasty had buried deep in the hope no one would find about them, knowing it had happened on another planet was a sad confirmation there wasn’t exactly a limit to human idiocy.

“The Governor at the origin of this mess imported psychic breeds?” the Basileia asked just to be sure she hadn’t a hearing problem.

“Lady Constantine Principa Argoy, may her soul rot in the darkest pits of Commorragh, wanted the greatest and most complete zoo of the Imperium,” behind the veneer of amusement, it didn’t take a genius to know the Lieutenant-General was not amused by the ambition of Argoy. “So yes, it involved psychic species. And while the Praefects of the time launched a gigantic hunting campaign after the Judgement’s earthquake, they have proven impossible to eradicate.”

Taylor paused a few seconds to consider her options. Until now, her only psychic insects were Lisa the Giant Moth and the Catachan Ants. Both served critical needs. The former allowed her to use what could be described as psychic purification with the Emperor’s Light and the transmutation of Noctilith into Aethergold. The latter were relays for her swarm, extending her already huge range to greater distances, and providing the priceless Bacta.

These two breeds were her greatest assets. But it had been dangerous to make the Queen-ant submit to her will, and a lot of preparations needed to be made every time they were to be transported or studied.

A large part of her mind wanted to say it was too dangerous, that even with the greatest safety measures imagined or recovered by the Mechanicus, there was no need to increase the lethality of her swarm and the assets she could wield on the battlefield.

The other part of her brain told her she was stupid and that her enemies after Commorragh would be out for her blood for long, with a good idea of what she could deploy into a war zone. Nocturne’s insects, while individually powerful, would not overturn a Commorragh-level disaster. But the psychic breeds of Indigan, coordinated with her power, just might provide an insurmountable advantage and destroy heretics and demons before they had the opportunity to inflict tens of thousands casualties to the Guard and ravage her swarm again.

“The psychic insects and arthropods are included on your list of hunt-and-capture list, provided of course you can transport them safely according to the regulations the Tech-Priests have for you.”

The eyes of the Indigan narrowed thoughtfully at ‘arthropod’. Interesting, it wasn’t exactly a secret in Hive Athena that breeds of crabs and other species of crustaceans answered to her will, but the rumours hadn’t had the time to spread to the ears of the Munitorum-selected officers.

“Pierre you will go with him.” The Lady General spoke to the Dreadnought for the first time of the meeting.

“WITH PLEASURE, LADY WEAVER!”

“As a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard, you will be an additional insurance the mission of the good Lieutenant-General is taken seriously. But your main mission will be to assess the danger and the aptitudes of the insects and arthropods of the wildlife of Indiga. Kill as many of the species as you want to have an opinion upon them, I give you a veto vote to exert if a species or several are unsuitable for my swarm.”

“I WILL NOT DISAPPOINTING YOU. THE INDIGAN INSECTS WILL BE THOROUGHLY TESTED.”

Nodding and cringing a bit at the sheer massacre of fauna which was able to occur, Taylor stopped watching the Dreadnought, wishing that he could stop wearing one of the numerous pirate hats ‘requisitioned’ at Pavia and Commorragh. Alas, even Isley had not discovered where the pieces of cloths were hidden when they weren’t worn.

“Pick between two hundred and four hundred veterans who have been declared untainted by the Inquisition after meeting Lisa,” the insect-mistress commanded her Guard subordinate. “The five thousand Tech-Priests and the Grand Cruiser of Stygies VIII which will be your transport to Indiga before your return to Nyx have already been pledged by the Mechanicus.”

“Plenty of firepower for the hunting operations I have in mind,” the Indigan officer assured her. “Will that be all, Lady General?”

“Not quite,” Taylor hesitated, before deciding the move was not illegal and preparing for the future, much like the gathering of new insects. “When you meet the highest planetary authorities of your world, please raise the possibility with them of providing a new Army Group for a future campaign.”

“I can certainly transmit the message,” the Lieutenant-General told her. “I don’t know if the reaction will be positive or negative, I have been away for too long, and I was hardly living in that kind of circles to begin with.”

This was more or less what was expected given how long guardsmen fought away from the planet they had been born unto. Taylor would just have to hope the Administratum and the Munitorum had not had a heavy hand around Indiga. At least for the Dundee-Pierre’s mission, the Lady General would have an answer rather quickly: Indiga’s Sector was in a straight line between Pavia and Nyx, so in less than a year, provided the Warp wasn’t too turbulent, there would be answers one way or another.

“CAN I USE MY FUNDS TO BUY AUTHENTIC INDIGAN HATS?”

Taylor did not facepalm, groan or express her contrariety, but God it was hard.

“Don’t push your luck, Pierre, if you don’t want to return to a stasis vault.” Though at least it would be a way to avoid a fateful meeting one of her Astropaths had warned her about a few hours ago.

And this meeting, the first of a long series, ended there. General Groener would be next, presenting his conclusions about the logistics of Operation Caribbean in his personal of Quartermaster-General of her brand-new staff. Then there would be Commissar Zuhev, with he and she had having to decide who would be the first Director or the new Nyxian Schola Progenium, the process of recruiting and training many new Commissars, and the coordination with the incoming Catachan ‘trainers’. And there were all the others.

Suddenly having a good memory of the endless list of things awaiting to pounce on her was more discouraging than anything...and more data-slates and other forms of paperwork continued to arrive.

“Bureaucracy sucks all the fun of power and privileges,” the Basileia of Nyx said gravely to her Dawnbreaker Guards. By a strange coincidence, none of them disagreed, though a few of the transhumans had the gall to chuckle.

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

The Saint was watching the stars projected on the walls of the bridge when they entered. But then again, when a small army of insects answered the data-slates in your stead, conversed with several Tech-Priests and gave new orders to the various guardsmen several metres away, Wolfgang figured one could enjoy the view of the Pavia Systems and the other stellar phenomena.

Evidently, their walk in the chamber that was the heart of the Enterprise was anticipated long before the first foot touched ground inside, and the Lady General turned to watch them approach long before they had passed the last wall of Space Marines guarding her. Or was it the contrary? While it was true there were many instances during the Battle of Commorragh where Lady Weaver had survived thanks to the intervention of Space Marines – one of the two deaths suffered by the Dawnbreaker Guard was a direct consequence of it – the Basileia of Nyx had also saved many, many times the lives of her bodyguards.

Maybe it was a symbiotic relationship, like the one the Imperial Army and the Legions had been supposed to entertain before the Great Treason. If so, Wolfgang knew it was going to make a lot of politicians very unhappy.

“Ah, Wolfgang. Perfectly on time. How is the Grand Cruiser *Golden Sword*?” Today the Baroness of Pavia was in a red armour, which for all the splendour and the magnificence did not look inferior to the one she had fought the Battle of Commorragh with.

“It is a promising exploratory ship, my Lady.” The new Rogue Trader thanked his benefactor deep inside once more. For all her astronomical gains, Lady Weaver had abandoned her claims on a lot of money when she sold the Grand Cruiser to him. “There are of course plenty of issues to tackle, but they will be solved in time. I have however decided to rename it *Pavian Victory*. Hopefully, the name will inspire a new crew to erase the shame of having served a treacherous Rogue Trader for several decades.”

This wasn’t the first ship of the Rogue Traders which found itself renamed. The Orion-class Star Clipper *Law of Profit* was now the *Law of Nyx*, and the Ambition-class Cruiser *Manifest Destiny* would begin a new and more respectable career as the *Ovation Destiny*.

Together these three warships formed a very powerful squadron, and once the other Ambition-class built by the shipyards of Mars arrived, Wolfgang knew he would have an armada surpassing in size many local Navy flotillas. This was all thanks to the patronage of the Basileia, of course. Without her help, Wolfgang would not have been taken seriously had he tried to make a move for the command of a Star Clipper, ever mind a Cruiser. By the hierarchy of the Imperial Navy, the ex-First Secretary was after all an Ensign in half-pay, and one who had not found a warship to complete his Academy graduation.

“Yes, hopefully,” the Lady General’s eyes looked at the two Navy officers accompanying him. “Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal. Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto. You have kicked a hornet’s nest of politics when you pushed to be transferred to Battlefleet Nyx.”

“And I regret nothing, your Celestial Highness,” the young Admiral – Reuenthal was merely forty-five, and looked as young as himself – bowed so low it was impressive he didn’t lose his equilibrium.

“No, I don’t suppose you don’t. Rear-Admiral?”

The Basileia had told him in confidence that for a woman having a M32 ‘Japanese’ name, Fujiko Yamamoto didn’t have the traits associated with Japanese people. Wolfgang could certain agree with her point. Middle-aged, red hair, blue-eyed, thin but with an extremely developed pair of breasts, the Rear-Admiral was a striking woman in looks, but had nothing in common with the looks of Wuhanese and other women sharing this type across the Nyx Sector.

“Your Celestial Highness is certainly aware that my future at Kar Duniash and other Segmentum fortresses is heavily compromised,” Fujiko Yamamoto spoke with assurance, but there was a weakness in her voice. “I am the highest officer to have survived of what was Augustus von Kisher’s command. No blame has fallen on my shoulders, but unless I and the other officers found quickly a Battlefleet to welcome us, my career is over.”

“And you think Battlefleet Nyx is your anchor of survival in the rising political storm.” The Rear-Admiral nodded silently. “Your performance in the cataclysmic final battle of the Port of Lost Souls was above the acceptable His Holy Majesty demands of his officers, according to all the naval experts I have spoken with. And I won’t deny you were dealt a bad hand when being placed under Kisher’s command. These ‘Fast Battleships’ were a disaster-in-waiting.”

The young Rogue Trader could only grimace internally. While the long investigation launched immediately by the Mechanicus was far from over – it was likely going to take years, really – Archmagos Sagami and Cawl had each on their own published long and coherent analyses that at least three major plasma conduits had been emplaced near compartments where they definitely shouldn’t have been. Devoid of capital-grade armour and too close from certain ammunition stores, the *Invincible* and its consorts were one reaction in chain away from death.

In the end, it wasn’t a surprise so many Fast Battleships were lost. The surprise was more there was one which managed to stay intact in the fires of war.

