**Legacy 13.3**

**Legacy of Change**

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

*But this was merely one campaign.*

*The Long War will continue, False Emperor.*

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

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

*But it will come.*

*The Long War is entering a new phase.*

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

*Your foresight is close to nonexistent.*

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

*We thrive in it, unlike you.*

*You are of* Order*.*

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

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

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

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

*But this is all a lie.*

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

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

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

*The Imperium will fall.*

*And we will win the Long War.*

*Death to the False Emperor!*

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Sub-Sector**

**Atlas System**

**Atlas II**

**Ducal Palace of Agra-Napoli**

**3.567.313M35**

**Captain Dino Rossi**

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

“WHAT IS THAT THING?” Someone screamed.

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

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

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

BLAM!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Err...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Governor?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shriek interrupted every conversation and order.

It was atrocious.

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

It was a sound no living creature should ever make.

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

“STAY STILL, YOUR HORRIBLE PARODY OF DRAKE!”

No, surely even Lord Pierre couldn’t-

Something extremely heavy hit the gates.

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

Fine, it was him.

The gates exploded.

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

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

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

A second later, the golden flames came into existence.

And this time the horrible shrieking easily tripled in intensity.

There were more explosions.

And then an enormous piece of masonry fell down.

The smoke slowly dissipated.

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

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

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

“Yes, Lord Pierre!”

**Hesperides City**

**3.371.313M35**

**Inquisitor Gabriel Mercoire**

“My Lord?”

“Yes, Acolyte.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That, however, was not a coincidence.

“The Governor?”

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

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

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

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

“Your orders, Lord?”

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

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

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

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

“The Magma Spiders?”

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

“How many cultists were among them?”

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

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

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

“Yes, my Lord.”

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

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

“Rules of engagement?”

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

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

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

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

“My Lord?”

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

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

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

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

**Palace of New Bologna**

**3.373.313M35**

**Marquis Galeotto da Montane**

How? How did they find him so quickly?

How?

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

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

There was a considerable amount of explosions.

The lights flickered out.

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

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

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

If this incompetent General had truly betrayed him-

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

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

“But...Grand Master...how?”

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

“Err...Grand Master...”

“What it is?”

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

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

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

The Marquis of Three Seasons expressed a hysteric chuckle.

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

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

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

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

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

Galeotto grimaced at the image.

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

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

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

Hatred and pride waged war in his heart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“ALIVE! THE INQUISITOR WANTS THEM ALIVE!”

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**Palace of the Orient**

**2.381.313M35**

**Dankanatoi Custodes Murasame Oda**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was not the reason of his visit today.

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

“I didn’t send one.” He replied.

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

The Basileia of Nyx made a slight nod.

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

The Adjutant-Spider stopped pretending she was sleeping.

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

He received a snort in return.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hololithic projection vanished.

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

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

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

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

It was...concerning.

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

The stars-filled eyes stated at him.

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

“Understood.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I am going to contact Terra.”

**Archmagos Dragon Richter**

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

“Do I look happy, Dragon?”

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

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

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

“What are you going to do?”

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

“Really?”

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

Dragon did not bother hiding her wince.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And for Atlas?” the draconic Archmagos asked.

Taylor snorted.

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

“And the noble and angelic part of you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dragon blinked.

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

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

**Athena Strategium**

**2.387.313M35**

**General Nikolai Rokossovsky**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Vostroyan General cleared his throat.

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

The mistress of the aforementioned spider chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

“This is a good point.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Amber Library**

**2.390.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

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

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

“But?”

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

“I know that.”

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

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

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

“How generous of you,” Marianne Gutenberg declared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was tempting, really tempting.

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

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

“You could purge them nonetheless.”

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

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

Taylor raised an ironic eyebrow.

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

“And the practical?” her wife wondered curiously.

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

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

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

“I will ferociously tackle the problem, Webmistress!”

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

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

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

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

Marianne, of course, burst into laughter.

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

**Nyx**

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

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

**The Hope Beacon – in construction**

**2.392.313M35**

**High Priestess Aurelia Malys**

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

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

Not far away, Liandra of Caledor laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Weaver breathed out.

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

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

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

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

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

The imperial eyes flashed gold for a heartbeat.

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

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

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

“I, of course, came with a list.”

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

“Artemis?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a long silence.

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

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

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

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

Weaver sighed.

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

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

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

**Nyx III**

**Lisa’s Dome**

**2.401.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The songs of Lisa were particularly triumphant today.

It may have to do something with the new harvest of peaches that had been grown on Ruby’s Harvest moon.

The fruits had been very recommended by several Governors of the Quadrant. And well, a happy Moth was a more productive Moth. The Noctilith brought in front of Lisa today had been transformed into Aethergold in record time.

But now it was done...

Listening to the song helped her thinking about many things that stayed out of her mind during her day-to-day duties.

Lisa’s melodies were powerful, joyous, and quite often celebrated plenty of mischief she had done to the poor Sororitas assigned to guard her.

The music also was *orderly*.

And it was not a coincidence.

This was subtle, and she had almost missed it several times, but both her thoughts and actions took an *orderly* turn.

And no, it was not because Roboute Guilliman had woken up to lead the Ultramarines once more.

It was because *the Emperor was of Order*.

Honestly, the insect-mistress wondered why it had taken her so much time to connect the dots.

It was obvious, when you thought about it.

If you wanted to become Anathema to Chaos, you had to be a *being of Order*.

No wonder the Ruinous Powers loathed so much the Living Saints and all those burning with the Emperor’s radiance.

The very fact they existed was the equivalent of several slaps in the face of Tzeentch, Khorne, and Nurgle.

And yeah, for all her shadowy abilities, Elena Kerrigan had to have been moulded with Order too. They were of completely different Aspects, but whether Light or Shadow, there had to be Order to ensure they didn’t repeat the mistakes of the Primarch.

Sacrifice, Administration, and Hope, but with a foundation of Order underneath.

Taylor honestly didn’t know how she was supposed to feel about that.

If the Basileia had been told she would become an Angel of Order...

“Bah, I was warned that this wouldn’t be easy, and I can’t say I didn’t receive nice perks for the ‘job’.”

The song of Lisa ended under the Dome. Predictably, the diva asked for some comfortable petting.

And one of the Astartes of her Dawnbreaker Guard approached.

“Yes, Thomas?”

“I can’t come back in one hour if you desire.”

“No, that’s fine. Lisa wants to be brushed or take a shower, and I have seen it enough times how it ends that I can afford to miss it this once. Shoot your arrow, battle-brother.”

“Thank you, My Lady.” The Space Marine of the White Templars bowed before going straight to the core of the matter. “I believe we are too *predictable* when it comes to our armament programs.”

And predictability killed, he didn’t say aloud.

“I would change predictable for *orderly*, Thomas. Otherwise, I don’t deny you have a point.”

Unfortunately, building the industrial capacity to sustain Crusade-level operations was not something you did with a click of the fingers or in utmost secrecy. There were machine-tools, giant manufactorums, and of course millions of Tech-Priests and other qualified personnel.

“That said,” the Lady of Nyx shrugged, “that our enemies will be able to have a clue or two about the Thunderhammer we will smash them with does not mean they will be able to stop it.”

“I would be more confident of that, my Lady, if we hadn’t just been given evidence of the atrocities the Arch-Enemy can set aflame worlds that should be out of reach of its treacherous claws.”

Taylor grimaced. That was something that was not pleasant to hear, but it was indeed the truth. Abaddon had somehow managed to execute nine attacks in total, using minor factions of cultists, and each time fuelling them resources they shouldn’t have been able to obtain. And while the means were well-documented, the ‘how did become aware of that?’ remained unanswered.

“The problem,” she said as the power of **Administration** rose within her, “is that long-term programs, by the sheer costs and commitment they represent, have to be orderly and predictable. Hurrying too much...it results most of the time in useless hulls like the Zion-class Battleship.”

Tanks and armoured vehicles were easier to deal with, but a serious commitment required tens of thousands of them minimum, and for the sake of efficiency, you had to impose some rules and guidelines.

“I am very well aware that by now, there isn’t any surplus of dry docks and empty slots to build more warships. Why, only yesterday, Artemis was cheerfully proclaiming she had never been so many dockworkers cheerfully accomplishing their purposes!”

All the shipyards were incredibly busy, and the industrial platforms devoted to other things like Guard production armament were as busy as them. As a result, some of the ships damaged during Operation Hell Garden had been diverted to Ryza for repairs, so that they wouldn’t wait for months here before returning to active service.

“I know, my Lady. And perhaps I worry too much about operational security. It’s just that if the Atlasian cultists were incompetent, others are not. The Heracles Wardens need all their skill to dismantle some enemy networks now.”

It was unfortunately true. The Traitors didn’t waste any time sending corrupted agents anymore; instead they were sending true chameleons that were ordered to stay undercover for years at a time, and sometimes they didn’t even recruit Nyxians, they did act alone and spied once or twice while doing perfectly normal jobs.

“We could move some mobile shipyards to Alamo and Neptunia,” Thomas proposed. “And place them under Mechanicus jurisdiction.”

“And where will we find these mobile shipyards in the first place?” Taylor asked lightly. “We ordered two from Ryza, and they will be delivered in a decade, not sooner. Besides, even assuming we got some spare shipbuilding capacity, the question of how we would avoid screw-ups is important. We are building a lot of ships from classes that are brand-new or have not been built in centuries. There’s plenty of room from mistakes, and I think plenty of oversight is required.”

It may be the **Administration** in her speaking, but it didn’t mean it was incorrect.

There were millions of tons of metal, advanced electronics, and incredibly complex pieces of machinery involved in every warship or transport ship.

“And frankly, the mobile shipyards and everything else aren’t conjured just like that. Even the Ring of Iron, with its fantastic size, has to tolerate some very real material limits.”

“I know,” the White Templar admitted truthfully. “I just am uncomfortable doing all for the conventional approach, when the Enemy knows for sure he is going to lose if it comes to a conventional, straightforward campaign.”

“You have a point. Yet there aren’t many Tech-Priests that can afford to launch important military programs on their own, and nine-tenths of them can’t do it with any secrecy, whether it’s life-or-death obligation or not.”

“Yet there is one, my Lady.”

“Yes, there is one,” Taylor regretfully conceded with a sigh. “And I would prefer to not utter his name today, thank you very much.”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Skavenblight**

**Date estimation impossible – [REDACTED]**

**Daemon Primarch Omegon**

The Warp twisted and erased many things, but for all the influence of Anarchy over Skavenblight – when other factions didn’t push for ‘Anarchy Kingdom’ or ‘Disorder-blight’, of course – there were still traces of the Sicarus-that-was.

Arguably, most of it was the ruined temples that had been immediately converted into sites of worship to their God once the Word Bearers were gone or killed.

Quite clearly, none of these locations had any historical value: before, they had been repeating all over the holiness of Lorgar, and now, you didn’t want to hear what the Skavens were preaching –assuming they didn’t use the sermon opportunities to eliminate their rivals.

No, to find the important historical sites, you had to descend far deeper than the surface warrens of the new masters ruling over Skavenblight.

It was dangerous. The planet had always had its old horrors and abominations crawling out of the Warp disturbances, but at least in the past the Word Bearers had conducted regular purges.

Now? Unless the Spawns ate someone important or an entire warren, there was little urge to counter-attack.

Life was very cheap on Skavenblight, and for every follower of Anarchy who went missing, there were one hundred and eleven willing to take his her, or its place.

Fortunately for Skavenblight, the mutated horrors in these deep tunnels were hardly a match for an Astartes Legionnaire, never mind a Primarch.

And once you killed one, the others fell upon the fallen to devour it.

Anarchy or not, there were things which didn’t change in the Eye of Terror.

It may have taken him an eternity, but Omegon finally reached the underground ruins that he had learned the coordinates of. All it had taken him was to devour the brains of a mad Astartes whose livery had made clear he was of a Chapter that had fallen to Chaos.

The ruins of the temple had been desecrated, of course.

But once you stepped inside, you knew very quickly it was not the Word Bearers or the Skaven who had been responsible for it.

It was...simply not their style.

The voices in his head approved and disapproved.

And as Omegon stepped forwards, the temple began to rebuild itself around him.