“There is one point however that I think that is particularly interesting and that you haven’t mentioned so far,” Wolfgang raised an eyebrow. If it was the case, he had missed it too. “You were born from one of the Houses of the Samarkand Sector regularly sending its heirs and heiresses to kar Duniash.”

“It has been a long time I haven’t returned home,” Fujiko Yamamoto confessed. “I am seventy-two now, your Celestial Highness. If these are contacts among the Zaibatsu you require, I am not the woman you need.”

“Your honesty goes to your credit, Rear-Admiral,” Wolfgang noticed easily Lady Weaver didn’t look a single second disappointed. “But you misunderstand my intentions. The Samarkand Sector ignored me for years, as most of its Houses were feuding with each other, and they limited themselves to sending me envoys with no power to their stations when I wanted to discuss industrial expansion with them, and by their fault there was a Munitorum tithe levied at the worst moment possible. I want to send a message to Samarkand their days of being the privileged interlocutor of Kar Duniash are truly over. What I want to know is if you’re willing to help me do it.”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness,” the Yamamoto Zaibatsu mustn’t have sponsored the career of their female Admiral very hard, Wolfgang mused. Not with her being a Rear-Admiral at the age of seventy when she had the talent to command a Battlefleet, and not with the devoted expression she gave to the black-haired Lady General. “The *Champion of Kar Duniash*, the *Domination’s Pride*, and the Lion will join Battlefleet Nyx and will carry out the duties you want them to accomplish.”

“In this case prepare these three warships for a Warp travel to the Nyx Sector.” The smile disappeared when the insect-mistress spoke to the other Navy officer on the bridge. “Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal. You are talented, that much is undeniable. Your naval tactics have proved their worth at Commorragh and during many naval battles you fought before this year. When I asked Bakka to give me a list of their most brilliant commanders, you were at the top.”

Golden energy danced around red armours, but the expression of Lady Nyx didn’t soften.

“What I seriously fail to understand, is how an experienced Battlefleet commander like you can behave like an evil grox around women.” Ah. Yes, in hindsight, Wolfgang should have known it had already arrived to her ears.

“With due respect...”

“Yes, Admiral, I know what you are going to say. Guard and Navy aren’t in the same chain of command, and even if they were, what you do in your personal life isn’t any concern of mine.”

At this moment, the golden pressure increased, and all the transhumans, Skitarii and humans on the bridge could verify that yes, in front of them truly stood the Saint of the God-Emperor who on his command, had charged into Commorragh and delivered death to billions of long-ears.

“All of this is true. But I want to trust the commanders I place in important positions completely and without reservation. For all my powers, I cannot afford looking behind me every minute. And right now, Admiral von Reuenthal, the fact you use your sexual partners like one use handkerchiefs does not exactly encourage me to trust you unconditionally. So let me clear, Admiral. I will accept you in Battlefleet Nyx, but I want improvements in your lifestyle and no more complaints and rumours coming to my ears. Because I can swear to you, once deeds have reached a certain threshold, I give no second chance and the officers who fail to uphold the standards of His Most Holy Majesty’s navy will have all eternity to explain themselves to him. Am I clear?”

Oskar von Reuenthal must have nerves of steel, because there wasn’t even a flicker of fear and shaking in his limbs when he answered.

“Yes, your Celestial Highness. You have made yourself totally clear on the subject.”

“Excellent,” sometimes, Wolfgang wondered why the Emperor hadn’t given powers to control felines or carnivorous fishes to His Living Saint. In hindsight, the answer was all too evident. The insect-mistress was already too versatile and powerful with her swarm! “Now your report on the capital warships which are going to be transferred to Nyx.”

The golden power diminished, and everyone could breathe more easily.

“My Victory-class flagship, the *Son of Victory*, is ready to depart the moment to give the order. The Emperor-class *Aquila Eternal* is also Warp-capable again, as the Ryza enginseers have beaten their records to repair the battle-damage. The Retribution-class *Crusade of Defiance* is not ready, and I fear there’s no way its engines will be declared fit for duty in less than three standard weeks. As for the Cruisers...”

**Pavia**

**Shadow Warden Kalyan Gowtham**

Kalyan had stayed in the shadows while the woman he had sworn to protect worked on the immense pillar of white marble.

It was not a sight, the Legionnaire recognised, you saw every day unless you lived next to someone having the capacity of controlling insects. Thousands of termites and ants were working like a small army of builders, carving stone with a precision the average sculptor of the Great Crusade would have died to possess. Even the coterie of artists the Emperor’s Children were keeping close to them would have found no work with this work.

The son of Corax amended his thoughts a moment later. No, while this wasn’t completely wrong, it wasn’t totally accurate either. Sculptures and other artistic creations of the Third Legion had always been flamboyant for lack of any other adjective, and this decades before treachery replaced trust and brotherhood.

The first stone – metaphorically and literally – Taylor Hebert had emplaced her was simple and modest. The Aquila at the top looked like it was about to fly, but it had not been painted in gold. The marble stayed as it was, and he had heard the insect-mistress order the architects regularly presenting their plans for the Fountain of Light be commanded to not modify in any way the inscription and the double-headed bird.

Kalyan hadn’t known personally any Custodes, but he thought the words now carved forever in the white stone would please them. At the light of the Aethergold Crystal, the Sunworms and the lone Catachan Queen-ant, the Lady General had brought with her, the letters would stand in High and Low Gothic.

**HE PROTECTS**

**BECAUSE SACRIFICE FOR MANKIND IS HONOUR**

**HE EXPECTS**

**BECAUSE HUMANITY MUST BE FREE**

**HE FIGHTS**

**BECAUSE LOYALTY IS ITS OWN REWARD**

**HERE RESTS THE INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF CONSTANTIN VALDOR**

**CAPTAIN-GENERAL OF THE ADEPTUS CUSTODES**

**STRANGER, IF YOU TURN TO YOUR HEART TOWARDS TERRA**

**YOU KNOW HE WAITS BY HIS SIDE**

Kalyan felt the inspiration from many Primarch’s speeches made during the Great Crusade. But then it wasn’t going to raise eyebrows, since Lady Weaver had access to several libraries of the Blood, which for all their holes, were more accurate than the ‘history’ the Imperium tried to force the people of the Imperium to swallow.

But with this inscription, hope remained. The ideals they had fought for were not totally forgotten. Oppression, in all its forms, could be broken. The legacy of Deliverance could be reawakened from the shadows. And maybe, just maybe, the new lights which began to burn after Commorragh’s destruction could lead Corax himself to return one day.

Their father had survived Isstvan V and the Drop Site Massacre. The Raven Guard had survived the Heresy, for all the terrible sacrifices and daunting barricades trying to drown them into a sea of damnation and betrayal. And Dorn and the Khan still lives. If two Primarchs could withstand everything the Webway threw at them, their own gene-sire could survive legions of the Arch-Enemy and return.

The Nineteenth Legion had perished, but the fight would continue. It would, as long as a single Raven Guard Astartes remained alive.

With the arrival of dawn, the sculpture effort ended and the insects left the site. Kalyan Gowtham and the other battle-brothers of the Dawnbreaker Guard left the heart of the newly-created city of Constantinople into several columns, and they were sorely needed, for several tens of thousands of pilgrims and Imperial citizens had come to see the Baroness of Pavia a last time before she left the planet and the system.

Somehow, before they boarded the Thunderhawk, the Shadow Warden instinctively knew they would not come back to Pavia before a very long time.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**3.270.296M35**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

“Cathar-4-Fredrick was seen praying twelve times the Omnissiah after he learned how the Basileia attacked the Eldar with underground assaults.” The Master of Destruction was rarely sarcastic, but today the irony in his words could not be mistaken for anything else. “Expect a large project of underground railway using the Ambulls of Lady Weaver to arrive by the Noosphere before the week is over.”

“As far as projects goes, this one sounds actually rather logical,” Dragon pointed out as they walked in the section of the Fafnir Forge-Temple where the Archmagos of Estaban VII was conducting his experiments. “For all our discussions about spaceport, orbital elevators and other great infrastructure projects, ground transport on Nyx III’s surface needs a growing number of railways, train engines, and wagons.”

It was why when the time had come to make the ‘purchase list’ to Ryza, Estaban, Mars, Lucius, and many other Forge Worlds known to produce the best train engines and superior railway systems, her orders had not been what any reasonable person would have described as *small*.

“I agree, but Ambulls can’t be servo-controlled without some going rogue and spreading across the planet,” the Master of Destruction nodded sadly, indicating this wasn’t exactly a new idea for the Adeptus Mechanicus. “Lady Weaver will have to stay in control of the Ambulls for the majority of the time, and for underground railways of the size Cathar-4-Fredrick wants, my humblest estimations are of hundreds of kilometres of railways, and we will have to dig deep, otherwise potential orbital bombardments always destroy the railway network in the first minutes.

“I suppose the final decision will stay with Lady Weaver in the end, then.” The newly promoted Lady Dogma, one rank short of Prime Hermeticon, answered. “One way or another, we will have to expand the railway system, and significantly. The current transport capacity is already filled at ninety-five percent, and with the reforms and the expansion which are sure to follow, this capacity needs to be increased several times, not decreased.”

“Indeed.” Stefan Delta-Septimus canted a long and complex binaric code, and gates large enough to let pass small Titans opened in front of them, revealing several lines of tanks waiting like they were due to be inspected. Which was not far from the truth, now that Dragon thought about it.

“You haven’t been idle.” Dragon commented. The last reports had mentioned one or two pattern-variants developed from the original chassis of the Khan Battle Tank, yet the first line of armoured vehicles was including eight different Khan tanks, and there were the super-heavies Cataphract waiting behind.

“By the Omnissiah, how could I be when servants of Him fought and won so many praises in His name?” asked rhetorically the Tech-Priests of Estaban VII. “But ultimately, the challenges of engineering proved fewer in number and in magnitude than my first reports indicated. Behold the Khan Commorragh, Khan Annihilator, Khan Conqueror, Khan Eradicator, Khan Executioner, Khan Exterminator, Khan Punisher, and Khan Vanquisher.”

Dragon nodded respectfully for the industrial achievement. She had been willing to begin the project herself, but other preoccupations and priorities had taken precedence over it, and after all Stefan Delta-Septimus was the Master of Destruction, and war machines were both his prerogatives and specialty.