Oh, not completely.

Whoever had tried to destroy this temple had clearly broken something important.

But as three more arms and several heads grew onto his daemonic body, Omegon found the fresco that he had come for.

It was a large piece of artwork.

Someone had clearly tried to shatter it permanently.

They had failed.

The Eight-pointed Star of Chaos shone malevolently, like it had been painted in blood and dark fluids mere minutes ago.

But these were the inscriptions which interested Omegon above all. The words that the voices of Anarchy had been unable to repeat to him, for they didn’t know them.

“**Behold the Eightfold Path, the Aetheric Dominions, the Warning of Everything That Was and Everything That is Yet to Be. Behold the Eight Arms of the Primordial Annihilator, Slaver and Protector, the Sin and the Weapon, the Darkness of the Lost and the Damned**.” The Daemon Primarch read.

Yes, this was what had come to find.

The first glyph above needed no presentation. Its senses were assaulted by the smell of blood. In the distance, you heard the weapons clashing and the tumult of war.

But this was not the name of the Lord of Skulls which was to be found next to the star’s point.

Instead, there was something very different to be found.

“**Heedless Slaughter**,” well, it explained so much and so little.

Did it mean that no matter how many times Khorne was killed, a new Ruinous Power with his attributes would always rise again? Or did it mean that if this Lord of Chaos died, the loss would be permanent and nothing would ever try to pick up the crown?

The glyph at the opposite of the Khornate one was not a surprise.

It smelled like an odious perfume, one urging you to commit the worst depravations, to swallow filth and betray everything you stood for, as long as it gave you a single breath of exquisite pleasure.

“**Slaanesh**,” the word was dead, and devoid of power, “**or as this Dominion is supposed to be, Rapturous Sensation**.”

And Slaanesh was gone. Would the Warp erase the loss in due time, or could it rebuild itself from the ashes?

If there was an answer to this question, it was not to be found here. Omegon turned towards the next glyphs. He recognised only three of them. The Changer of Ways’ glyph was next to the star’s point proclaiming it as ‘Infernal Tempest’, which was anything but a surprise. It appeared that destroying the plans of allies and foes alike was a feature, not an anomaly of the Tzeentchian Chaos.

Its opposite, as could probably expected, was the glyph of Nurgle. And it was called ‘Putrid Corruption’.

Yes, it was completely accurate, and for once the squeaks of approval gained a majority.

Last but not least, the rune of Anarchy was present. The name of Malal was nowhere to be found, of course, but the mysterious author of this fresco had carved the letters ‘Ravenous Dissolution’.

This could have been all, but it wasn’t. Eight points for the Eight-pointed Star of the Primordial Annihilator.

Five were known.

The other three...Omegon tried to look away, but he knew instinctively he had to read.

He had to read, though he didn’t want to.

“**Malevolent Artifice**,” he spat the words. “**Encroaching Ruin**,” despite his resistance, something spoke with his mouth. “**Formless Distortion**.”

And in the centre of the star, of course, the Primordial Annihilator awaited.

The pressure diminished.

Omegon, instinctively, rushed out of the fresco room. He didn’t know why, but he felt the urge to get out of this temple, and never return.

But once the previous room was long behind him, the passages in front of him ceased to be the ones he had seen before.

There were more carvings.

All of them looked recent, like the artist had just left.

Omegon wasn’t fooled; they were likely as ancient as the Eye of Terror itself.

He tried not to read.

Omegon really tried.

But something here seemed to have the power to befuddle the mind of one of the Demigods forged by the Emperor and empowered by the Beast of Anarchy.

Some words had been mercifully erased.

Others were not.

“**Four will dominate Four...None can be equals...None can be United...the Reverse is the Mirror...the Eighth will usher the Age of Apocalypse**.”

There were many, many more sentences proclaimed.

Some were outright contradicting everything that came before, others would have made his blood freezing if he had still been made of flesh and blood.

But one thing was clear. No, two.

Two things were clear.

Abaddon *knew*.

The Emperor *knew*.

Both had come to Skavenblight when it was still called Sicarus.

In person for the former, via an Avatar of the Astronomican for the latter, most likely.

When?

Malal suggested after the Siege of Terra, but before the last Black Crusade.

*They knew*.

The Warmaster of Chaos and the Anathema had found out some of the few rules that Chaos could not against, and now for both different reasons, they were trying to exploit them in order to achieve victory.

“**If there are eight smaller Dominions unable to ally with each other, Order can divide and conquer at its leisure**.” His father was truly gambling that once the eight ‘Paths’ had their Gods, he would be able to kill them one by one. And thanks to the death of Slaanesh, the birth of Malal and every deity after it would not destroy the galaxy in the process. “Of course, the new Warmaster has both greater and different ambitions. He wishes for Four of the Eighth to be greater, while Four languishes in the shadows. And they will all court him. They will all be vying for his military acumen and decision.”

The screech of his patron was particularly abominable.

Anarchy did not like being told what to do at the best of times; having to crawl to a mortal to beg for the scraps was a colossal insult.

The power of rats ravenously eating the other rats was unleashed.

The walls began to corrode.

Pillars broke.

The rebuilding of the old ruins abruptly stopped.

There was a glimpse of something at the end of the tunnel.

There was a glimpse of-

“**Stop!”** He shouted. “**I must**-“

But Malal was not listening to him.

Malal was screeching and hurling its displeasure at everything that had the misfortune to be too close.

Everything was dissolving. Everything was falling apart.

But the eyes of a Primarch were almost divine.

They could see-

They could see a new Eight-pointed Star.

Except this one had a malefic eye at the centre of it.

An eye-

“**The Eye that watches...but not the Eye of Horus...never Horus...not Horus...Horus was weak...you learned of it here, Despoiler...you learned of its existence, the Greatest Treasure of the Phoenix Throne...you came here during your errant Quest, searching for the Path that would lead you to it. You wanted the Eye of Sheerian!”**

And the screeching of Malal suddenly came to an end.

Because, and the Beast of Anarchy had acknowledged it at the same moment Omegon did, it was almost certain Abaddon had grabbed this priceless treasure before rising the banner of the Black Legion.

It changed things.

No, it changed *everything*.

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

***Ferrus’ Revenge* Shipyards – high orbit above Nyx**

**2.404.313M35**

**Admiral Miranda Lawson**

“Thank you for agreeing to set a place in your schedule so promptly, your Celestial Highness.”

“I reward success, and you’ve been very successful in some parts of the Venus Cruisers construction, Admiral, or so Archmagos Sultan assures me.” The Living Saint gave her a polite smile. “And of course, I had this entire day of very tedious conferences on *Ferrus’ Revenge*, so I admit you make a nice interlude. Moreover, your message was intriguing.”

“I will try to justify this confidence.”

One of the two Space Marines playing the role of bodyguards clearly tried to laugh, and tried to pretend it was a cough when Lady Weaver glared in his direction.

“Right. I have about...forty minutes before the next meeting on my very schedule. Convince me, Admiral.”

“As I’m sure you are aware due to the clearances involved, the Tech-Priests on *Terra Cimmeria* have been able to unlock a new STC Template, your Celestial Highness.”

“Yes, they did, with some Custodes support.” The ruler of the Nyx System blinked. “I was under the impression that it is something incredibly complicated and more fit for expensive research on Graviton Technology, however.”

“It is, and it isn’t.”

Now she had at least the curiosity of a Living Saint.

“Explain.”

“Some of the theory of the T-Waves and the Graviton particles are completely beneath me,” Miranda admitted shamelessly. “A lot of the Graviton research available on Holy Terra and Mars was revealed by the God-Emperor himself during the negotiations whose outcome produce the Treaty of Olympus. Most of it comes to us straight from the Age of Strife, and we were only able to reproduce some of the complex tools as the Great Crusade came to its conclusion. Obviously, most of the advances were reduced to ashes in the Great Heresy right after it.”

“I am not surprised to hear that.” The golden-winged woman said unhappily. “But some of the research and the prototypes survived, I take it?

“They did, and the Imperial Navy invested a considerable amount of time and resources trying to pursue the project. Many Lawson Admirals were involved in it during the last two millennia, by sheer coincidence.”

“Sometimes I believe more in the Emperor’s hand trying to guide us than coincidence, Admiral.” The Basileia snorted.

Miranda smiled back carefully.

“I presume the Admirals of Battlefleet Solar had a good reason to sink so many resources in this project. One I can’t see so far. Yes, I have seen some relic Graviton Weapons fired, and they’re impressive. If the effect is magnified by a warship’s battery, the offensive potential is evident and terrifying. But I am realistic enough to know that ten or twelve guns like that could cost as much as a brand-new Battleship if the Tech-Priests aren’t careful with their finances.”

“You are completely right, your Celestial Highness. Graviton Weapons don’t justify these massive expenses. The Gravity Wave Projector, however, absolutely did.”

“I heard this name somewhere...I think Archmagos Lankovar used it when showing me some Tau prototypes and devices. Mainly at an attempt to allocate funds to some projects. I think it was able to slow the speed of human-sized enemies, or entirely halt them over a small area. But it was very short-ranged, and expended a frightening amount of energy for inefficient results.”

“This...”Miranda’s lips twitched. “This might be a family of weapons using the technology on a tiny scale, yes.”

“Well, I have learned something very interesting this morning. Continue.”

“There are several Gravity Waves Projectors in the Jovian Shipyards,” the female Admiral told her superior bluntly. “But so far, we were never able to miniaturise them quickly enough to install them in a Battleship hull. Moreover, the Projectors are horribly short-ranged. As such, their deployment was considered impractical.”

“That’s all well and good, but I fail to see the importance of what you tell me.”

“Oh...err...sorry, your Celestial Highness. I will cease to dance around the subject. With a Gravity Wave Projector of sufficient range, and some other advanced derives that are found within the Template, the Imperial Navy may very well be able to deploy ships that will create miniature gravity wells and Graviton-disrupted areas under certain conditions. And this will mean that strategically, we will be able to disrupt the Warp drives of an enemy fleet.”

The hands of the Living Saint struck the table, and Miranda admitted she almost jumped, because it was really a thunderous sound.

“**Seriously**?”

Miranda Lawson nodded hastily.

“Yes, your Celestial Highness. It is the solution to the frustrating problem that has tormented every notable Admiral since there is an Imperial Navy: how to force an enemy that doesn’t want to face you into battle to commit his void assets despite the unfavourable odds. And it is also a way to turn the table against the Traitors, who often enough trapped Squadrons and Battlefleets inside Warp Storms, forcing to choose between damnation and annihilation.”

“I can see that...and...Archmagos Sultan and Dragon were made aware of this?”

“Yes. Archmagos Sultan agreed the theory was sound. Archmagos Dragon grumbled something about an ‘Interdictor’ or something of that nature.”

The Angel grumbled too in the next seconds. Something about ‘Leet’ and ‘reality being stranger than sci-fi’.

“I suppose this has merit, then. But then I think the technology must have drawbacks too.”

“The biggest and most notable problem, as far as I see it, your Celestial Highness, is that it will neutralise only the enemy ships which use the Warp Drive or some variants derived from Imperium technology. The Necrons and the Tyranids, as far as I understand, do not fall into this category.”

The Eldar and some other xenos also did not share what was easily the great advantage and weakness of the Imperium.

“And?”

“Well, the price for a single unit of this formidable application of Graviton Technology is...extremely expensive.” Miranda admitted. “Furthermore, the STC Template here proposed an extremely miniaturised version compared to the Jovian devices, but it remains huge. I think we will need a Battlecruiser hull to deploy it.”

“And of course, the more warships are equipped with this technology, the larger the area of effect, I suppose?”

The female Admiral silently nodded.

“We do not have the space and the resources to build something like that here, Admiral. One Battlecruiser? Yes, we could build something like that. But an entirely new class with some of the most advanced technology that Sol has yet to field in Navy’s service? No.”

“Does it mean you are not going to fund the project until the first part of the naval program is over?”

“No,” to her great relief, the Living Saint answered, though her sigh was not exactly reassuring. “Several of my advisors argued rather loudly that in the next campaigns to come, we need an edge against the multitude of enemies that will no doubt push their luck against the Imperium. You have given us a weapon that can upturn the strategic balance. It just means that we are going to need to act very carefully, and in secret.”

The Basileia looked upwards, but her stars-filled eyes watched something that Miranda was pretty sure wasn’t in the room.

“Gamaliel, I fear I am very much going to need to contact Cawl this time.”

**Nyx III**

**Triangle Citadel**

**2.410.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Over a decade ago, the idea of sending one hundred guardsmen against a single Space Marine, even for a light tactical exercise, would have been considered a punishment.

Now?

Well, the Space Marine still won with impressive ease. But the equipment – especially the new tactical drones – the guardsmen had been given for today was considerably improving the time they were able to last in the scenario.

“Those are Kriegers and Vostroyan Firstborn in the trenches, aren’t they?”

“They are,” Werner Groener assured her as the Iron Drake battle-brother brutally cleared trench after trench with foam grenades.

“Impressive,” Taylor said aloud. “How long did you give them before organise this little game?”

“Ten days,” the Cadian told her.

“Impressive,” she repeated. “I suppose you want to train other guardsmen like that?”

“That would be for the best,” the Quartermaster-General replied. “And I will politely request more drones.”

“I suppose we can do that,” and Leet was going to be happy to learn the invention he sponsored was mass-produced by the Tech-Priests. “Of course, I will warn you that I’ve heard several Space Marines protesting of the unfairness of these trials.”

“They intend to ban the drones for the next formal military manoeuvres in a few months?”

“No,” Taylor said drily. “Their Techmarines are going to buy drones of their own, and then they’re going to field them against the Guard’s regiments.”

Werner had the good sense to wince.

Yeah, the Space Marines good acknowledge how much of an improvement the drones were for their operations. And unlike most guardsmen right now, they had a Power Armour that had sufficiently evolved cogitator-power to control said drones remotely.

“Several Magi are debating whether drones could end up as a separate branch of the armed forces of the Imperium.”

“The enthusiasm speaking, I think,” honestly, Taylor hadn’t a truly decided position on the subject. “I think I will wait for these new weapons to pass the trial of fire in the next years before making such a radical change.”

“Experiment then fight the political battles?”

The Basileia of Nyx chuckled right as the Iron Drake ‘eliminated’ the remaining opposition with the paint ammunition.

“It is certain that it’s not a ‘if’, it’s a ‘when’ those battles will be fought.” The insect-mistress shrugged. “Still, there’s no denying this phase is a success. You can proceed with the next one.”

“Thank you, your Celestial Highness.”

Truly these drones were really increasing massively the scouting capabilities of the Reconnaissance Regiments and every force on advance guard’s duties.

It would give plenty of tools for an innovative commander, and decrease the casualties in consequence.

The question was now if they could provide a worthwhile replacement to the Sentinels and other scouting vehicles, so that the men and the women could survive in the environments the drones warned them about.

“Other issues?” she asked. “Besides the obvious ones we already discussed for hours in the last months.”

“The long-range precision fire,” Groener answered thoughtfully. “For the short-range, we have the mortars, for the mid-range, the Vermillion Dawn rockets and all the current artillery pieces are adequate. But once we begin to go past ninety to one hundred kilometres, our artillery is forced to fall silent. Most of the time during Operation Stalingrad, we had to rely on the Aeronautica Imperialis to strike further than that. And when we don’t have air superiority, it results in unpleasant losses.”

“And Deathstrike missiles are way too expensive and dangerous to use on low-strategic targets,” Taylor finished.

This wasn’t an exaggeration; the two hundred missiles she had negotiated with Triplex Phall recently were so horribly costly she could have created several Tank regiments for the same price.

“Yes, your Celestial Highness.”

“This would mean a specialised long-range artillery regiment...well, the Munitorum wouldn’t have a problem with the concept, at least.” This kind of battalion-sized unit would be able to destroy some key targets, but it wouldn’t have the manpower to do anything else, like confronting an Infantry Regiment at close-quarters if treacherous ideas were spread by the Ruinous Powers.

“That was my opinion, too.” Werner Groener assured her.

“The price, however, is a big problem, and not just because I feel the Tech-Priests will tell me it will require some really advanced technology to enter mass-production.”

“There were ideas to go with air-defence systems to improve the panel options and provide high-altitude support to the Hydras? Could we make something with dual purpose?”

The Lady General Militant placed a hand in her black hair.

“Maybe? I admit that I am a bit out of my depth here. I didn’t study much those incredibly specialised fields, and so far, the last discussions I had were with Tech-Priests trying to convince me that air-air missiles could be modified to ground-launched attack modes.”

“And the field tests?”

“They haven’t begun yet. There’s a lot of...doctrinal...err...vigorous debates. If you want more details, you will have to speak with Archmagos Dragon Richter.”

“I will. Otherwise, we could always...adapt what we have.”

The insect-mistress sent an ironic glare at her subordinate.

“I hope you aren’t going to propose our huge anti-orbital missiles to be mounted on trucks, General.”

Some of the ammunition had special armoured trains built just for the very purpose of moving them from the Spaceport to the silos where they played their role of deterrence.

“Perish the thought, your Celestial Highness,” the Cadian officer smiled before returning to a deadly serious expression. “But I don’t think we can keep relying only upon our Hydras. The Arch-Enemy has proven that it can unleash new horrible mechanical abominations in the last Black Crusade, and I have really no wish to be defenceless when they will strike with their new Super-Heavy Bombers.”

“I understand your point.” Obviously, they were going to field new aircraft that would have the orders to shoot down everything that the enemy had in the air, but they couldn’t really take chances on the subject. “Please speak with the Master of Destruction as soon as you can. We will discuss the subject at the next strategic council.”

**Nyx System**

***Jaghatai’s Celerity* Shipyard**

**Headquarters of the Nyx Compact**

**2.418.313M35**

**Rogue Trader Lady Magdalena Orpheus**

The painting was beautiful, whether or not you liked jellyfishes.

It felt so realistic that you could almost believe the subject of the artwork was really in an aquarium in front of you.

It was *too realistic*, in fact.

And knowing what she did now, Magdalena’s unease was very, very real.

“Looking at your expression, I suppose it’s a good idea I didn’t invite any smug long-ear to this audience.”

“I’m sorry, your Celestial Highness” the Rogue Trader apologised, “it’s just that-“

“You don’t need to apologise, Lady Orpheus. Unlike plenty of people who have no reason but the Imperial propaganda to believe the worst of the xenos, you had the bad luck of meeting Sliscus. And in general, when you meet a Drukhari, you have a tendency to hate the guts of all Eldar sub-species, not just the one which did you wrong.”

“I...yes, it’s exactly that.”

“Good. I will move the painting once we are done here. Its purpose was to give you a good idea of what sort of appearance the Guardian did have. I can’t exactly let you land on Catachan to see yourself, after all.”

Magdalena breathed out in relief. Obviously, she knew Lady Weaver was not going to send her on a suicide mission, but it was always good to hear.

“I just hope it is not going to be amended by a ‘but I will send you into a place as dangerous as the Green Hell, your Celestial Highness.”

She received an amused look for her humour.

“That depends entirely, I suppose, whether you consider the Galactic Core more dangerous than Catachan. Personally, I don’t, but I may be a bit biased on the subject.”

As rumours were already spreading in the entire Nyx System of what kind of hellish opposition the Guard, the Sororitas, and every being assigned to Operation Hell Garden had encountered, no, Magdalena didn’t think the Living Saint was biased at all.

“The region is not known for having bred Devils that can reach the size of Titans.” The female Rogue Trader did decide the ‘yet’ was not to be spoken today. “Does the order of priority for my mission is going to change? Must I locate at all costs this species of psyker-jellyfishes and bring a breeding pair at Nyx?”

“Absolutely not,” the Angel shook immediately her head. “I respect your courage, but you don’t have the sheer power needed to capture the equivalent of a young Guardian, no matter how many advantages I could give you. Even if a young jellyfish would lack both the experience and some of the overwhelming power of the Guardian, the psykers I spoke with confirmed that young specimens would fall into the Alpha-class category. In other words, a capture mission would just result in your extremely painful deaths for no gain. No. This is not a capture mission; it is one of information-gathering. I must know if in the Galactic Core, there is a planet where the species of the Guardian jellyfish survived.”

“Will I be able to use...local resources for this goal?” Magdalena bluntly asked. “By it, I mean-“

“Yes, you will be able to request the help of whatever Duardin agents want to cooperate with you. You don’t have the time to explore the Galactic Core system by system, and this is not why I’m sending you there anyway. The Bastions Borek spoke me about, however, have been here for millennia. In all likelihood, they have been able to compile massive records on the fauna and the flora they encountered during their mining and non-mining operations. I just invite you to be careful.”

“You think they would seek to grab jellyfishes for themselves?” the black-haired holder of the ancient Orpheus Warrant of Trade reacted with genuine surprise.

“No, I’m far more afraid that once they know what we’re after, certain Duardin merchants would try to rise up their prices, until the sums we’re speaking about range somewhere between ‘extravagant’ and ‘financially delirious’.”

This was alas a way more likely outcome, yes.

“Nonetheless, the potential dangers and the stakes have considerably skyrocketed due to factors you had no say in. That’s why I plan to reinforce your expedition, Lady Orpheus.”

“The journey to the Galactic Core, even with the support of the White Scars to provide succour close to the region, is not going to be a tranquil affair,” she noted. “I doubt anyone but Rogue Trader ships can maximise the odds of a return with most of the crew alive and some success under their belts.”

And unfortunately, all the Rogue Traders of the Compact were already assigned to other missions, some temporary, while others like Wolfgang Bach promised to last far longer periods of time than hers.

“This is true. But I have spoken with Terra and some interested parties, and...as always large rewards have a gift to open doors that were staying shut down so far.”

“I suppose greed is a powerful motivator, your Celestial Highness. Though it also bring out other problems.”

“It is completely true, but I remain moderately confident that crazy or not, your reinforcements will not be as enthusiastic as Leet and his accomplice to provoke as many conflicts as they can just because they feel it is going to be fun.”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

It took ten seconds.

Ten seconds for Magdalena Orpheus to leave the hall where the jellyfish painting had been moved.

Ten seconds to swallow some cold water.

Ten seconds also was the sum of the patience some Muses could tolerate enduring.

After that, Liandra of Caledor jumped out and began to behave like she was the mistress of this place.

“I will admit that Sliscus had good taste,” the red-haired Aeldari smirked. “I mean, satisfying his carnal urges with non-Aeldari would have been a sentence of death in Malekith’s court, I believe he would have been flayed alive before being thrown into a lake of some super-acid before being resurrected-“

The glare she gave to the smug long-ear really conveyed nicely the message she wanted, because Liandra stopped immediately.

“But I suppose you don’t want to hear that sex is something critically important if you want to not go insane.”

“Most of your species went insane because you debased yourselves into planetary-sized orgies.” The Angel of Sacrifice retorted.

“Yes, in hindsight...what was the point I was trying to make?”

“Your Gods should have tried to spank you for your behaviour.”

“We might have thought it was something to encourage us, my Empress.”

Taylor sighed.

It seemed that she was not going to win this debate.

“All Rogue Traders I have working in my service are going to be told to keep both eyes open for the possibility of encountering the species of the Guardian, but realistically, Magdalena Orpheus and Wolfgang Bach are the ones who are going to explore areas cut off from the Imperium during millennia.”

“And if they found the species in question, your Imperium may get access to the knowledge of the Old Ones, and design crude Geomantic Engines.”

“Yes.” In turn, it would allow them to launch vast recovery operations for worlds previously devastated by war and other cataclysms. And yes, they were doing something like that at Neptunia, but compared to the Muse’s memories and Liandra’s own words, it was extremely primitive compared to the efforts the Old Ones were applying on daily whims. “By the way, since the Aeldari clearly didn’t manage to reverse-engineer these Geomantic Engines, how did you erase so much of the damage of the War in Heaven at your height?”

“It is true we had no Geomantic Engines, but we had our Gods,” the golden-skinned Muse spoke with a slight smile.

Taylor raised an eyebrow.

“I seriously doubt Khaine had powers which made him skilled in the art of turning wasteland into forests and verdant plains.”