Obviously, it didn’t take a Magos or even a Tech-Priest to realise that the Council member had modified Nyx-pattern Jaghatai Khan Battle Tank’s hulls to accept the armaments which equipped the different ‘classes’ of the Leman Russ.

And the Khan Commorragh was obviously the ‘normal’ Khan Battle Tank, though after interrogating the cogitators at distance, Dragon smiled because all her recommendations, especially the ones which had been deadlocked in the last years, had been added and fully integrated into the new schematics and databases.

“This is very impressive work. I suppose all of these tanks are able to achieve the same speed and mobility performances as the Khans which fought the Battle of Commorragh?”

“Of course,” assured her the Master of Destruction. “In fact, I have managed to obtain superior performances in this area with the Khan Conqueror and the Khan Annihilator. And my subordinates are ready to deliver you and the rest of the Council a sufficient number of models for further testing. The problems now, as I’m sure you are aware, are of industrial and efficiency nature.”

This was definitely true. As much as having plenty of Khan tanks was satisfying for her ego, neither Taylor nor the other Guard officers would look at them with smiles and satisfaction if the armoured regiments had small packets of every variants with no true specialty.

“The lines where we produce the ‘normal’ Khans can be rapidly retooled to produce the Commorragh variant.” A rapid calculus and simulation in the Noosphere databases of tank manufactorums confirmed her words. “But even with several obsolete Leman Russ lines closing to be modernised and placed in the orbital forges, I can’t in good conscience launch the production of eight new models.”

“The Khan Exterminator and the Khan Punisher are intended to serve the same purpose, that of infantry hunter vehicle,” Stefan Delta-Septimus noted, pointing his mechadendrites at the tanks respectively armed with a twin-linked Autocannon and a Punisher Gatling Cannon.

Dragon couldn’t help but wince at the ammunition figures these machines would have consumed at Commorragh, but really, a specialised tank to scythe down hordes of Orks and fast enough to evade the greenskins’ ramshackle machines was necessary.

“I’m in favour of the Exterminator. It can be used in a limited anti-air role if the circumstances demand it, and it is far longer-ranged than the Punisher.”

“And the crews of the latter tend to manifest a behaviour their commanders refer as ‘trigger-happy’.” The Archmagos Reductor confirmed. “The Exterminator it is.”

“What are the costs of production for each Khan model?” Dragon asked. The numbers which lit in the Noosphere almost made her curse. “Are the numbers correct for the Executioner and the Vanquisher?”

“I’m afraid so,” Stefan Delta-Septimus said apologetically. “Ryza and Tigrus’ help comes with a price. We haven’t yet the expertise among our average Tech-Priests to mass produce Plasma Destroyers, the Vanquisher Cannons are directly imported from the Eastern Fringe. Logically, the situation may change in the next months.”

“As long as it doesn’t, keep the Khan Executioner and the Khan Vanquisher in storage.” Dragon shook her head. Not only these two variants required a very different production line, especially the Executioner and its energy armament, but they needed different alloys and armour inclination. Unlike the Exterminator, the enginseers on the battlefield would have to keep very different spare parts to repair the problems of this Battle Tank. “I’m not very happy about the performance of the Conqueror, though.”

“Its accuracy and speed are superior to the Khan Commorragh.”

“But it requires the tank crew to engage are far closer range, and even then the explosive shells are less destructive than what the vehicles sent to Commorragh were able to do. Moreover, the accuracy of the standard Jaghatai Khan is far superior to the Leman Russ at mid- and long distance. I prefer the Khan Annihilator. It doesn’t sacrifice the range advantage, and it is easier to resupply.”

Several more attempts were made to overturn this judgement, but the more the Master of Destruction explained, the more Dragon felt her convictions solidify. The ‘Kahn Commorragh’ could be the standard armoured platform of the tank crews, with the Annihilator providing an alternative on war zones where constant resupply was all but impossible, and the Exterminator would play the role both of scout and anti-infantry chaser. If the circumstances changed, there might be possibilities for the Executioner and the Vanquisher, but for now these last two were far too expensive to be mass-produced.

“The Khan Eradicator?” It was the only Khan model which had not been discussed, and it was armed with a small but extremely devastating Nova Cannon.

“From what I read from your reports, it is expensive, but extremely useful against fortified obstacles.” Within reason, of course. This tank wasn’t going to bring down a Hive’s walls alone, nor bring low the void shields protecting critical installations. But barricades, bunkers, armoured vehicles and plenty of worthwhile targets would not resist its fire. And thanks to new schematics and data coming from other Forge Worlds, the Nova shells were now far more stable, and the risk of accidents had been impressively low during the field tests.

“It is. And it has been noted that while its armament is vulnerable in urban warfare, it excels on jungle-covered worlds and the great majority of the battlefields where the environment can be easily destroyed.”

Since the Khan was supposed to avoid urban warfare – the Battle of Commorragh notwithstanding, this was one more point in favour. Dragon nodded and approved the mass production of the Khan Eradicator, though the numbers would be very inferior to the Khan Commorragh.

“Between the tithes’ requisitions and the reforms, this year will be a year of transition, but we should be able to produce one million Jaghatai Khan Battle Tanks next year,” and yes, Dragon was well aware of the irony of having given this name before a Primarch confirmed the Great Khan was still alive somewhere in the Eldar Webway. “But it will be the Master of Enginseers and the Master of Metallurgy and Mining who will confirm or amend these numbers. The Cataphracts?”

The super-heavy tanks were impressive, standing there, no matter that their engines were cold. One was of course the original Cataphract, renamed ‘Cataphract Commorragh’ and its destructor Smaug Lascannon. Unlike the original Khan, this new version was extremely close to the vehicles sent with Operation Caribbean forces, having only received minor improvements in cogitator processing and a superior alloy for the manufacture of several parts.

From left to right were the Cataphract Commorragh, the Cataphract Hammer, the Cataphract Sword, the Cataphract Blade, the Cataphract Storm, and the Cataphract Siege. Unlike with the Khans, price was not exactly a problem. The non-Commorragh versions were a bit more expensive than the original model, but it was all relative in this case; a super-heavy tank was going to cost a lot no matter the purity of your intentions.

Some problems, however, transcended the tonnage.

“The Sword and Hammer variants are both anti-Titan machines,” or anti super-heavy armour, when it came to it. “I know we can produce excellent Magma Cannons since Archmagos Metallurgicus Unity-Victor Omega-Manville’s reports from last year. But I’d not heard we could produce Volcano Cannons.” These were to be sure formidable weapons, but only a handful of Forge Worlds had the means to produce them. And it was not something the Horus Heresy could be blamed, though it had certainly not helped: Volcano Cannons were belonging to the Titan armament category, and very sophisticated technology.

“It could change soon, with the Fabricator General’s support of Lady Weaver.”

“I am reasonably confident it will, but with Legio Defensor in dire need to be rebuilt, Alamo will need all the Volcano Cannons available. And like I said before, bringing two anti-Titan super-heavy tanks is the opposite of efficiency.”

Thus the Cataphract Hammer and its Magma Cannon were chosen for mass production, though it hadn’t the same meaning as it had for the Khan variants. Plenty of manufactorum were yet to be completed in orbit, and the ones which had been built here or elsewhere had to suffer some minor but vital modifications to improve productivity, worker’s productivity, and training of new Tech-Priests. If thirty thousand super-heavy tanks were declared good for service in the Guard on 297M35, Dragon would accept it as an acceptable outcome.

The Cataphract Blade was eliminated for the same reason as the Khan Executioner; while the Plasma Blastgun would no doubt be extremely impressive to explain to the enemies of humanity the meaning of the word ‘terror’, buying it by the dozens from Ryza was extremely expensive, and building it for the moment required Plasma-specialised Artisans Dragon had great need of elsewhere.

The Cataphract Storm was tentatively approved, under the condition the anti-infantry Vulcan Mega-Bolter’s firing rate was resolved before any attempt to implement the manufactorum modifications necessary for its production. The Tinker parahuman signed far more easily onto the Cataphract Siege, the Stormsword Siege Cannon having proved extremely reliable during the field tests.

All in all, these were three Cataphracts definitely approved, and one tentative; the Master of Destruction’s work had indeed been anything but idle, and this wasn’t counting the new Khans.

“Due to the information and the technology discoveries of Commorragh, I have also thought about launching a new project for a Cataphract variant armed with a Volkite Carronade,” the Archmagos Reductor confessed.

Dragon didn’t react outwardly, though inside, she was very pleased. It was often hard to convince some of her colleagues to try new ideas – with the proper security measures, she wasn’t crazy to ignore the risks caused by Chaos corruption. The new Lady Magos Dogma had arrived at this conclusion soon after receiving the information how much Volkite schematics and data they had received from the Salamanders and the Obsidian Chariot’s discovery.

“I had been thinking myself something similar for our tanks,” Dragon admitted, “for the Khan line, I abandoned the ideas, the Carronade would need to be down-sized to an unacceptable degree and the HL 310 V12 Multi-Fuel will never been able to deliver the minimum output for a Volkite weapon. But the Cataphract hull should be able to handle the stress, though field testing remains the only way to be certain.”

“So I will be granted your permission and the resources to proceed?”

“You will. Obviously, I request you wait before all the data and schematics are safely recorded in our databases before truly beginning the project. But yes, this new Cataphract-variant has my attention. The codename it will be presented to the Council will be...Obsidian.”

Honestly, all the resources Stefan Delta-Septimus demanded were nothing compared to the ‘present list’ of Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan, the Mistress of Ships. With more and more industry placed in spatial manufactorums armoured to resist capital nuclear detonations, the orbital elevators, the creation of multiple shipyards which would one day possibly be linked until they formed an orbital ring in all but name, the new orbital forges powered by the Izanagi STC and its new model of fusion reactor...well, there was no such thing as an unlimited budget. But these days, both Sultan and certain other Archmagi working to expand the industry of Nyx had effectively near-unlimited funds, resources, and tech-power to accomplish their goals.

“I suppose it is out of the question to take the new project of ‘Dragon Dreadnought’ for myself?”