“Khaine was the exception, yes. It was Isha and Lileath who were considered the greatest in this art. There’s a reason why we called ourselves children of Isha during an eternity, and why the new gardens were called the Maiden Worlds. It was common during certain periods to affirm the Goddesses were Aetheric Geomantic Engines.”

With the caveat that when the Empire of a Billion Moons fell, this ‘alternative’ to the true Geomantic Engines fell with it, and thus not only suddenly the Eldar’s souls were no longer safe, they also had no way to ‘Eldar-form’ new planets from the ruins of their folly.

“Thank you for this precision. I suppose we can only hope the Rogue Traders and other parties will find young Guardian-type jellyfishes in time. The Guardian has to relinquish this knowledge before dying; if not, it will be a dark omen for this entire galaxy.”

“I agree completely, my Empress. Of course, in this instance, I think the humans have a considerable advantage over the descendants of the Aeldari. One must search for powerful jellyfishes, and since the Guardian clearly was invisible to all threads of fate, the Farseers will be of no help at all. The more eyes search, the better. And there are more human eyes out there ready to do it than there are children of Isha.”

It was a logical reasoning, yes. Of course, Taylor had already contacted Terra and Baal among other planets, and the negative answers didn’t exactly put her in an optimistic mood.

“This Quest, since I believe it is one of the most important one we will have for the next decades, is indeed going to be led by humans. That said, I believe it is necessary to use all our potential sources of information to solve this problem. And in that regard, the better informants are those who were alive when the Old Ones were still around.”

It was with a certain pleasure Taylor saw that all smugness had deserted Liandra of Caledor.

“My Empress, this is...” ruby-coloured lips were licked in a rare show of hesitation, “the Queen of Blades doesn’t like to be disturbed. And you know how frequently she answers her queries. I may have to track her wherever she went to train.”

The Queen of the Swarm began to giggle.

The former Blood Muse pouted.

“It is not fair, my Empress! You know she is going to use me as a ‘punching-ball’, as your Dawnbreaker Guard enjoys saying aloud!”

“Yes, in all likelihood, she will.” Taylor was a Chosen of the Emperor of Mankind, the Shield of Angels, and the Lady of the Nyx Sector. She was incredibly powerful and proud.

Thus she didn’t say aloud ‘better you than me’.

“But there are two ancient legends who may know something of the Guardian and how the Old Ones genetically and psychically altered him to suit their purposes on Catachan. One is the Queen of Blades. The other is Trazyn the Infinite.”

Taylor grinned.

“I am going to contact personally the latter, but if it is your utmost desire, we can always exchange the interlocutors, Liandra.”

Horror coexisted with admiration in the next three heartbeats.

“You are really evil, my Empress.”

**The Eye of Terror**

**The Broken Worlds**

**Empyrean-saturation maximal – date estimation impossible**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Most of the time, when you sailed through Hell, you tended to forget that the prison had once been the heart of the greatest Empire to have ever ruled this galaxy.

And the Eldar had done it for millions of years. Millions.

The Imperium, by contrast, had not lasted two hundred years before almost destroying itself in civil war, and even today, the new formula was barely five thousand years old.

But admittedly, Mankind had never enjoyed the advantages other species took for granted.

And when Slaanesh was born, when the Eye of Terror tore apart the Materium, most of the Empire had disappeared in mere seconds.

The great monuments like the palaces of depravation had disappeared together.

Excess had come to claim everything, and ninety-nine percent of everything that the Eldar had loved to boast of was disintegrated by divine wrath.

The Eye of Terror had not just been the death blow of the Eldar Empire; it was their Damnatio Memoriae too.

But not everything had disappeared with its xenos creators.

Obviously, the life-expectancy wasn’t great for the crumbling remnants. It was the Eye of Terror.

But here, before her eyes, there remained some shadow of the past glories.

The Broken Worlds.

It was almost a poetic name to describe immense void naves that had been abandoned in the middle of nowhere.

The hulls were beyond gigantic.

They were more colossal than the Moon of Sol; and it was not the fires of stars and the laws of cosmic physics which had created them.

No, these hulls had been shaped by impossibly complicated psy-technology, the likes which had never been touched by human sorcerers.

In many respects, the Broken Worlds were the predecessors of the current Eldar Craftworlds: pleasure crafts which sole purpose was to ensure the long-ears enjoyed absolutely luxurious living conditions when they travelled across the galaxy.

But when the Eldar had grown bored of their unprecedented planet-sized chariots of the void, they had abandoned them here, after removing everything that was aether-active or valuable to them.

And thus the Broken Worlds had survived the fall of Slaanesh, when the Eldar didn’t.

“I wouldn’t advise to come far closer than we are,” Boros Kurn said conversationally. “There are rumours some nasty scavengers have made their lairs into these planetoids.”

“Pure superstition,” Malicia scoffed. “There isn’t any air inside these carcasses, and while Eldar shipbuilding before their Fall surpasses the art of Mankind, nothing is eternal. If there is something left inside the Broken Worlds, it’s daemonic. Even Orks and other belligerent lifeforms need air in significant quantity to survive for some time.”

Several minutes were spent watching the spectacle offered by the Broken Worlds.

It was strange to feel all so tiny, to be confronted with your own insignificance compared to these leviathans of the past. The galaxy was old, and uncaring. This may be the lesson that you could acknowledge from the sights.

“I know why you chose this place to hide, but I doubt the Ferryman is going to be fooled for too long.”

“It has given a respite of several days, and it is what matters.”

“A respite for what?” the Space Marine inquired. “So far, the Black Legion is the nicest reception we got, and it was more or less ‘don’t fight while we negotiate’. Once they obtained what they wanted from you, the Despoiler and his cohorts ignored us. And with this precedent, I don’t think anyone will try to join forces with us.”

“A respite to escape the Eye of Terror once again,” the Tzeentchian sorceress replied.

Boros gave her an expression of surprise.

“We lack the means to go through the Cadian Gate.”

“Who was speaking about using the Cadian Gate? I am very well aware we lack the strength to challenge the Kars and the millions of guardsmen permanently stationed there. At best, we will make them laugh as they crush us in a one-sided manner.”

“But...you don’t have your hourglass anymore. Unless you lied about this?”

“Regrettably, no, I lack my hourglass. This accursed bastard of King in Yellow shattered it while the final battle raged.”

It had been one of the many bad surprises waiting for her when she returned to the *Natural Selection*.

Many key treasures broken, as the guardians empowered to guard over them had lost all reason, killed themselves, or outright been turned to dust.

The King in Yellow would pay for that.

No, *Nagash* would pay for that. And with interest.

“In that case, we will be forced to use one of the existing Gates.” Boros told her with a tone of finality.

“Not exactly,” the female parahuman corrected him. “There are other unstable routes to leave the Eye of Terror.”

“Yes, the incredibly dangerous ones. Assuming you can reach them in time, you have mere minutes to use them, and even if you do everything right, sometimes, you lose half of the fleet in the process. I heard in fact from a few Legionnaires that it is the best scenario. Three cases out of four, you fail, and everyone is turned into cosmic debris...or worse.”

“That’s why I desire an artefact that permits to properly ‘stabilise’ the road out of the Eye of Terror.” The blonde sorceress admitted to her lieutenant. “We can’t of course open something as big as the Cadian Gate without the Imperium moving half of its armadas to intercept us, but we can with proper rituals and an excellent focus, delay the collapse of the temporary exit by a few days. The escape would still be dangerous and require peerless helmsmen to lead the way, but the chances would rise from ‘extremely low’ to ‘fairly good’.”

“All right, I concede the idea is not stupid. But where do you find an artefact as useful as this one, and why did the Despoiler never bother to acquire it for one of his four massive campaigns against the dogs of the False Emperor?”

“Brigannion Four,” Malicia said simply.

“The Planet of Steel? We don’t have the military strength to storm it! And I heard that since the destruction of Commorragh, the planet has been fully engulfed by the Eye. If it isn’t a Daemon World now, I don’t know what it is!”

“Yes, it is one of the four great citadels of the Iron Warriors Legion inside the Eye.”

And the slaves of Perturabo – after the Myrmidon Androids, it felt disgraceful to call them his ‘sons’ – had an unhealthy rivalry building the greatest fortified strongholds of the hellish prison, so the competition was high.

“If the Night Lords had been in control of the planet, we would have had a chance of victory, but-“

“No,” Malicia abruptly stopped him. “It had to be the Iron Warriors. The pirates of Konrad Curze only care about loot, plunder, slaves, and committing atrocities that can give nightmares to everyone. We could have only offered them to take them with us along the journey, and evidently, we would have had to watch our backs until they deserted our side to go after badly defended targets. The Iron Warriors are far more predictable.”

“They are also waiting for us behind kilometres-tall walls of adamantium and the toughest materials that can be found in the Eye of Terror.”

“Yes.” The Destiny Unwritten whispered softly. “And it will not save them.”

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**86th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM**

**DEAD ONLY**

**MANNEUS DRATH**

**‘THE TYRANT OF STEEL’**

**WARSMITH OF THE IRON WARRIORS TRAITOR LEGION**

**TRAITOR SIEGE-MASTER**

**HERETEK AND FORGE-MASTER**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-BETA DIABOLUS THREAT**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT IMPERIAL FISTS OR OTHER SUPPORT FROM THE SONS OF DORN**

**THE TARGET IS NOTED TO HAVE BUILT IMMENSE FORTIFICATIONS AND LEGIONS WORTH OF HERETEKAL ENGINES POWERED BY [REDACTED]**

**REWARD: 25 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 FORTRESS WORLD, SUPPORT OF SEVERAL CADIAN REGIMENTS, SEVERAL MEDALS AND COMMENDATIONS FROM THE IMPERIAL FISTS, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**Outer Edge of the Eye of Terror**

**Brigannion Four**

**Empyrean-saturation maximal – date estimation impossible**

**Warsmith Manneus Drath**

The thunderous sounds were entirely devoted to making new weapons of war.

Many had compared Brigannion Four to a succession of Forges and colossal gears whose only purpose was to produce new ways to kill their enemies, and there was truth to that.

The Warpsmiths were building the weapons. The rest were building the defences to protect the Forges.

Iron within, Iron without.

It was all it should be.

Colossal gears moved perpetually, crushing everything in their path. The raw substances of the planet and the Warp were funnelled into large lakes of lava so that the machines could find and use everything valuable in them. Daemons were dragged out of reality to be chained in metallic chassis. Artillery tubes were shaped and prepared by the tens of thousands. As the large Iron Hearts beat faster, proof of the mastery of the Fourth Legion over the Materium and the Immaterium, the smells of oil, sulphur, and of course steel alloys were everywhere.

Imperfect weapons were sent back to the furnaces, obviously. Sectors which had failed to respect the quotas he had assigned were dismantled, devoured by the ones which had.

Everything was as it should be.

Except for one thing.

“Glory to **Tzeentch**! You can’t not escape from...AAAARRRRGGGHH!”

Manneus Drath looked at the miserable worm who had dared revolting against his authority.

“Cut him piece by piece, and throw the remains to the Twisted Engines. Show the slaves the consequences of rebelling against my rule. And once you have done that...find all his accomplices. This one couldn’t have gone so far in the Styx Citadel without support.”

“Yes, Warsmith!”

The Legionnaire saluted and ran out, proof that he had perfectly heard the unsubtle threat in Manneus’ words.

Either the accomplices would be found, or soon Brigannion Four would have a new Master of Executions.

“Cultist activity is on the rise, Warsmith,” the thunder of the hammers striking the metal rose higher, overwhelming many voices, and more slaves perished below. “Though we don’t know the how-“

“We know perfectly who is behind these pathetic attempts to destabilise my rule,” the implacable Master of Brigannion Four declared. “Malicia. It must be this useless wretch of Malicia.”

“I would have thought that the Ferryman pursuing her from one end of the Eye to the other would have prevented her from plotting.”

“Apparently not,” he grunted. “Curse Skurvithrax for not finishing her at Harmony.”

“Skurvithrax...or the Warmaster?”

In many other legions, it would have been something worthy of the worst punishments. But the Iron Warriors of Brigannion Four were not the dogs of the Despoiler, or anyone else.

They were their own masters.

“Both, I suppose,” Manneus Drath spoke. “Anyway, it is a problem. We are not ready.”

“And the flow of Legionnaires from Medrengard has all but ceased.”

Words that he didn’t think would ever cross his lips or any of his warband warriors’, really.

The Eye was truly changing.

“I think everyone who wanted to escape Medrengard has done so now. Falk and the others certainly did; they just chose to not come here and accept *my* authority...unlike others.”

Mechanical grows succeeded to screams of pain as another assembly line finished the creation of a new model of Heldrake. This creation seemed particularly ferocious and vicious, even by the standards of these Engines; it devoured three reptilian slaves body and soul before the Runes of Hatred compelled it to stop.

“This betrayal is too-“

“We are not surprised by this latest treachery from our so-called ‘gene-sire’,” the Warsmith of Brigannion Four interrupted coldly. “He always was a true bastard, and if not for several interferences, he would have destroyed us before the great Crusade came to an end. His actions make perfect sense from his perspective. He believes the Legion is unsuited to march into the inferno and die like the idiots worshipping Lorgar did. Therefore his solution is to drag all our souls back to Medrengard, and build us anew as parodies of Men of Iron. Enslaved Astartes cursed forever to be trapped in a Men of Iron’s armour.”

For all his facade of calm, Manneus still felt the fury he had felt when the first warband of Medrengard had arrived to show him the evidence.

And while he wouldn’t admit it to anyone, yes, he had shivered.

There had been...unease.

Perturabo had done some brilliant things, and others that were downright monstrous.

But the revelation of these ‘Myrmidon Androids’ had been on an entire level altogether, and from what he knew, the reaction of the Legion stationed on Medrengard had been stationed between two extremes: those who had decided to depart immediately with everything they could transport, and those who had sworn vengeance and urged every Legionnaire to besiege the massive Citadel where their so-called ‘father’ had made his lair.

The former were alive. The latter were not.

“Increase the alert of our defences,” Manneus Drath commanded his subordinates, who all saluted back the Olympian way. “I don’t know whether Malicia will get here before Medrengard will throw several of these strange Space Hulks against us, but it is a certainty now that Brigannion is going to be attacked sooner than we calculated.”

“They will all die, Warsmith. Our walls will not fall.”

“Indeed they will not. And our enemies will soon understand why we call this world the *Planet of Steel*.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Aquila**

**2.422.313M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

Obviously, the message could have been delivered by someone of far less seniority of the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition than him.

But Odysseus had not met the Angel of Sacrifice recently, and with recent events, something unofficial yet requiring a personal touch was needed, in his opinion.

“So Inquisitor Mercoire thinks the situation is under control?” The Basileia asked eyes closed after sipping her tea. In the background, a large spider was reading the Atlas Report, while many Catachan Ants directed a small army of insects.

“He is. Evidently, he is not satisfied by the towering incompetence and the lack of security procedures that were the norm everywhere near the Arch-Duke’s Palace.” Odysseus let the warmth of his hot chocolate spread in his body before opening his mouth again. “I suppose you won’t be surprised to hear that he has transferred close to eight hundred cases to the Adeptus Arbites.”

Then there was only the waiting.

It wasn’t long, certainly under forty seconds.

“I suppose I can live with that,” the Lady of Nyx nodded. “Yes, I am willing to follow the recommendations of the Holy Ordos to deal with this fiasco. High Judge Milos will receive your report today, along with my support. The Arbites will be allowed to be the fully independent judicial power it is meant to be for procedures like this one.”

The Lord Inquisitor gave out a thin smile.

“I am moderately surprised you don’t want to handle some of the cases yourself.”

Lady Weaver huffed.

“Please don’t tempt me, my Lord! I already had to vent off for several hours on the sparring grounds after I read the report of Pierre. If I hadn’t listened to myself, I would have cut the heads of half of the Atlasian nobility, and sent the survivors to the Penal Legions.”

To be honest, it was exactly what plenty of Nyxians had almost expected to happen. The ardent supporters of Weaver with an excessive amount of jubilation, the conservative nobles with a surprisingly badly hidden amount of fear.

“Somehow, I don’t think the rumours spread by certain foreign agents sent by the Administratum would have deterred you.” He stated politely.

“You are perfectly right.” The Queen of the Swarm replied bluntly. “They were already proclaiming I am a tyrant months before this happened; they can go screw themselves, if they still have the physical ability to do it. I, however, have more practical concerns. Despite the accusations levelled against the Arch-Duke and his court, there is no denying Atlas Primus and Atlas Tertius will keep their current Planetary Governors. There may be a few courtiers who will fall after the investigations of the Arbites, but nothing compared to the turmoil of the Civilised World.”

“Tue,” Odysseus Tor acquiesced, noting a point he had been waiting for several minutes. “Is this the moment you will reveal why you had deployed your faithful Venerable Ancient to the Atlas System?”

“No,” the stars-filled eyes stared at him. It wasn’t a glare. But it wasn’t empty of defiance. “I don’t think I will.”

The Lord Inquisitor sighed internally. He had expected something like that, yes. And no, Odysseus didn’t believe for a single second that Ancient Pierre had somehow sniffed out in a few days the heretical cult which had ushered so much disorder and bloodshed.

One had to be realistic: Weaver had likely sent the Dreadnought as a vanguard for a long-term plan which would remove the three Dukes of Atlas from their positions.

There wasn’t enough evidence, but his experience told him the Basileia had wanted to decapitate the three heads all at once.

The irony was that the move had largely contributed part of the Arch-Duke’s family from this three-headed abomination and the half-amateur military coup that had been unleashed at the same time.

“It is your prerogative, of course, but next time, please warn us. Several freshly Inquisitors were...not pleased by all the implications this affair had.”

Of course, quite a few were still trying to adapt to a Sector where they had Planetary Governors in front of them that would call the Angel of Sacrifice before obeying their orders.

Nonetheless, there had to be rules, or the next years wouldn’t be calm.

“I will inform you of some of the actions taken in my name, if it doesn’t threaten operational security,” Lady Weaver swore after several seconds.

Odysseus made a curt sign of the head. He supposed it was the best he was going to get today.

“How is the situation on the other fronts the Despoiler opened across the Samarkand Quadrant?”

“All the daemonic influence and the heretics have been permanently neutralised,” the Lord of the Ordo Malleus said grimly. “But I fear that in three cases at least, more unpleasant actions are going to be necessary. And one involves a plea for more Aethergold.”

“I see.” The grim expression was copied by the insect-mistress, and the spider behind her began to tape frenetically on the specially-customised console. “How unpleasant are we talking about?”

**Hive Athena**

**The Palace of the Orient**

**2.425.313M35**

**Minister of Foreign Affairs Zoe XIX Attica**

“This minister gathering went far more smoothly than I foresaw it.”

“That’s because you didn’t tell your humble servants to change everything about the budget again, your Celestial Highness. I suspect there would have been fierce grumbling otherwise.”

The Basileia of Nyx snorted, and sent several of her blue medium-sized beetles able to carry away the plates and the refreshments.

“Yes, I suppose it would have been quite masochist of me. The budget so far looks like it will be within margins this year, and the economy, so far, has not shown any sign to experience a massive inflation increase.”

“Something that makes Baron de Seignelas very happy,” Zoe commented lightly.

“Oh, no doubt.” The golden-winged ruler approved. “How did it go with the rest of the Quadrant?”

“I will likely need a few more weeks to give you a full Sector-per-Sector summary, Lady Basileia, but so far the general impression is overwhelming positive. Inter-Sector is an all-times high, and the measured response of the Inquisition to recent events has been appreciated.”

“Really?”

“They’re well aware you could have arrived with the *Enterprise* and begun to ask unfortunate questions.” The young noblewoman pointed out.

“Yes, I could have. But not in all likelihood without feeling like a massive hypocrite. I couldn’t stop the situation on Atlas Secundus to explode out of control, what right I have to blame Sector Lords who have even less influence than I do over the other Planetary Governors?”

To be clear, Zoe could guess that if a Sector or a sub-Sector had been the site of one of the eight or nine Vermillion-level alerts that had shaken the Quadrant and provoked a massive military retaliation from the Inquisition and other military forces, there would have been a fierce price to pay for many Lords and Ladies.

But they weren’t – though as she understood, some Aethergold testing had been made in certain cases.

“As far as certain Ambassadors reported, several Governors wouldn’t have hesitated if the armoured boot was on their side.”

“I know. But this time, I think we need to be better than to spill the promethium and pretend surprised when we bring the Flamer near it.”

Zoe grimaced at the image.

“Does it mean-“

“I have not abandoned the idea to reform the Imperium, do not worry. But I have realised that as pessimistic as I was on the political front, I was not pessimistic *enough*.”

This time the wince on the Living Saint’s face was not hidden in the least.

“I fear Atlas is going to keep us very, very busy for the next decades. Unless for some reason the First Duke and the Grand Duke have changed their course of action?”

This would have been quite something, Zoe thought. Those two had refused pretty much everything that was associated with Nyx, and they weren’t going to bare their throats at such a critical moment.

“I’m afraid, Lady Basileia, that it isn’t the case. The First Duke and the Grand Duke are incredibly sorrowful about the deaths of the ‘Atlas Incident’! And clearly, they are proudly claiming they were loyal all along! Why, the cultists were all found on Atlas Secundus, and thus the heresy began and ended here! Their only mark of shame was to be so close to Atlas Secundus!”

One of the Space Marines watching over the small audience room coughed violently.

“Well,” Lady Weaver drawled, “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised by their incredible survival instincts.”

“They abandoned their cousin to your mercy, Lady Basileia. Given how strong the blood ties were between Atlas Secundus’ rulers and their own Houses, I am hesitant to call it a *smart* strategy.”

“Did I call them smart?” the Lady of Nyx snorted again. “They are as stubborn as some wild groxes I saw recently. They just happen to have better clothing habits; that’s all there is under the appearances. I suppose they’re gambling on the fact that if I want to build a modern and functional society on Atlas Secundus, it will cost me so much that I will need to look away from their feudal domains.”

“They’re not completely wrong, aren’t they, Lady Basileia? I mean, all the economic warnings are clear about the risks of inflation if Nyx was to act...unwisely.”

Plus as it had been mentioned before, the budget of the Hive World and everything associated with it were in a sound situation right now.

“I know. But we may have a bit more margin next year. And with the return of the survivors of Operation Hell Garden, I will have an abundance of Queen-ants. Bacta production is going to increase significantly. And what is good for Bacta sales is good for the Nyxian Investment Fund.”

“You decide, Lady Basileia.” Zoe chuckled. “After all, you and your lovely wife are the main shareholders...I believe you control something like eighty percent of it?”

“Seventy percent,” the black-haired ruler corrected with a grin. “Greed is a dreadful sin.”

And many Planetary Governors of the Nyx Sector and the Quadrant would not have been able to resist it, they knew.

“Well, this promises very interesting budget discussions for the next year, to be sure.”

“It also promises a very interesting series of talk with certain nobles of Atlas Secundus too, don’t you think?”

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**Seraphim Avenue – the Gateway to the Spire**

**2.514.313M35**

**Arch-Duke Brabanto XV da Flor**

Unlike most of his children and the overwhelming majority of his court, Brabanto XV had visited Nyx before.

It had been forty-two years ago, give it or take it, and his memories of the planet were hazier than he liked to admit, even to himself.

But Brabanto remembered enough to know that the massive street leading to the Gubernatorial Palace of this Level had been reserved to nobles and all those who were employed directly by them.

And the plebeians were by law forbidden to show their faces if they did not have the proper permits.

Of course, the avenue he recalled had been known as the *Ajax Menelaus* Avenue, not Seraphim.

Moreover, failing memory or not, he did not remember all the shops and the angelic statues.

Could a world change so much in thirty years?

The Atlasian noble in him wanted to believe that, no, it couldn’t.

The pragmatic part of him whispered that the traces of blue, brown and green that had been visible from high orbit had not come out of existence by asking it aloud and hoping something nice came out of it.

The human part of him gritted his teeth as pain erupted in his body again.

Brabanto looked at his left arm. He had never been proud of his muscles, and he wasn’t narcissist enough to believe he could have attended the Atlantean Games as a participant.

But it was still a shock.