“You suppose correctly,” the Master of Destruction had asked politely and not tried very hard, so it elicited no stern answer from her. But yes, the Astartes-crewed Dragon Armour and the Dreadnought pilot-crewed Dragon Armour projects were her babies, and woe befell those who tried to steal it.

“I understand and with this, I wish to petition the Council for a replacement of the Basilisk artillery piece, since we have recently acquired the pattern of the Mars-Solar pattern Basilisk and numerous other artillery prototypes from lesser Forges.”

“The Basilisk? By the Motive Force, why? The Earthshaker cannons likely killed more Eldar than the swarm Lady Weaver unleashed against the xenos!” And at the risk of saying something everyone knew, Taylor had killed millions of long-ears by the lowest estimations.

“Yes, it did,” the Master of Destruction agreed. “But it was against a xenos species which thought rushing half-naked on a battlefield was a good idea, and most of their armoured formations, bunkers and fortifications, for all their ridiculously low numbers and tactical stupidity, caused us enormous problems when we had not the advantage in tactics and insects.”

“The Eldar had the numbers,” but as the Estaban VII Tech-Priest released a torrent of data on their private Noosphere exchange channel, Dragon was forced to amend her judgement. The 132mm shells of the Earthshaker Cannons had done the job, but it was too often because Taylor had imitated the World War 2 Soviet Union and beaten old records of how many artillery pieces you could emplace per kilometre.

“I see your point. But since we have already the Mars-Solar pattern Basilisk’s schematics, wouldn’t it be preferable to produce it instead? It offers more advanced targeting arrays, overhead cover, and ten percent more firepower than the regular Basilisk.”

“It would be enough if we spoke about an ordinary Guard regiment,” immediately disagreed the Archmagos Reductor. “But after the sheer level of apocalyptic fighting which happened inside Commorragh, I believe it’s best to avoid half-measures.”

Well, Dragon had been complaining for several years about how reluctant to innovate the Priesthood of Mars was. She wasn’t going to preach the exact opposite view now.

“Your idea?”

“I have studied numerous databases purchased from Archmagos Belisarius Cawl and Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix, and I believe a self-propelled artillery piece with a gun of 175mm will give us long-range supremacy against any enemy which might dare to challenge the armies of the Basileia.”

Stefan Delta-Septimus had maybe not a final project for this final artillery piece, but he had not come to her with nothing. The reasoning and his arguments were good, and he had also accounted for an automatic ammunition resupply vehicle, with auto-loading technology and advanced cogitators. In fact, it looked a lot like certain advanced artillery models Dragon had seen on Earth Aleph’s military documentary’s once.

“I don’t want to imagine the challenge of logistics it will take to modify the existing manufacturing artillery production lines,” Dragon sighed. “But you are definitely right about the need to have absolute artillery supremacy on the battlefield. The next opposition will most likely than not have Great Crusade-issued equipment, certainly corrupted by the Ruinous Powers. We must be ready, and artillery is one of the Guard’s strengths. I will support this project at the Council. Do you have a name for it?”

“Thunder.”

Dragon had to concede it was very appropriate.

**The Warp**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

When a Navigator’s nose began to bleed, it was a very bad sign. The fact that this dreaded symptom had begun fifteen minutes and twenty seconds ago on Rafael’s face wasn’t exactly reassuring Friar.

After the first storm had engulfed the Enterprise and almost knocked Nathaniel, forcing Friar to replace him for several hours and some, the Chancellor of House Achelieux had caressed the hope this first terrible assault on the Empyrean on the Gellar Shields was a serious but isolated incident.

“Do you need to rest?” Friar asked as his second cousin gritted his teeth and more colours which had no names in the Materium flashed around the chamber.

“I can hold...for ten more minutes,” the young Navigator articulated with a mix of pride and exhaustion the older Navigator was all too familiar.

“Ten minutes and not one more,” he said severely. “Miguel has finished his preparations, and I don’t want to see you collapse from exhaustion,” leaving aside what happened when for a few seconds there was no Navigator at the helm, it had really not been that long since they translated out of Pavia.

“Understood...Chancellor...these storms, I can feel the malevolence from them...”

“Some entities serving the Arch-Enemy have taken umbrage of Commorragh’s destruction,” Friar didn’t voice the fact it might really be the Chaos Gods themselves who were trying to breach the Gellar Fields of the *Enterprise*. He needed the Navigators available aboard to be focused and defiant, not afraid.

Besides, with their third eye, all of the Navigators who had taken the helm so far had seen the uncountable waves of horrors the Sea of Souls was creating to break the great Battleship. Like him, they knew what the price of failure would mean in this instance.

“Be sure to replace him at the first sign of weakness,” the Achelieux Chancellor murmured to Miguel. “If the crystal of Aethergold vacillates, you run to Lady Weaver and request the replacement.”

It was a true benediction to have this kind of artefacts shining with His light aboard to help them, and now that they really needed them, Friar wasn’t going to institute rationing where these priceless psychic items were concerned. Without them, reliable navigation through the hellish dimension would be near-impossible at the moment: for all his experience, the oldest of the Navigators present had never seen such storms and gigantic daemonic legions be assembled to strike at a single ship. And there had been so little warning before the first onslaught...

This was nowhere near the relative calm which had existed when the warships of Operation Caribbean had sailed to Pavia. And the storms which had raged after the beginning of the attack against Commorragh were really weak breezes compared to the hurricane of hatred and malice focused on the *Enterprise*.

There were many things which wanted Lady Weaver dead in the depths of the Empyrean. In a way it was reassuring, since it betrayed the fact these daemons and all servants of the Ruinous Powers of what the Living Saint might do to them again if given the chance. On the other hand, when you were caught in the middle of this storm, it was difficult to find a lot of other positive factors to this dangerous predicament.

Of course, the moment he left the room where Rafael was still sometimes gasping in pain, one of his many servants arrived, bearing a message from the only person among the crew and the passengers he couldn’t decently ignore.

One order to find him if something unexpected happened to Rafael or any of the other Achelieux Navigators, and Friar went on his way, escorted by several men-at-arms. Of course, many had to be left behind at several security nodes. The Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard rarely allowed sizeable military companies to approach their mistress, and most of these exceptions belonged to the Guard.

Lady Weaver and the Imperial Fist serving as her protector were contemplating the hololithic schematics of a very tall dome-covered monument when he entered.

“You did not have to come so fast, Chancellor.” The golden-winged woman said in an amused tone before returning to a more serious expression. “Archmagos Sagami has informed me the pressure is considerable on the Gellar Fields, on the order of seventy percent of their maximum power.”

“The Empyrean is in fury, yes.” The Chancellor acknowledged. “I won’t say we are caught in a permanent Warp Storm, because we are still following one of the main paths leading us to Nyx, but we are targeted by several vicious and evil entities. As a result, I fear we are badly trailing behind the entire fleet, and unless the attacks abate, this Battleship will arrive in last position to Nyx.”

“But you are confident we will still be able to keep our course.”

“Due to the power of Aethergold, yes we are,” in this case Friar spoke for all the Navigators save Nathaniel who was still recovering. “To our third eye, this psychic crystal ‘sings’ to us the position of the Astronomican and we are able to continue guiding the *Enterprise* through the Warp.”

“I’m glad to hear it, and I’m sure the rest of the *Enterprise*’s crew will be too.”

Friar nodded before continuing.

“I know the reserves of Aethergold don’t allow this move for the time being, but I will petition you in the future to have at least one of these crystals installed on the most vital starships. This should drastically decrease the odds of a starship being lost in the Warp.”

“And I will seriously consider it,” Taylor Hebert caressed one of the huge spiders which was weaving a large banner to her right. “The mining of Noctilith hasn’t even begun, and everyone wants Aethergold. I can only hope the Mechanicus Forge Worlds will be able to find worlds rich of this resource which weren’t claimed by the Necrons.”

The black eyes looked directly at his, and Friar was quite glad his third eye and his other senses were largely muted because the presence of the Emperor’s was extremely potent, so close to her.

He didn’t turn his gaze away, though. House Achelieux had tied their fortune and their future to the destiny of Her Celestial Highness Lady General Taylor Hebert, and a few moments of temporary strange sensations were a very small price to pay for the woman who had won them one hundred Navigator Maps and one hundred Astrogation Databases. The fact his signature existed on a contract promising one hundred Achelieux Navigators for the sum of sixty billion Nyxian Throne Gelts was just the Auramite coin on top of the cake.

“I see you are consulting the schematics of a new monument,” Friar changed the subject in a lighter tone. “Is it the ‘Arena of Blades’ so many people have been spreading rumours about?”

“No, not really,” the young woman rolled her eyes and let the beetles posed on her shoulders fly away. “I’ve transmitted certain instructions to the senior Architects we have at Nyx, but so far there are no definite plans for the large stadium of bloodshed the Queen of Blades wants. It doesn’t help that I had never considered building one before Commorragh; so far, all the arenas I was in presence of, I closed them or I forced their owners to use them for other purposes.”

The Chancellor was not going to naysay this last sentence. During his stay on Nyx Tertius, there had been many illegal underground arenas closed, and generally their owners weren’t treated gently by the Arbites, especially if the beings fighting on the sand of the arenas were humans.

“No, this is part of the project I will commission to honour the memory of Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius and all the soldiers who perished during the Battle of Commorragh. I intend to call it the Gaius Mausoleum, and the plans are based on the souvenirs I have of an ancient Terran mausoleum called the Taj Mahal.”

Friar studied the dimensions provided by the numbers dancing around the walls, which would be another work of art if the architects managed to concretise the projects of their employer.

“Where do you intend to build it, if I may be so bold?”

“For the moment, the plan is to use the Shrine World of Claire 47.” There was a vindictive smile which appeared for a couple seconds on the Basileia’s lips. “There are far too many cathedrals on this planet who aren’t receiving more than a handful of visitors per year, and too many of the last fifty Pontifexes have spent the pilgrim’s donations on vanity projects. This Mausoleum, on the other hand, will be built in memory of people who gave everything to the Emperor and the Imperium. They faced abominations by the thousands and participated in the slaying of Excess. They are far more deserving of being recognised than men plotting and conspiring near the altars.”