A shock to see that his left arm was made of metal.

And as his eyes fell lower, Brabanto’s mood fell as well.

Despite the best efforts of his personal Medics, his left leg had to be partially amputated too. The wounds taken from the traitor guards bribed by the heretics had made it inevitable.

And this rubbed the injury with something extremely painful.

Nothing but a miracle could have saved his arm – there hadn’t been much left of his hand after the first enemy shot – but Bacta could have saved his leg.

But of course Atlasian politics being what they were, they had refused Nyxian ‘interferences’ from the very beginning.

And thus there had been no Red Bacta on hand to heal him and save his leg.

The Inquisition had some, Brabanto knew. But it had all gone for the personnel fighting against the heretics and the traitors.

There had been a priority order, and for the first time in decades, he had not been at the top of it.

Of course, he was a Governor. A man of his station could buy prosthetics for an affordable price.

Brabanto had done it. But one more problem that had suddenly slammed in his face was that while Atlasian device-synchronizers existed, the best of the best in the Nyx Sector were not found on Atlas.

Add the irregular flashes of pain, the underwhelming performance of his new metal appendages, and Brabanto had been given a prime view of the consequences of his politics.

And now as his aircar opened in front of the flamboyant red carpet, the Arch-Duke of Atlas Secundus was not confident at all he had made the correct choices for his world and his people.

Honestly, he had likely been less confident than he thought he had been in the last years...but it didn’t matter.

Regrets didn’t matter.

Deeds *did* matter.

And Brabanto had really no reason to boast about anything.

Especially not as on each side of the red carpet, a parade guard of thousands of guardsmen clad in Nyxian blue was lined up.

Usually, the Lord of Atlas knew, these men and women would be in their most splendid uniform, wield honorific swords, all the while pretending they were not going to run to the nearest tavern to get royally drunk the moment their superiors allowed them to.

Today, it wasn’t the impression given by the soldiers of the Imperial Guard.

All of them were clad in some sort of advanced armour.

Brabanto knew there had to be some which was ‘carapace’ and some that was ‘power’ when it came to the models, but he didn’t know enough about the military side of things to say which was which.

He could say, on the other hand, that these hundreds, no, thousands of men were equipped and ready for war.

There was whistle and some music.

The armoured boots slammed onto the floor, staying far short of the red carpet.

And that was all.

There was no sign of a herald to announce his titles, no loud demand to cheer for a Governor of his importance.

And he was not stupid enough to not recognise the unsaid message.

*You were incompetent. You were lax. You opposed me on everything that mattered, and you were wrong*.

The massive doors of the palace in the distance, an edifice that seemed to have become even more imposing and fortified since his last stay here, opened in a song that resonated like the calls of the banners of the God-Emperor.

It was...far away. Very far away.

Brabanto swallowed heavily, and thanked everything that was holy that he was allowed to use his hover-chair.

There was no doubt in his mind that this ‘walk’ would have demolished him physically, erasing all the healing progress of the last days.

It was, ultimately, going to be something you could describe as an ‘awful experience’.

“Lord Arch-Duke,” one of his daughters whispered, “there are rumours that the distance to walk to reach the Living Saint is directly proportional to the annoyance she feels towards the petitioner.”

“I have heard the rumours,” Brabanto grimaced as he tried to install himself correctly on his hover-chair. “We better pray they are not true.”

More pain pulsed in body.

Brabanto gritted his teeth.

“We have been *invited*. Let’s go meet our host.”

And if he died here today, it would make sure he didn’t see the tens of thousands of nobles and non-nobles that he had failed by his inept handling of Atlasian politics.

**Severity’s Manor**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

It was strange to think it here and now, but Taylor felt more than a little pity for Arch-Duke Brabanto XV da Flor as he advanced towards her elevated throne.

The man really behaved like he was encircled by a school of mega-sharks that had just been told dinner was served.

It may not even be that much of an exaggeration.

The hundred-plus nobles following on his heels were not all antagonistic, but plenty were already anticipating the slaughter.

It was not completely surprising, but after the ‘you’re on your own’ attitudes of the First Duke and the Grand Duke, Taylor had hoped for some loyalty from the Atlasian nobles.

Clearly, if she hoped for an outstanding display of brotherhood and genuine trust, it wasn’t going to be this pack of jackals that was going to set an example for future generations.

Or it would be taught in schools as something that you shouldn’t do.

“Your Celestial Highness,” Brabanto left his hover-chair as he reached the first stairs leading to her ‘not-throne’, and kneeled, despite the obvious pain it must have caused him. “I have answered your invitation.”

“Indeed, you did,” the Basileia answered coldly, waiting three seconds, before deciding there was no point to be cruel. “Rise, Lord Arch-Duke.”

The nobles of course whispered at her words. What? Did they truly think she was going to kill him on the spot in front of them? If it had been the case, she wouldn’t have wasted the price of a journey to Nyx to do so. Pierre was still there trying to remove the black sheep of the Atlasian PDF along with a team of Heracles Wardens. Separating the head of a noble from his shoulders didn’t require a giant audience with a demonstration of force.

And besides, it was interesting to have a glance at one of the people who had been inconstantly been irritating her.

There had been vids and other hololithic documentation, yes, but most of them had been made for propaganda purposes. In reality, once you removed the purple and red rich clothes that seemed to be straight out of a Renaissance fair, Arch-Duke Brabanto XV really looked...average.

He was reasonably fit, though the severe wounds taken during the coup may change that – he clearly hadn’t adapted well to his mechanical prosthetics.

Yes, the richly silver embroidered cloak of carmine was incredibly extravagant.

But for all the annoyances, for all the political struggles...the Arch-Duke looked like a man completely unsuited for his position.

It was, assuredly, truly something to never forget for the short and long-term future.

“I am sure you know why I invited you here, Lord Arch-Duke.” She said as her gold wings unfurled, acknowledging she had to look like a miniature sentinel of light in her golden Power Armour.

“Incompetence to fulfil my sacred duties,” Brabanto XV said in the voice of someone who knew the axe of the executioner was close.

“Incompetence in the fact your vigilance wavered against the heretics and the abominations they serve,” the winged parahuman corrected. “If you had tried to embezzle some of the resources you were supposed to pay to the Administratum, I don’t believe we would have that conversation. If you had harboured pirates and other outlaws guilty of attacking the Imperium’s shipping lanes, the Imperial Navy would have delivered the reply in person.”

Needless to say, it would have been a Battleship and a few flag officers that would have sailed to Atlas.

“You let heresy spread under your watch. And though your Prime Minister appears reasonably competent, there is ample trace of you and plenty of your relatives dismissing the warnings that several Arbites and representatives of the Imperium made concerning your ridiculous isolationist behaviour. Do you deny the accusations?”

There was no resistance, just resignation, both in the eyes and the behaviour.

It wasn’t **Sacrifice**; it wasn’t falling upon your sword to defend others.

It was just that, resignation.

“No, your Celestial Highness.”

Of course, behind him, the pack of nobles really looked like they were about to jump and tear him apiece.

“Your honesty is duly noted. Arch-Duke Brabanto XV da Flor. By the power invested in me by the Emperor, May His Radiance and Sacrifice be forever Honoured, I strip you of your title, duties, and privileges of Planetary Governor. Fortunately for the salvation of your soul, the Inquisition has declared you pure from the corruption the chief heretic spread on your world. Therefore I will be merciful. The small secondary castle-palace you have in the Theia Mountains of Atlas Secundus will remain in your possession with a reasonable amount of servants. You are hereby going to stay here for the next ten years, which will give you time to heal from your wounds and meditate on what you’ve done wrong. Once this period of penitence will be over, you will place yourself under the authority of the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition.”

The ex-Governor of Atlas Secundus suddenly looked far happier than he had entered this room; a confirmation that she was not the only person to have thought the aristocrat was unsuited to fill the shoes of the highest office of the Civilised World.

“Your Celestial Highness, may I-“

“Do not speak to the Webmistress without being invited!” Yes, the carrion birds were here to pounce upon their prey. But Artemis was here to admonish them severely, and if a giant golden spider storming out from her hiding place didn’t surprise you a bit, you had good nerves.

At least most learned their lessons. They didn’t open their mouths for several seconds.

As their genitor moved his hover-chair several metres away to give them room, Taylor wondered how was it that Pierre had not stolen all their hats. They had some really impressive headwear, and it had been complimented by pearls, feathers, and in some cases, even some devices to project the illusion of hunting scenes.

But as much of a pleasure it was to have silence, there was no avoiding the dance. She gave the command to Artemis, and her Adjutant-General allowed one of the female nobles to speak – one she was pretty sure was trying to seduce her given the indecent cleavage of what should have been a ball gown of blue and crimson.

“Your Celestial Highness, if a Planetary Governor is removed from his position for the charges he was guilty of, there are many interpretations of the succession laws...”

As much as it would have been funny to play with their expectations, or let them propose ridiculous methods to settle their way, she didn’t intend to spend days speaking with the Atlasian nobles.

“The basic succession laws don’t apply here. I read the extensive reports the Inquisition wrote on every potential candidate, and frankly, I am appalled by the plots and the intrigues that were made in the aftermath of the heretics being purged. As it stands, I don’t believe any member of the Atlasian nobility has the mindset and the honour to be a good Planetary Governor.”

The Lady of Nyx could name one of Brabanto’s XV children, oh yes. And sadly, watching them as they stood in this hall, there was little doubt that it wouldn’t take ten years before his or her removal in an extremely violent manner, one way or another. The possibility of her own blade being the cause of said death was not to be discounted either.

“Fortunately, I have been given the honour by the Primarch Roboute Guilliman himself to host the valiant Chapter of the Angels Revenant after the series of victories won in the Macragge System. Thus a solution to my dilemma exists today.”

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT! YOU HEATHEN-“

The noble whose cloak had been covered in emeralds abruptly stopped his scream of defiance when he realised that Artemis was not the only one who had stayed hidden out of sight. The Dawnbreaker Guard had too. And Reclusiarch Boulc’h of the Iron Champions cut for a very impressive figure at all times.

The offending noble was removed from the room in a deathly silence.

It took many seconds before another daughter of the Arch-Duke stepped forwards.

This one had dyed her hair in purple, and the style reminded Taylor for a strange reason the ‘fashion’ sponsored by Aurelia Malys.

She had a large amethyst necklace around her throat – all of the certainly purchased from Megaera – and her yellow robe of silk was clearly both trying to respect the Renaissance-style and to seduce. Not necessarily in that particular order, mind you.

“Ah...your Celestial Highness, we have been loyal subjects of the Golden Throne. It would be...a poor reward to confiscate all the wealth of House da Flor and every noble family which stood against the darkness when the heretics tried to storm the Governor’s Palace.”

Sometimes, Taylor really thought that politics was just the art of lying through your teeth while keeping a smiling expression on your face.

“Who spoke about confiscations, Countess?” The insect-mistress gave a silent command to Artemis to withdraw a bit, several nobles had...reacted very poorly to her being too close to them. She breathed out. “Obviously, all the Houses, Guilds, and other parties who sided with the heretics will have their wealth entirely confiscated, assuming it has not already been done at this hour. And the resources obtained from it will be placed at the disposal of the Chapter Master of the Angels Revenant, who will name a Seneschal of Atlas Secundus. Evidently, the Angels Revenant Chapter does not have a presence yet as they’re busy fighting a war in the name of the Emperor, thus it will fall to the current Prime Minister to fulfil the duties in the interim, and he will be overseen by several Nyxian administrators.”

The last part she added as an afterthought was definitely pay-back, however.

“And one Adjutant-Spider will administrate the accounts, in the eternal struggle against tax fraud.”

“We will not fail you, Webmistress!”

The young noblewoman paled, but maintained a face filled with dignity.

The same couldn’t be said about the rest of the ‘jackals’.

Some had collapsed. Others were agitating their fans and clothes like they were hyperventilating.

One or two were screaming hysterically – no insults, no, it felt like their nerves or sanity had completely failed them at this hour.

“But, your Celestial Highness, the Angels of the Emperors are no doubt the greatest warriors of the Imperium,” this female aristocrat was certainly dangerous; her first impression hadn’t been wrong. “But they know nothing about the customs and the traditions of Atlas Secundus! This will require...ah...a delicate touch.”