Friar was quite glad he had not invested a single Throne Gelt on Ministorum projects so far, because it looked like that the Shrine World was going to experience several reforms, and the radical changes would be accompanied by a purge of the problematic elements among the leadership of the Ecclesiarchy.

“This is going to be quite spectacular.”

“It will be.” The voice of the Living Saint was more melancholic than triumphant. “Unlike the original Taj Mahal, there will be stone statues sculpted to represent the heroes of Commorragh dispersed all over the parks and gardens. And all will be looking in the direction of the Mausoleum’s heart.”

“Like an army guarding a beloved commander in death,” Friar approved. “I hope I will live long enough to see the project completed.”

“I do not intend to make a monument the size of the Sanguinala, Chancellor, and Nyx architects had already stores plenty of tons of white marble. When the possibility was discussed before Pavia, my Chief Architect was confident it would take less than four decades to complete it...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx V**

**3.290.296M35**

**Cardinal Prescott Lumen**

The Cardinal of the Nyxian diocese snorted when the younger Deacon finished reading the message.

“At least I am sure this is truly Tapendra and not an imposter the guardsmen have arrested.”

“Your Eminence, the list of crimes he is accused of is bad enough, the arrogance-“

“Oh, Tapendra is going to be burned alive for his crimes,” Prescott didn’t like subjecting anyone to this execution method, but unfortunately the former Pontifex Mundi of Iris’ Vision had gone too far and served very badly the God-Emperor and His Living Saint. “The only real question is if we judge him before or after Lady Weaver’s return.”

The Deacon’s stormy expression made it clear which option was his favourite.

“In my humble opinion Your Eminence, judging this treacherous slime after the Basileia’s return would weaken your authority. Yes, Her Celestial Highness is your ecclesiastic superior now, but it is not a valid reason to overturn decades of precedents. According to his last message, Pontifex Primus Tapendra Shanmuga still believes he is above the laws of the God-Emperor. It’s past time we show him he isn’t. We can postpone his execution long enough to organise a meeting with him and Lady Weaver, I’m eager to see how it will fare for him, but we must proclaim to the whole Sector that his crimes will not be tolerated.”

It was a coherent response to this issue. There were drawbacks which would emerge in due time from this, but Eugeniusz was right, the judgement of Tapendra Shanmuga would cause more problems if it was delayed than not.

It wasn’t like the evidence of his crimes was slim. For the greatest part of three decades, the Pontifex Primus of Iris’ Vision had used his position to extract a disturbingly large amount of resources from the Cardinal World he had the charge of, preventing any possibility that the population could take the first steps towards the status of Civilised World.

It was always horrible when a Governor abused his position, but Tapendra Shanmuga had gone further and falsified practically every record, and bribed the Menelaus inspectors to look the other way. Judging by the first records of the administrators of the other worlds of the Iris System, there weren’t two billion living on this planet, the number was closer to three billion and nine hundred million. The ‘Shanmuga Palace’ was a monstrosity which would have been considered an aberration on far richer worlds like Megara or Iris’ Shield, and the contrast was sickening with the millions the man had maintained in conditions of extreme poverty.

Yes, the classification of Iris’ Vision was a Feudal World, but your duty was to make sure this state of affairs lasted few years, it was not your duty to let your subjects live in squalor and a feudal lifestyle!

Worse, the very fact the difference between the theoretical and the real levels of population and the wealth accumulated discovered when the Guard had dragged Tapendra in chains to a transport bound for Nyx must have begun long before him. And since the recently dismissed senior member of the Adeptus Ministorum was born on Vijayanagara like three of his predecessors, Prescott had a good idea how the rot had settled.

Many times before Lady Weaver’s elevation the shepherd of the Nyxian diocese had decided the influence of Atlantis in the region was far too high and would lead to plenty of riots and insurrection if nothing was done. He had not expected to be proven right like this.

“I can only hope Zygmunt is going to be able to restore some of the faith which should be the norm on one of our Cardinal Worlds,” former Pontifex Mundi of Saint Clare’s Stand directly under himself, Zygmunt Kankowski was one of the rising stars of the new generation of Priests. “I know the hospitals and the great infrastructure projects are going to help, but these people have lived decades under the fist of Tapendra, obeying to each and every whim of his.”

It was something which had led to the treacherous Pontifex’s complete failure, ultimately. It was all very well to find excuses mutter apologies that your planet was unable to contribute military to anything important, but when you were ruling like a cruel King your populace, Pontifex or not, you needed a big army and the economy of Iris’ Vision had not left much spare money around. Thus when Tapendra Shanmuga had declared his intention to overwhelm the illegitimate regime of the two other Iris worlds, and that in order to do this, a great mobilisation of the ‘Holy Army of Iris’ Light’ was to begin, the population had begun to manifest its displeasure. Fortunately, spies of Iris’ Shield inside Shanmuga’s court had relayed the intentions of the Pontifex to the other planets, and before a week was out, Iris’ Vision’s leadership was arrested and a complete new hierarchy would be in charge.

“I am going to wait Zygmunt’s first reports,” Prescott Lumen continued unhappily, “but I’m already preparing for the worst. Given how ‘feudal’ these imbeciles wanted their subjects to be, we may have no choice but to request the assistance of the Mechanicus.”

Eugeniusz grimaced unhappily. The relationships between the Tech-Priests of the Mechanicus and the Ecclesiarchy were far better than anyone would have dreamed of a decade ago, but they weren’t to the point a Cardinal or another senior Priest would love to invite the red cogboys on one of their planets and let them gloat over the dirty laundry of the Ministorum’s poor governance.

“I would prefer we avoid this, your Eminence.” The red-haired Deacon said after a few breaths of hesitation. “Due to the recent astropathic communications from Ophelia, I know the effort to rebuild Iris’ Vision is not a problem, but the Mechanicus is going to make us pay for this, and I’m not speaking of material resources.”

Prescott acknowledged the warning. Unfortunately, the more he read about the state of Iris’ Vision, the more he was aghast. Lady Taylor Hebert’s first answers had been courteous but not very happy about the kind of shenanigans Tapendra Shanmuga had been able to do without the Ecclesiarchy being aware of it. And the Basileia had been extremely blunt to deplore the waste of manpower represented by keeping more than three billion Imperial citizens in a ‘neo-medieval state making a mockery of the Imperial Creed’, to use her own words. Prescott didn’t know if Iris’ Vision was destined to become a Civilised, Industrial, Hive, or Agri-World in the future, but he knew that if he wanted to keep this planet as a Cardinal World, half-measures were not going to be the solution.

“I know. At least for the moment, the other parts of the diocese which aren’t in the Suebi Sub-Sector are far more productive and have the approval of Her Celestial Highness. Upelluri is in good hands with Pontifex Wanjiru Kenyatta, and Claire 47’s priesthood is finally on a path to restore its prestige with Pontifex Krystyna Banaszak.”

It had taken far too many arrests and executions for his taste where the Shrine World was concerned, but his envoys from Saint Clare’s Stand had finally the upper hand and were purging both Atlantis and the non-conformist Chapel-Masters and Pontifexes. Claire 47 had already ceased being a sinkhole of donations, something Prescott had almost resigned himself to never see in his lifetime.

“Yes, your Eminence. Of course, it leaves the Suebi Sub-Sector.”

The tall Cardinal’s mood was less triumphant than it had been before this sentence. From an outside perspective, receiving an additional six worlds out of a total of nine planets was an extremely generous gift for any diocese.

But any Cardinal having a brain between his two ears knew that this ‘gift’ had placed him on the black list of the Atlantis Cardinal, who had certainly not enjoyed being told his westernmost Sub-Sector was no longer his to administer. The Lemuria System, wealthiest node inside the Suebi Nebula was going to be a problem, he just had to re-listen the astropathic message sent by Hierophant – the name the Atlantis hierarchy had found for its Sub-Sector rulers - Hewendu Indushekhar to be aware that the Priests might profess their undying loyalty for now, but the daggers were going to be unsheathed soon.

“I think the worlds of the Parthia-Hibernia trail can be bastions of the Faith and very loyal servants of Lady Weaver in a matter of years,” only the worlds of Hibernia and Ajusco were Cardinal Worlds among those four, but all the Planetary Governors and Pontifexes Mundi were on their way to swear their vows in person, and had already provided plenty of information, which at first sight looked like the genuine administration reports. “I fear however the Antioch-Drakkar trail will be on the receiving end of a military intervention not long after the return of Commorragh’s survivors.”

“My concerns were more political, your Eminence,” Eugeniusz Podlesnik was showing its relative inexperience here. “Surely after the hammering Her Celestial Highness has delivered to the vile xenos, the Hierophant and his allies will realise that any kind of military action can only result in a one-sided massacre!”

No, not so much inexperience than a lack of familiarity with the behaviour of certain members of the Atlantis diocese.

And just as this thought arrived in his mind, one of the young men he used as a liaison with Adeptus Astra Telepathica entered his office, delivered a roll of vellum stamped with the colour reserved to priority communications of senior Ministorum Priests, and left without word.

Prescott had always been a fast reader, and it took him less than a minute before arriving to the end, a moment he announced by closing his eyes and praying the God-Emperor to give him strength.

“Your Eminence?”

“It appears the reasons why so few Frateris Templar were available for deployment when Operation Caribbean’s call for arms rang were not only founded on political pettiness, Eugeniusz. For three years, the soldiers of the Atlantis diocese have fought a rebellion of former penal workers on the Cardinal World of Sparta. And so far, after three years of debacles and military disasters, the Frateris Templars are no closer to crushing the rebels than they were at the start of their campaign.”

It was a humiliation, and the reality that the various Pontifexes answering to the Hierophant must have been actively suppressing the news and the rumours stemming from it was an unholy disgrace.

“I don’t see a way it could be worse.”

“I do.” But Prescott had the unfair advantage of having read the message. “When the orders of Ophelia came that the Suebi Sub-Sector was now in Nyx’s diocese, my counterpart of Atlantis decided to ‘forget’ there was a military campaign in the first place, and stopped the supply and reinforcements’ efforts. This means that we have now Pontifex-Crusader Ousadevi screaming for help, twenty million Frateris Templars trapped on an Ice World with atrocious winter weather and a rebellion approaching two billion former penal prisoners with little love for the Imperium or His Most Holy Majesty’s Ecclesiarchy.”