And here at last they came to the prelude advice of a genius, better known to the Imperium as Roboute Guilliman.

“This is why, with the approval of the authorities-that-be, the creation of a Senate is an imperious demand of Nyx.”

**Countess Serena da Flor**

There were days where you were tempted to curse your siblings as loudly as your lungs allowed you to.

It was better to control oneself and resist the temptation, though.

The Living Saint dominating them from above would not like that at all to begin with.

It had been supposed to be so simple, according to the parasites they had sent ahead of their delegation.

Wait for their genitor to pay for his incompetence, and then convince the Basileia of Nyx you were the most suitable candidate to replace him.

A dozen or so of half-brothers had been particularly been pushing hard for this, and they were Arch-Counts and Vice-Dukes, while she was ‘merely’ a Countess.

They had more resources, more secret accounts to spend, and in their totally modest opinions, they of course knew better.

“This is outrageous!” Bruno was the first to react in a very vocal manner.

“The traditions of Atlas-“

“Were to remove said institution around two thousand years ago, yes, I’m aware,” the flamboyant figure burned so brightly it was very difficult to glance at her and not shiver in the process. “What a former Lord Nyx tolerated, I won’t. The institution will be reinstated, and the feudal rule will be relegated to the archives.”

“All Atlas will rise against this perfidy!” Vitale protested, once more proving he was lacking the intelligence of both his father and his mother.

“Was that *a threat*?” the Living Saint asked politely.

The giant spider, which had been about to return to hide behind the curtains, returned to its previous position. You didn’t need to be a Duke to know that if this unconventional pet was given the order, they were all dead in the blink of an eye.

The Astartes that had just dragged Sabato outside would just have to clap his hands and clean up the mess.

“No! Yes! No!” Panic made people do very stupid things, but it was different seeing it with your very eyes. Everything when you lived at court was prepared months in advance. The etiquette was so well-known that you could predict what was happening around their genitor with a clock, a calendar, and the Dress Code of the year.

“This is just a naked attempt to confiscate our wealth!”

“It is not.” They were playing a game they had not been trained for. Serena made a few discreet hand signs. They had to be careful-

“Well, I for one refuse your dictate! I will go back to Atlas and-“

“You will not. Artemis?”

“Vitale da Flor, Vice-Duke of Zephyr Island, Chancellor of the Eastern Gardens, Colonel of the Antelope Regiment,” yes, the giant golden spider talked, the rumours had not been wrong about that at all. More worrying was the fact slapping them like a velvet glove. They had not been prepared for the Living Saint, but clearly the reverse was absolutely untrue. “Value of the assets estimated at two billion Nyxian Throne Gelts and change. We can buy the assets at your pleasure, Webmistress.”

Their possessions were not going to be confiscated, in other words.

But it was possible when there was a change of dynasty to buy palaces, forts, manors, gardens, and other particularly valuable lands the fallen nobility had jealously guarded.

It was happening here and now, and Serena knew better than to hope that anyone of her half-siblings had the Throne Gelts, Crowns, Florins, or Ducats to outspend the Angel ruling over the wealthiest worlds of the Sector.

“You were speaking about a Senate, your Celestial Highness?” Yes, the very statement of speaking the words was a massive defeat. “I presume there will be requirements to enter it?”

Granted Serena hadn’t studied how any Senate worked, but everyone knew you couldn’t stroll in the Senatorum Imperialis of Holy Terra like a seat was awaiting you. There were things to achieve before that.

“Yes, there will be requirements. Obviously, one of them will be to be a law-abiding citizen of the Imperium. The *Lex Imperialis* is something that must be respected, not ignored. There will be elections. But the biggest requirement of all will be a mandatory period of service in the Imperium institutions before applying for Senatorial office.”

No. No, she couldn’t mean-

“I am not merciless.” The Living Saint’s light seemed to leave no shadows, nothing to hide from her, be it emotions or thoughts. “While my preference goes of course to the Imperial Guard, I am well aware not every citizen is suited for military life. Logically, it will mean leaving the choice of every Atlasian soul to serve the Imperium in the manner he wants to. It can be the Administratum, the Arbites, the Mechanicus...or service under the guidance of the Adeptus Astartes.”

The last option had not been chosen randomly. With Atlas Secundus about to fall de jure under a Chapter’s authority, of course the other Space Marines in the Sector would watch with great attention what was happening there.

But it was a disaster for all the nobles of Atlas; Serena had not counted them, but there couldn’t be more than a thousand high officers of suitable blue-blooded deployment in the Guard, and it was one of the biggest contributions to the Imperium they did make recently.

“There will be a joint delegation of Aventinium and Nyx that will arrive soon to Atlas to shift Atlas Secundus into the brilliant future the Emperor of Mankind wishes for all Humanity’s souls. But before that, I’m afraid I have to insist if you will recognise the authority of the Senate over you.”

Yes, otherwise they were all going to enjoy luxurious prisons on Nyx while the plebeians celebrated their exile...

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**2.611.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“My Lady?”

“Yes, Diamantis?”

“With all the respect you didn’t leave them a lot of choices.”

“Hmm...” it had been only minutes ago the Atlasian aristocrats had disappeared in the direction of the VIP halls where they would wait until returning to high orbit.

Okay, the minority of Atlasian aristocrats. About half had declined her proposal, and would stay ‘honoured guests’ in Hive Athena with her Swarm monitoring them.

“You disagree?”

“No,” the Huscarl replied frankly. “I would have removed them all. I was almost surprised you didn’t.”

“They were incompetent, not treacherous.” So far, the insect-mistress didn’t add. “And you might have noticed, like Gavreel and the rest did, that nowhere is there a promise that the Angels Revenant will guarantee their presence in the New Atlasian Senate.”

A few of the Heirs and Heiresses might. Some of them had brains, and now that the old order was no more, they had all the motivation they needed to claw their way out.

“And if they choose to break their word as soon as they land on their homeworld?”

“There is a reason Pierre didn’t immediately return to Nyx. And the Inquisition presence is not as imposing as it is just because of the anti-heretic investigations.”

The reports indicated that as of last week, they had approximately seventy percent of the PDF under control. It went without to be said that the arrogant feudal rule of the Atlasian nobility had left them with little friends, for all the ‘patronage’ and the ‘gallant and protective shield’ they had proclaimed for the last decades.

“If this proves so much of an efficient diversion, why not have invited more nobles here?” the Imperial Fist asked, visibly curious.

“The more were summoned to this little audience, the more the aristocracy was going to be suspicious. Many are incompetent, but not all, and they still have a brain somewhere in their heads. When you summon thousands of people at once, it’s either to reward or to punish. And I don’t think anyone was delusional enough to think I was going to reward the Arch-Duke and his main advisors. Honestly, I think the only reason all his children and grandchildren came was because their ambition to replace their sire as Planetary Governor toppled their common sense.”

“And the other nobles would not have been part of the House of da Flor, so they wouldn’t have answered the invitation. Not unless it was delivered with a Bolter.”

“Or several hundreds of lasguns, yes.”

It was somehow disheartening that plenty of times, the only thing that could be taken for granted was the monopoly of violence the Imperium enjoyed over its citizens.

There had been more times than she bothered to count when Taylor asked herself what would have happened if the Emperor had pushed from the very start a model that was more akin to a Federal Republic.

Naturally, said political system would have had to survive the Horus Heresy to be able to rebuild the Imperium into something idealistic...

“Anyway, the other nobles that are not part of House da Flor will be forced to adapt too. I will likely have to visit Atlas in person next year, just for your ears.”

“Joy of joys, stone of stones,” the Huscarl grumbled before shrugging. “At least we will be busy protecting you with all the assassination attempts.”

“You have no faith in nobles respecting the liberty aspirations of their subjects?” the female parahuman knew it was a rhetorical question, thank you very much.

“If you confiscated their assets, my Lady, they wouldn’t have the resources or the personnel to hire said assassins.”

“Touché.”

But it was better to wait for the nobles to give her the reason to remove them from the board. And when they did...it had been a surprisingly long amount of time since no Penal Legion had been formed.

“But there is another presence why I chose to come in person today. Follow me.”

The walk rapidly led them out of the secure corridors to sections where you had an excellent view of the Orbital Elevator, before moving to a shopping centre – closed at this hour. Half of the Dawnbreaker Guard, most of them specifically chosen by her were acting as rear-guard today, while Ishtar and several thousands of spiders were the vanguard, along with two companies of guardsmen.

It was not a race, but the Basileia knew that people without a constant physical activity would not have been able to follow them without sprinting after a few minutes. They passed through some of the most secure chokepoints installed at the creation of the Giraffe Spaceport, before at last arriving to hangars which, all proportions guarded, were very similar to some of the underground bunkers found on many Fortress Worlds.

They had arrived just in time, for the massive doors of all the hangars were opening, to let some thirty Thunderhawks land.

Usually, such an arrival should have inspired tens of thousands of men and women to attend, if not hundreds of thousands...or more. But discretion had been requested, and thus discretion was given.

Besides, it was so much fun keeping so many of her Dawnbreaker Space Marines in the dark. It was just a small vengeance for all the moments where they had kept secrets for her, after all.

And honestly? When the first hatch opened, it was literally priceless to see so many Astartes gape at the same time!

“Lord Dorn, it is my honour to welcome you Nyx.”

**Hive Athena**

**Gardens of Meditation**

**2.614.313M35**

**Primarch Rogal Dorn**

The garden was oddly peaceful.

It was like war had never existed here. Bloodshed couldn’t exist in this little realm of water, flowers and trees.

Everything was orderly, with beautiful symmetries.

His father would likely have adored it.

That was never in question.

For his own personality, it was...

Rogal was not used to it.

He could admit it truthfully to himself.

The Seventh Primarch liked the silence.

War was loud, and you had to keep yourself thinking as fast as you could despite the thunder of the cannons.

Here there was nothing to trouble the surroundings.

The only living beings nearby were his sons and the insects feigning to sleep on the grass.

It was secret, far from the crowds who worshipped him as something near-divine now.

The thought was very much an uncomfortable one.

Fortunately, there was cold, harsh, pure water to banish it.

And there were more pressing subjects anyhow.

“You think Abaddon is going to try to escape the Eye of Terror the moment our internal problems will explode out of control.”

“I realise I have little evidence save a nine-fold sorcery coordinated attack,” Weaver almost apologised, her own glass in hand, her outward appearance limited to a simple military uniform of blood-red colour. “Yes, the Cadian and the Boros Gates are incredibly fortified. Logic dictates he would unavoidably suffer heavy losses in any attempt. But, well...”

“As it happens, I agree with you. You met him in person during the last campaign, I was given to understand.”

“I did. He certainly will be one of our most dangerous enemies as long as no one manages to kill him for good. And in all honesty, I don’t think I can duel him alone.”

“I believe you.” The Primarch of the Imperial Fists winced as he dug to find memories of old. Memories of before the betrayal. Memories of brotherhood. Memories that could not be anything more than memories now. “Ezekyle Abaddon always was a very dangerous commander and a Champion of the Legions. Many underestimated him because they thought size and ferocity alone were the reasons of his success, but I knew better. And when the Siege came, he was one of the rare Traitor commanders to escape with his life, all the while swearing no pact with the monsters of the Warp.”

Much like everyone in the Mournival of the Sixteenth Legion, Abaddon could have been one of the greatest heroes of the Imperium. He in fact achieved this status in his lifetime, well before Ullanor.

Instead, unlike some heroic souls, the First Captain of the Sons of Horus had chosen the death of unity before his oaths to the Emperor, the arrogance of his sire’s Legion before reason.

Isstvan III had marked his descent into the pits of treachery and destruction.

And Abaddon had never looked back.

“He may try to create his own exit. There is precedent.” Weaver indicated calmly.

“At the risk of saying the evidence, it would leave him with no path of retreat possible, either for his Black Legion or for himself.”

For yes, there were paths sometimes opening that allowed the Lost and the Damned to storm outside the Eye of Terror. There had been some in the thirtieth millennium; there were others in the thirty-fifth. But all of them were temporary. If you wanted to get out with a massive fleet and retreat by the same ‘Gate’, Cadia and Boros were the only sane options.