And he had thought the Iris’ Vision disaster was bad.

**Suebi Nebula**

**Nerushlatset Space**

**Coreworld Amarnekh**

**Approximately 8.300.296M35**

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

“Glorious Phaerakh, this is against tradition!”

Neferten had wondered for hundreds of years if removing the nobles defending military and political opinions defending the opposite of the choices she made was the best path for her Dynasty. To her greatest regret, the Phaerakh-Cryptek had come to the conclusion that removing a few critics to gain some measure of ephemeral satisfaction was counter-productive.

A good Phaerakh – or Phaeron – recognised that for all the resistance and the terrible immortality the biotransference had granted them, the Necrons had not gained omniscience when they prostrated themselves in front of the C’Tan. The ruler of a Dynasty could make mistakes, although many Phaerons had made it a capital crime for their subordinates to voice it. And if no voice was rising from her Overlords and her Cryptek’s ranks when she made a disastrous error, it was a near-certainty the defeat would be repeated a second time, and it would likely have worse consequences as the enemy had learned to exploit the flaw while the Necrons would stay stagnant and immobile. Many old and prestigious Dynasties had been rendered extinct during the War, validating this opinion.

This was not to say Neferten was ready to let every critic pass. The supreme commander of the Nerushlatset armies was willing to tolerate constructive criticism and had made this clear the moment the War had begun against the gigantic amphibians and their endless coalition of psychic puppets. Many Crypteks and Immortals had been elevated above their peers when they accumulated the victories and her hereditary ‘geniuses masters of war’ were limping back home with their forces in tatters.

Yes, critic was fine as long as there were arguments to explain why you thought it was a bad idea...and how you wanted to solve the situation. The problem was the Nemesor bowing a respectable distance away from her throne had not given her any explanation.

“Yes, and?”

Her subordinate seemed surprised by her reaction. Where was this idiot coming from? She consulted in a hurry the planetary core of Amarnekh, and obtained the answer. One of the ancient city-masters she had been forced to accept in her nobility when the Old Ones had unleashed the Krorks and every Necron, no matter how pitiful or tactically inept, had been terribly needed on the frontlines.

It was one of the rare times the Szarekhan emissaries had not kept their usual arrogance when ordering the new deployments. The souvenir made Neferten shiver before she banished it in her deepest engrams.

“If you do not trust the humans to respect their word, why is the Crownworld left with minimal defences?”

“I trust the humans,” it wasn’t completely true; the Phaerakh trusted Weaver to know that a war against her Dynasty was something the newly golden-winged human would not win without dozens of planets burned to the ground, a military and a support base in ruins, and both Necrons and humans fatally weakened, vulnerable preys to their many enemies. Moreover, unlike plenty of non-human races, Neferten shared many goals with the Imperium of the humans: ensuring the Eldar did not rise as a major power again, destroying the debased descendants of the Krorks wherever they grew too aggressive and violent, and making sure the barriers separating reality from non-reality were not breached like they had been before the War in Heaven. “But trust into a newly signed alliance doesn’t mean Delphimonia isn’t vulnerable to other threats. The Crownworld is the only aster in our possession which is not in the Nebula. Making its defences impregnable would require the presence of a World Engine, and this would be an evident violation of the treaty. Not stationing a World Engine would make our shipyards and our war machines unacceptably vulnerable in the case the greenskins return to avenge the destruction of their war-moon or the long-ears want to punish us for the destruction of Commorragh.”

The strategic advantages of moving everything which made her Crownworld a Crownworld to Amarnekh were evident, and they had begun well before she left for Pavia with one of her World Engines.

“Aside from tradition, have you anything more critical to base your arguments upon?”

“The edicts of the Silent King were-“

Anger overwhelmed reason in her consciousness and before she had the time to master herself, the Phaerakh-Cryptek was castigating the Nemesor.

“If the Silent King was here and told you to throw yourself into a star, would you obey?” She snapped. “It was bad enough we had to obey his insane idea of ‘Great Sleep’! Do you want to test more of the Szarekhan whips upon your back?”

The Nerushlatset Dynasty had voiced their concerns every time. Neferten had seen not long after her own rise to Phaerakh how the politics of the Triarchs and the highest Dynasties were utterly removed from reality. It wasn’t enough for the Phaerons around the Silent King and his two Speakers for the Dynasties to have conquered the stars in their name; the Dynasties had to be to their beck and call.

Neferten had been ignored. The Nerushlatset Dynasty had been ignored. Never had she been granted an audience with Szarekh or anyone high-ranked among his Dynasty. There had been only arrogant Nemesors and after that the first Necrons, giving her a choice between submission and annihilation. She had been young in these days, and the new metallic bodies had seemed invulnerable. She had let them drag her to the furnaces. It was a decision she was still regretting millions of years later.

“Fortunately for you, I am in need of a patrol commander guarding the Kadatek vaults for the next...oh I don’t know, four hundred Amarnekh years,” which were five point one standard years for a human, the Phaerakh had calculated. “You have just volunteered for this duty. Congratulations, Nemesor.”

“This is not tradition! This is not his-“

Her guards removed him from her presence before she had the time to change her mind and expedite his molecular disintegration.

Once alone, Neferten took a few seconds to contemplate the great objects now decorating her quarters, and the rising numbers of her Dynasty. The Silent King – or at least his envoys since no Triarch had ever visited one of her fortresses while she was alive – would not have tolerated this, not at all. A second-tier Dynasty rebuilding its armies, pillaging the inactive worlds of the so-mighty Horth Dynasty, and allying with a ‘lesser species’ without asking for the permission of their ‘betters’? The warmongering Maynarkh Dynasty would have already been sent against her to wipe out starships and worlds!

The familiar codes of a teleportation arrived on the throne’s commands, and Neferten authorised them when she acknowledged them as Destruction-Overlord Sitkah, which among her court had been able to add ‘Drukharikiller’ to her list of victory-titles.

“You were right, my Phaerakh,” the younger commander began as Neferten made clear the usual ceremonies of obedience and respect could wait another year. “The possibilities were already infinitesimal, but the advanced simulations of Artificial Intelligence A-1 confirmed it. It is absolutely impossible for the humans to have failed to store notable Noctilith reserves without enemy interference. Their ‘Imperium’ has too many planets, and their ‘Mechanicus’ mines too heavily for them to not have discovered several important deposits in four thousand years of theirs. And the ruler of their Imperium was aware of his Aethergold-creating powers, making the acquisition of Noctilith a priority atop many other material resources.”

“The abominations created by the fault of the Old Ones.”

“This was also my first reaction,” Sitkah agreed. “But now that our first ships have returned from their explorations, I fear the Aeldari sub-species have not been shy attacking the humans too.”

Neferten was building a strategic assessment from these revelations and she didn’t like what she learned.

“And our most powerful telescopes confirm the Szarekhan Pylon Line is the most damaged where it is closest to the former heart of the Aeldari Empire?”

“Yes.”

At this moment, the logical order which should have been uttered was ‘replace these Pylons’.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t. The Nerushlatset Dynasty had made its fame by promoting brilliant commanders and its Cryptek made many older Dynasties grit their necrodermis teeth in jealousy. But the Pylons had been cutting-edge technology the Void Dragon had ordered at the end of the War in Heaven, and only the Szarekhan Overlords had been trusted with the secrets of its production, maintenance, and anti-Warp principles. Neferten and any non-Szarekhan Necron over the rank of Nemesor had been given the codes to activate a Pylon Nexus, but this was all the ‘confidences’ Szarekh had made to the Phaerons and Phaerakhs.

Between Delphimonia, Amarnekh and her principal Coreworlds, Neferten had only fifteen Pylons –one per world – and the research how to replicate them had just begun. It did not help that so little Noctilith was left in her vaults; they had been forced to hand out everything before the Great Sleep.

“We have less time than I thought when our forces arrived at Pavia.” Most of the Aeldari and their descendants were dead now, so the problems coming from their direction should be limited, but if the empyreal abominations tried to breach again the veil and make a variant of the Enslaver Doom, they had to be stopped.

“The good point is that so far, the humans appear to take Noctilith mining seriously,” Sitkah noted. “More than forty mining ships have arrived in the last rotation around the fourth planet of the ‘Brockton System’ and they are accompanied by more ‘Mechanicus’ transports. Ideally, if they can handle the lava-plesiosaurs and have adequate harvesting-machines, their first ton of Noctilith will be mined before half of one of our years.”

“This is slow,” alas, compared to Necron technology, only the Aeldari, Krork and several Old Ones could really compare, and the humans had never had the help of psychic amphibians to burn the evolutionary steps. “But if it’s the best they can do, our plans must be adjusted in consequence.”

“We could...gain several years, at least for the Noctilith. We weren’t trusted for this duty but-“

“No, Destruction-Overlord. I need better data and we need to finish our current expansion program. The kind of adventuring you are proposing would be ill-advised at the best of times, and I doubt the humans would jump in joy at the idea.”

Neferten shook her head before asking another question that promised not to improve the tapestry of misery the galaxy was soaked into.

“Where is Orikan?”

**The Warp**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Lesson one where Inquisitors were concerned: never forget that for all the nice appearance these men and women were able to project in public, there were Inquisitors. They had a mandate to protect the Imperium and humanity from eldritch horrors, demons, xenos, and everything which might threaten the millions of planets the military garrisoned, and if one world had to burn or suffer a purge of billions to save ten others, the Inquisitors would do it. Some of them would do it regretfully, but the planet would still be on the receiving end of a genocide, either by Exterminatus or a more conventional war.

Inquisitor Pedro de Moray was the perfect example of this. The red-haired servant of the Imperium had humour, was aware of the bureaucratic realities, and was known to speak with many guardsmen regularly on many varied non-Inquisitorial issues.

As the insect-mistress was introduced into the compartment the Inquisition had taken for itself aboard her Battleship, said Inquisitor was busy dissecting one of the aliens called ‘Stryxis’, and judging by the evidence, the alien was still alive as Pedro de Moray studied the inside of its body.

“What are you goals with these xenos?” Taylor asked to Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper as they passed on a metallic bridge giving them a complete view of the hall where dozens of Stryxis were gutted under the blades and the surgical instruments of the Inquisition.

“You aren’t convinced like many gamblers we are doing it because we want to have fun?”

Taylor managed to snort, despite the disgust she felt at contemplating a scene like this.

“Please, Lady Inquisitor. If you wanted to torture these xenos, you could have used them as Excess’ bait during the fighting at Zel’harst or Utar’ragh. There was no need to waste space aboard our transports and resources to keep them alive. And I know that you are a practical woman. You wouldn’t have saved them just for the fun of torturing them.”

“You’re right,” the female representative of the Ordo Xenos replied. “We didn’t save them just for the pleasure of torturing them, though with the countless headaches these untrustworthy creatures have caused in the last centuries I can’t say I am sorry to see them writhing in pain.”

This was something that even years later, the former warlord of Brockton Bay was not appreciative in the least. Torture and cruel punishments were law in the Imperium, and everyone in a position of authority found it normal, which forced Taylor in numerous occasions to align her judgements on the positions of the Inquisition and the Ecclesiarchy, otherwise people would begin to whisper behind her back she was too lenient, taking too many liberties with the Lex Imperialis, and begin to investigate paths to make her orders null and void the moment she had her back turned.

The Imperium was living in a cruel galaxy, and since the Inquisition and every existing Adeptus had not the manpower to monitor every citizen out of a population of tens of billions, the punishment for crimes falling under the definition of heresy and high treason had to be so horrible that the aspirant criminals shivered in fear and stepped back from a life of crime before any law-breaking was committed.

Both as a Basileia and a Lady General, Taylor was not sure she believed this was the best way to keep a star empire like the Imperium functioning. Unfortunately, there were plenty of past examples in the Nyx Sector alone that when this doctrine wasn’t employed, the rule of the Imperium was faltering. And so death sentences by being plunged into a pyre or a pool of acid remained the reality. Because a single Chaos cultist at the wrong job could do major damage, and unfortunately there would always be an idiot among billions who would believe he could outthink demons and stay his own master until the galaxy was his to command.

“So far, the studies haven’t made any outstanding discovery, but we are just at the beginning of the experiments.”

The Governor of the Nyx Sector frowned because her silent inquiry of what the Inquisitors hoped to acquire from the Stryxis had hit a large wall, and she knew enough about Lady Inquisitor Harper to know insisting would bring nothing new on the table. Leaving the ‘Stryxis’ room, they arrived in front of a large cell with an aquatic environment. Interestingly, Taylor began to feel beings she could control out there, even if it was faint. The psychic machines generating a sort of green shield between them and the cells were certainly responsible for the ‘muting’ part.

“Brachyura,” commented the Lady Inquisitor. “The first species we wanted to present you. Can you control them?”

“Yes.”

The insect-mistress came two steps closer to the shield, still keeping a respectable distance away from it, but it was best because the xenos inside this aquatic cell were really tiny.

Visually, a Brachyura had the central body of a crab, except the crabs were not reaching the size of a middle-sized dog, and they hadn’t some twenty legs looking like the ‘legs’ of a sea spider either. The crustaceans’ carapace and legs were an elegant combination of light brown and yellow.

And as she...focused, for lack of a better world, her will on one of the Brachyura, the parahuman entered contact with the mind of a really intelligent creature, and there was much curiosity and fear coming from it. They were also impressively complex plans of mechanical devices in this mind, no doubt the reason the Inquisition was so interested in them. Taylor sent a wave of emotional calm, before retreating and closing the connection.

“What did you see?” Rafaela Harper asked as her eyes turned away from the large cell containing the Brachyura.

“Intelligence and mechanical plans,” Taylor answered, seeing no reason for deception. “I’m not a Tech-Priest, so I will need further confirmation, but I think they were powering their habitats at the bottom of their oceans with some sort of plasma technology. Is it the reason you saved them at Commorragh?”

“Yes,” her interlocutor admitted. “We don’t know where the Brachyura’s homeworld is; all the individuals we have found until now were slaves of the Drukhari. But several times we have had plenty of evidence that their limbs are incredibly dexterous beneath this crude appearance and they are really adept at developing new plasma technology and the projects the long-ears wanted to accomplish.”

“In this case, I will need to commission the Magi of the Mechanicus for a translator allowing us to understand their language.” She could take control of them, they had nowhere near the ability to keep her out like the first Catachan-queen did, but unless she controlled them for the rest of their lives, that would create immense problems. Intelligent beings, as a rule, didn’t like being Mastered. “How many of them do you have in custody?”

“Counting the thirty-plus you see there, four hundred and sixty-nine were saved from Commorragh.”

The rest of the conversation about these crabs-spiders was spent deciding where to put them, and for the moment the answer was they were staying at Nyx. The Mechanicus could easily build an aquatic living environment also serving as a luxurious prison here, and there were plenty of empty zones reorganised by Dragon which could be used to hide their presence.

After a few seconds watching the Brachyura conducting their usual community activities, Taylor and the Lady Inquisitor went to the next huge cell.

Here, the outcome couldn’t be described as ‘good’. Rafaela Harper had just the time to say ‘Akvrani’ before the hybrid combination of a very large wasp and an octopus went smashing against the barrier. It had no effect on the protection, but the fact five other xenos went smashing against it in the next seconds proved this was no coincidence.

And she couldn’t control them, certain because the part of their body containing their brain was octopus-like.

“You say these xenos are called Akvrani?”

The Inquisitor nodded.

“A particularly vicious breed of xenos the Imperium met during the Great Crusade in Segmentum Obscurus.”

“If their hostility is any indication, the meeting of the Legions and these xenos ended in violence.”

“Evidently, though the records we have of that time are far from complete,” Rafaela Harper grimaced. “I will be honest; I suspect the Legion which made the Compliance of what was going to become the Askellon Sector and crushed the Akvrani was the Night Lords.”

Taylor imitated immediately the Nyx Conclave’s member. All the Traitor Legions had a reputation, but those the Night Lords had made in millennia past was enough to give you nightmares. The most positive way to describe them was to call them ‘Astartes pirates’. It was best to avoid thinking about the worst things they did to the people who had the bad luck to fall into their claws.

“Well, I can’t control them.” The tentacles and the other limbs hinted this was a species capable of producing advanced tools, but there were no clues about what type of technology they applied it too.

“A pity. They had the capacity before the Imperium met them to mass-produce grenades and other explosive devices shredding the toughest materials known to Mankind.”

And obviously the Inquisition, like the Mechanicus, would dearly want to have the weapons and to replicate this kind of technological ability.

“If I can’t control them, you will have difficulties forcing them to cooperate. I don’t think they are anything like the Rashan or the Brachyura.”

“They will reveal their secrets,” and the emotionless promise convinced that this was an Inquisitorial promise. “Willingly or unwillingly, but they will do it.”

The third cell Taylor was led to was easily the strangest experience she had so far. To begin with, the xenos inside it greeted her in Low Gothic.

“Hello human-full-of-meat!”

“Err...hello?”

There was something strangely disturbing about a mouth opening and closing on the body of something looking like a gigantic red slug.

“We want to establish Peace-relations with you!”

Okay...what in the name of this cursed galaxy were these xenos smoking? Peace?

“The Naiads are an extremely peace-loving civilisation,” Rafaela Harper interjected seeing her disbelief. “The Imperium generally ignores them when they send their ‘diplomats’ outside their homeworld. They seem to believe the only thing of value is peace.”

“Of course!” the slug-Naiad vigorously agitated its enormous mass – it had to be close to one and a half metres long. “Peace is blessed! Peace avoids environmental damage and strife! Peace allows us to thrive and multiply! Praise be Peace!”

Taylor wanted to tell the xenos its vision of the galaxy wouldn’t work in a galaxy where the Orks – to name just one of the worst problems – lived and breathed for war, but really, this xenos had been enslaved at Commorragh: part of its red scarred skin made that clear.

“You continue to believe in peace after all the Eldar have done to you?”

“The Eldar will know the value of Peace once we teach their children how to productive contributors to Peace!”

Taylor fought to remain a normal expression, when inside she was laughing. Seriously, this was...refreshing to meet a xenos species which thought of nothing but Peace, but why had the Lady Inquisitor thought she could be of use when meeting this representative?

Alas, there was no answer from Rafaela Harper this time. They departed after saluting the ‘Peace-lobbying’ Naiad, and went to the fourth cell.

This time there was no question she could control the xenos: the being in front of her was essentially a giant blue plant bug with four additional limbs.

“An Uluméathic,” the whisper arrived to hear ears at the same time Taylor was pushing through the mind of the creature and taking control of it and the four other xenos present in the cell. It was easier than with the Brachyura, despite the Uluméathic specimens trying their best to keep her out of their memories.

It was absolutely disgusting. It looked like the Uluméathic had already conquered five other intelligent species after they had managed to reach the stars, and so far, each and every one of these xenos civilisations had died, devoured by the Uluméathic armies when they touched ground of the new world they assimilated into their Empire. The best translation for what happened was ‘feasting-triumph’.

And most damning of all...

“They ate the population of a small human colony before being captured by the Drukhari.”

“Your control over them?” The Lady Inquisitor was anything but surprise, so the Ordo Xenos had most likely entertained suspicions about the perpetrators of the crime for a long time.

“Total.” Taylor knew what was going to follow, but frankly after feeling the joy the Uluméathic of this group had felt when they slaughtered humans before the skies darkened and the dark weapons of the Eldar destroyed their armies, she wasn’t going to feel any compassion for them. Even the reason the Uluméathic had let themselves be captured so easily by the Inquisition was to try an infiltration and an internal onslaught.

“The coordinates of their homeworld then if you please.”

Weaver gave them. One of the Uluméathic was the equivalent of a galaxy cartographer, and there were several stars in the Eastern Fringe she had already once or twice as a point of reference. Not that it mattered much, because with a few beetles and spiders, she was easily able to reproduce the maps the xenos had kept safe inside its brain.

“Your assistance was appreciated. The Conclave will...deal with the problem caused by the Uluméathic League.”

The xenos hadn’t the same vision humanity did of a league, then, because from the Uluméathic memories, their nation had appeared like an Empire where the rule of the strongest prevailed in all circumstances.

“I doubt you will be able to take control of our last guests, but any insight you may have is welcome. The species you are about to see is called the Axlo, and the psychic monstrosity called the Cacodominus wanted to exterminate them to the last before the Black Templars destroyed it. So far, we have no idea what pushed this abomination to such genocidal extremities. The Axlo are not psychic, did not represent a threat to it, and while they were a star-faring species, they had only three colonised worlds for them when the Cacodominus unleashed its Chaos Knights upon them.”

The Axlo the Inquisition had transported aboard the Enterprise were not disappointing, the Lady Inquisitor had made clear they didn’t know why anyone would want their destruction, but...Taylor was not trembling in fear or really worried for the future of humanity. In appearance, they looked like a species mixing the characteristics of a lizard and a cat in grey colour. The body had the feline elegance, but it was covered in scales, and one long observation confirmed the Axlo adults had fangs and claws no bigger and more dangerous than the teeth and nails possessed by a human adult.

Taylor tried to push more of her skills, either the golden aura or her insect-controlling abilities, but she felt nothing psychic or anti-psychic from the Axlo. After five minutes of complete failure, she had to admit defeat. And the Axlo didn’t appear to speak Low Gothic, or any language a human mouth could speak.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see anything out of the norm. The Axlo are a perfectly normal species with no psychic talent or any particular asset that might warrant destroying them.”

The Cacodominus’ motives, assuming they had not been based on sheer madness, would likely stay a mystery until the stars grew cold.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

***Vulkan’s Arsenal* Shipyard**

**3.360.296M35**

**Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan**

“The construction plan will be designated Commorragh’s Fall, and is activated right now. Its main goal is to provide a sufficient number of escorts to the Imperial Navy. The supply lines must be adequately patrolled and the mining and cargo transports arrive to Nyx without a scratch to their paint. Starting today, thirty Nyx-patter Cobra-class Destroyers and twenty Nyx-pattern Hoplite-class Destroyers will begin to be assembled and sanctified, per the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s will.”

“This is impressive,” acknowledged Cathar-4-Fredrick of Metalica. “You expanded the Centauri-class docks from thirty-five to fifty in less than five years to make such a plan possible.”

“Indeed. It was done in prevision of a great success being won in the Pavia System. But as you well know, the Mechanicus simulations have been recognised as completely inadequate when the Basileia is involved. Logically, *Vulkan’s Arsenal* should be expanded, but this is where the problems of modifying an existing sub-par structure begin to cause problems to my schedule,” the Mistress of Ships and Shipyards explained. “The necessity of adding Emperor-class and Jupiter-class docks is now primordial, but *Vulkan’s Arsenal* can’t handle these modifications right now. Not without stopping all the armament projects and the new constructions, stopping half of our current trade transiting by it, and certainly plenty of other problems the Council would discover in the following months.”

Logically, such a plan would have been unacceptable for the capital of an Imperial Sector. It was even more unthinkable for the Sector of the Victor of Commorragh.

“So we are going to build an entirely new shipyard, with the possibility of making it the base of a future orbital ring around Nyx.” The Magister of Enginseers emitted a long cant of frustration. “Archmagos Prime, I am as devoted as you are to the Omnissiah, but do you really think we will be able to work according to the...optimistic schedule you have given to Magos Dragon?”

“Yes,” Arithmancia Sultan replied, not a single doubt in her voice or her blessed cogitating cranial components. “This shipyard will be built in a decade. And the schedule is not optimistic, it is based on holy algorithmic results and my long experience in the shipyards of Ryza. Thanks to the Fabricator-General and Lady Weaver, we will receive over two hundred million Tech-Priests and workers before this standard year ends. I may be forced to delay the expansion of *Vulkan’s Arsenal* and other projects while we built this great work, and I may be forced to divert several coteries from going to Alamo, but this shipyard will be completed in time.”

“This unnamed shipyard...”

“It is not official, but Lady Weaver wished us to consider if *Ferrus’ Revenge* would be an appropriate name.”

In Arithmancia’s opinion, it was. Not only it used one of the most pro-Mechanicus Primarch’s names, it was also sending plenty of messages to Mars and Terra’s enemies. The massacre of Isstvan V had begun to be repaid. The Imperium had not abandoned the idea of mastering great infrastructure projects – had not Ferrus Manus’ homeworld a great orbital structure, the most blessed Telstarax, orbiting around it?

The *Ferrus’ Revenge* was not an orbital ring, yet, but it would certainly outsize and outperform every shipyard in the Nyx, pardon the Samarkand Quadrant. Once it would be completed, it would have:

24 Emperor-class dry docks

12 Jupiter-class dry docks

12 Saturn-class dry docks

48 Mars-class dry docks

48 Luna-class dry docks

12 Mercury-class dry docks

12 Centauri-class dry docks

12 Auxiliary-class dry docks

That was just for the ship-building infrastructure, there were also defences to erect. Due to the names of the enemies Lady Weaver was happy to cut into several parts, Arithmancia’s had emplaced a lot of lances and macro-cannon batteries. Simulations predicted it would be enough to deter an assault of any force less powerful than twelve intact Battleships and twenty-four Cruisers.

“Yes, a fitting name,” the Master of Enginseers confirmed. “But I seem to remember a Council where you affirmed to the Minister of Industry you were going to build more shipyards...”

“Smaller ones and they don’t compare to *Ferrus’ Revenge*. The *Jaghatai’s Celerity* shipyard will be a purpose-built Rogue Trader shipyard, and I will only furbish each dockyard for each hull the four Rogue Traders own. And the *Dorn’s Will* shipyard will build and repair Astartes warships.”

“This is going to be a cog’s headache for me to find all the Enginseers you need.” Cathar-4-Fredrick complained.

“Nonsense.” The Archmagos Prime born on Ryza hadn’t let any obstacles bar stop her victories and achievements, and it wasn’t going to begin now. “Between the Pacificus tithe and the contributions of the Tempestus and Ultima Forge Worlds, we are going to receive upwards to three billion Tech-Priests and loyal servants of the Omnissiah in the next three years. I can assure you we are going to find that there isn’t enough work to content everyone!”

“If you say so,” the High Magos-Enginseer snapped in an unhappy binary cant before making report on activities where her contribution was required. “The last shifting of the Nyxian industry on the orbital forges is forty-two percent complete and my Enginseers are on schedule. Expansion of the Navy’s facilities around Nyx Sextus is twenty percent complete. Plans for the installation of the Macro-Forge on Alamo are seventy percent complete. The training for the production of the Jovian auto-loading weapons is ninety percent done, and replacements of the pre-290M35 damaged parts of the ancient industrial stations has been successfully completed. I will detail during the next Council my proposals to improve the quality of the components available to your shipyards.”

This was very good, very promising, praise the Omnissiah. Nyx was slowly but surely elevating itself technologically to the holy level where great Forge Worlds had risen.

“I want your support when the time comes that I will lead the efforts to study and decipher the *Skyline* template.”

“Out of the question,” Arithmancia replied politely. The template which had received the codename *Skyline* was the blessed Olbia Space Elevator, manufactured by the Trade Star-Cartel of Neptune during the Age of Technology. From the preliminary data she had received, it wasn’t the best schematics ever conceived for a Space Elevator, the Martian Ring of Iron had some more advanced in all characteristics, but it was one they were going to be able to mass-produce and easily maintain and repair, which was admittedly several times more useful.

“You will already have the *Comet* template.”

“No, this mining ship will belong to Unity-Victor Omega-Manville’s department, not mine.” Admittedly she was going to see these ships arrive in her docks sooner or later, but first the Master of Metallurgy and Mining was going to have numerous hours to exploit everything useful from it. “And before you ask for it, the *Red Dawn* template of the fusion reactor will likely go to High Magos Thomson Siemens.”

“What was the template Lady Weaver promised you, then?”

“Why don’t you ask the Regent or the Minister of Industry?”

Arithmancia was many things, but she was not going to be boastful when the prize was a ship-mounted electromagnetic gun ready to be studied and produced in her own foundries...

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**S-42XXAKDRK21W Exploration Zone**

**7.379.296M35**

**Gloriana-class Battleship *Eternal Crusader***

**Chapter Master Flavius Sextus Jovius**

“Yes, Chapter Master. It’s the space region where the Destroyer *Wheel of Determination* was ordered to patrol.”

“Then it is here we will find the Craftworld of the long-ears.”

“Chapter Master?” The Admiral sounded astonished, which made Flavius wonder if his tactical performances were as good as the reports implied. “I’m not denying the evidence, but surely it would be really...audacious, even for these warmongering xenos, to destroy our warship after an emergency astropathic cry for help has been sent.”

“Yes, it would be,” High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa smiled ravenously. “Unless there is something the Destroyer would have reported if there was time for second astropathic message.”

“Biel-Tan,” grumbled a Captain of the Crimson Fists.

“Biel-Tan,” approved the commander of the Chapter which had once been known as the Seventh Legion. “The *Wheel of Determination* must have evaded the mobile fleet of the xenos long enough after the first call to see the Craftworld on the long-range auspexes.”

It was a pity the officer who had accomplished was most certainly dead along with this crew. The Imperial Navy needed men of that calibre to face the multitude of threats trying constantly to attack the Imperium.

It was too bad for this Destroyer’s crew, but even in death, they had accomplished their duty. The sons of Dorn had the confirmation the Tarot and all their other sources of information were accurate: the Craftworld was truly hiding in this deserted space between dangerous nebulas and millions of gigantic asteroids.

This wasn’t a stupid location to hide your home; that much Flavius Sextus Jovius was ready to give to the long-ears. The natural obstacles made augurs, auspexes, and every time of sensor far shorter-ranged than they should be in space, and the Eldar fleets were particularly fearsome when they were allowed to play a game of skirmishes and feigned retreats.

But for this attack most of the traditional advantages belonged to the Imperium. And the Imperial Fists were going to do what they did best: unite in a formidable weapon of war, and bring down those who believed they could threaten human worlds in all impunity.

“We could try a double envelopment,” tried one of the high officers of the Frateris Templar.

“No. It is a good idea, but it will take too long. Our tactics are going to be as unsubtle as possible. We must seize the Eldar by the throat, and this means an attack straight to the heart. Here is we are going to do...”