“I know. And yes, Abaddon has the disastrous example of Lorgar to think of now. It was one Legion deciding to gamble everything on a poorly-thought gamble.”

“But,” Rogal finished grimly, “the problem many strategists will not consider is that for all the flaws of Lorgar, his plan could have worked.”

“Yes,” the young winged woman grimaced unflinchingly. “Evidently, Lorgar did screw up his campaign. He underestimated the defenders of the Cadian Gate. He underestimated the Space Wolves. He underestimated the Emperor, many great commanders, and plenty of other Imperial heroes. But there was something he didn’t err about. He trusted the fanaticism of his Space Marines, the sheer hatred fuelling them, and the levels of atrocities they were willing to sink to.”

Stars-filled eyes stared at him. And in them Dorn saw the glaciers of his first years at Inwit.

“I don’t think we can count upon the new Warmaster to underestimate us like Lorgar or his own gene-sire did.”

“I believe you are completely right.” The Praetorian answered. “It must be said that I would have been more confident of Father’s plan if he had arranged to tell me decades in advance and prepared the defences. Yes, I know the plague of rats is his solution to an incredibly bad problem, but the risks are incredibly high.”

“I can’t say I disagree.” Weaver admitted while filling his glass anew with water, before doing the same for hers. “And if the Emperor thought removing, let’s say six out of twelve of the High Twelve was a solution, I have a feeling it would have already been done. But while a symptom of the disease would be treated with, in reality we would just have lit the fuse that would shake the Imperium’s to its very foundations.”

“The foundations are already very badly shaken.” Rogal sighed.

It was a bit pessimistic on his part, admittedly. In some aspects, the Imperium was stronger today than it had been at the Ullanor Triumph. The Imperial Guard of M35 was not the Solar Auxilia of M31, but the former had such an absurd numerical superiority that it didn’t matter how the latter fared individually.

Unfortunately, the threats of today couldn’t be taken lightly either.

“I suppose this is why every Primarch is preparing. You see the storm on the horizon.”

“We better see it, for we ignored it when we were young. And you’re doing the same.”

“I do.”

“I was told there was a certain project which could make our lives easier.”

“It would be more accurate to say there is a critical project, supported by lesser ones. Just to give you an example, we’re beginning to prepare a world right next to it to serve as a Titan Moth reserve for the days ahead. And we have already a whole new generation of them being born under the domes of Nyx.”

Dorn understood the hint quite clearly; as long as it wasn’t activated, the Custodes had decided there was no ‘need-to-know’ for him.

The Ten Thousand hadn’t changed much in the last millennia, and the Praetorian challenged any human to change his mind on this specific topic.

“When?”

“We’re shifting as many resources as possible to finish it next year.”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**0.614.313M35**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

Nicephorus took a few steps back as the outburst of rage went out of control.

“HOW DOES SHE ALWAYS MANAGE TO EMERGE TRIUMPHANT WITH NO NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES WHATSOEVER? HOW?”

The surprise was truly unpleasant on his part.

To be sure, Nicephorus hadn’t brought something that could be qualified of ‘good news’, but it hadn’t been that bad either.

“Forgive me, Xerxes, but I don’t see how it is a bad thing from our perspective. Yes, a few heretics tried to launch coups and were crushed in the attempts. The Inquisition played a key role into arresting and purging the heresy. What is there to be angry about?”

“How about the Holy Ordos arresting that bitch of Weaver for incompetence?”

There were times when the Solar Guardian wanted to end his headache by smashing his own face against a mirror several times. It would hurt a lot, and he may die in the process. But it would remove some of the despair he felt at being so powerless right now.

“Brother, surely you remember that even in the Zion Sector, the jewel of our sphere of influence, there are worlds we have little control over?”

Xerxes grunted in reluctant approval.

“Yes, but those are a bunch of worthless backwaters that are paying nothing but pitiful tithes.”

“From Weaver’s perspective, the Atlas System was heading the same way. I’ve looked at the taxes and the industrial output, and the system is definitely stagnating. I also must mention that it isn’t likely to change. Yes, the Sector Lady is going to try to revitalise the Civilised World. But there are hard limits to what she can do. The other planets of the Atlas System are not under her control, and unless the two local Planetary Governors are so stupid to meddle in heresy or some other sort of treachery against the Imperium, she will never be.”

There was a tense moment. And after some nasty glares, the wrath of the High Lord of the Administratum progressively faded away.

“All right,” the anger was still in play, but it was not sheer fury powering it, “but why a Senate and this dance of hypocrisy and ancient laws?”

“Because there is no middle-class worth the name, and the unwashed masses of this backwater do not have any experience ruling something as complex as a manufactorum?”

“Or because she wants to test how far she can go with her ugly ‘reforms’ before moving to Holy Terra!”

That was...those were words that came back more and more frequently in Xerxes’ mouth these days.

And if Nicephorus was honest with himself, yes, it worried him. Xerxes had not risen to where he was by jumping at shadows and inventing enemies that didn’t exist.

The Administratum required a lot of astute politics moves and some ruthless competence.

And here, it was...it was trying to conjure enemies when there were none to be fought.

“Xerxes. Assuming Weaver has such ambitions, and I am not convinced she did, she would need a super-majority of the High Lords to resign in masse to get away with it. Yes, some of her allies, like the Fabricator General of Mars, are willing to sponsor *some* reforms. But each member of the High Twelve has very different goals from the others, you know this better than I. The Chartist Captains are more concerned with taxes exemptions and trade privileges. The Astronomican always want more psykers to train in their facilities. There is no motivation for *critical* reforms. Not now, not since the crisis of the Black Crusade is behind us.”

Nicephorus was sincerely grateful for that, by the way. The Imperium needed order and stability. It didn’t need mobs trying to upturn the status quo which had worked so well for the last millennia.

“You say that, but we have Astartes on the doorstep of Holy Terra! Who knows what kind of schemes they’re preparing?”

Oh no, not this topic again...

“Xerxes, we have debated this several times with your children recently. Yes, the Invaders are likely more loyal to Weaver than anyone else in Sol save the God-Emperor.” The contrary would have been very surprising, truly. “But they’re literally watched by a billion eyes, and they’re currently stationed either on their ships or aboard the *Phalanx*. And if I remember well, we all agreed that the best thing to do was to get them back to full strength, so that they would once again return to the frontlines, no?”

“That was before knowing that they intend to increase their recruitment pace with aspirants from Necromunda in addition to Terra!” Xerxes spat.

And Nicephorus blinked in incomprehension.

“Err...where is the problem? I mean, this wasn’t something I heard before, but it is not too surprising. The Invaders Space Marines are sons of Dorn, much like the Imperial Fists are. And everyone knows the Fists recruit irregularly some replacements on Necromunda. As they are several trillion bodies to choose from, I don’t think it is very surprising they went for this Hive World. The Planetary Governor is an informal vassal of the Fists, and it’s not like the Helm’ayr line is going to care that they are missing a few thousand hive gangers.”

Necromunda had plenty of things in common with Holy Terra, minus the greatness.

That was what happened when you allowed someone that was nothing but an upstart ruffian to unite the planet instead of sending the Imperial Guard and putting the fear of the God-Emperor in them.

“It matters because this is the prelude to an Imperial Fists muster at Necromunda! Before her Triumph, Weaver will strike at our vital interests.”

Was Xerxes losing his mind? Nicephorus was suddenly very worried about it.

“Xerxes, there are currently less than fifty Space Marines, supported by a single Strike Cruiser at Necromunda. This was announced yesterday by the representative of the Adeptus Astartes. I suppose this will be them who will do the recruitment purposes, in all likelihood. This is not a muster. And this is assuredly not anywhere ‘close to our vital interests’, unless Zion and all the Sectors in our sphere of influence have mysteriously moved hundreds of light-years away from their current coordinates while I wasn’t looking!”

The Lord of the Adeptus Administratum suddenly looked...not furious, but very displeased. Not at Nicephorus, oh no. The glint in his eyes was eminently recognisable. It was a sign that Xerxes feared having said too much.

On the one hand, it was somewhat reassuring that Xerxes was not becoming raving mad.

On the other hand, it was an unpleasant sensation to be kept in the dark. For he had just said the truth: the Vandire Clan had few assets in the Necromunda Sector, and their influence over the major players there was insignificant.

The question burned his tongue.

What had been put into motion in the Necromunda Sector?

Nicephorus tried to find the courage to ask.

He didn’t find it.

And though he didn’t know it at the moment, the Solar Guardian of Records would have plenty of causes to regret it later.

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**The Palace of the Orient**

**2.620.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“A pity the Lord Primarch didn’t stay longer. I would have early asked him more questions about the trade nexuses of the thirtieth millennium. But I’m sure it will result in more fortresses being built, so it’s all for the better, right?”

Taylor snorted. She could recognise the sarcasm of the Vicequeen when she heard it, thank you very much.

“And this is the merchantwoman who tried to buy the *Phalanx* from its legitimate owner,” the insect-mistress joked back. “Did you at least obtain the information you were primarily after?”

“Of course she got the information she was after,” Wei intervened, moving around the piano that had been recently installed in the entertainment room. “You know that compared to her implacable Chartist sense of affairs, a mere Primarch is nothing!”

They all chuckled for several seconds, and it felt good.

It felt really good during these evenings to not have crowds of pilgrims repeating ‘your Celestial Highness’ a few millions of times. It felt good to not worry about assassins and unpleasant security problems; her Adjutant-Spiders were coordinating with the Catachan Queen-ants, and Nyx was as safe as it could possibly in this dangerous galaxy.

“But in all seriousness, yes, I learned what I wanted.” Marianne abandoned the red couch to sit on the piano seat. “I knew of course that the pre-Heresy Imperium was a very different animal than the one we have today, but I hadn’t imagined by how much.”

“To be fair,” the female parahuman said while petting the purring Mainz Cat on her lap. “We can’t exactly be surprised. Heresy or not, it was a period of time that occurred four thousand years ago.”

It was enough to give several men and women in her staff vertigo. And it certainly gave her a sense of humility.

No matter how much she considered her new ‘increased’ life-expectancy, the Imperium has stood for longer than the Roman Empire, all the Chinese dynasties, and plenty of other civilisations. The survivors of the Age of Strife had managed to rebuild from the ashes, no matter how imperfect their solution had been.

“I know.” The Vicequeen moved her fingers like she was launching a coin in the air. “But there’s something that interested me above all: the Adeptus Administratum, and how it was tied to the planet that was called Terra at the time.”

“In what way?” the black-haired Queen of the Swarm asked.

“In the way that at the time, it was a far more ‘balanced’ Adeptus, for one.” Marianne grinned. “By sheer coincidence, it may have to do with the fact the Administratum had not ‘absorbed’ about a third of the old bureaucratic Adeptuses of the time. The Primarch guessed – for he was not there most of the time – that it was an emergency measure brought by the devastation of the Heresy in order to rebuild the Throneworld as fast as possible.”

“And in the end, the emergency measure was never relinquished when the big works were over?” Wei sweetly verified, receiving a nod of approval. “Why I am not surprised?”

“Because you’re clever? And yes, inertial ensured the status quo was allowed to continue. And then as each new crisis exploded out of control, you can very much predict what happened.”

“The Departmento Munitorum was swallowed during the era of the War of the Beast,” of all of the betrayals of the Imperial Guard by the bureaucrats hiding behind it, this was definitely one of the worst. “It should have been independent, but this was forgotten.”

“And,” Wei added, “every time the Administratum grabs a minor Adeptus, it is ensuring the performance of said Adeptus severely decreases, by virtue of the game of politics.”

“The Administratum as a consequence becomes more bloated, unwieldy, and deliciously maze-like with a byzantine and nightmarish bureaucracy.” The mistress of the Dawnbreaker Guard concluded. “Without it, the Imperium can’t stand. But with it, celerity and ability to evolve are severely restricted. And we fall into Decay. Did I mention how I hate Decay?”

“Oh, yes, you did.” Her wife assured her. “At least twice per day, lately.”

“Good.”

It was not an exaggeration to say that billions, no, trillions of Administratum members would fight to the death to protect their privileges. And why they shouldn’t be? Year after year, they had convinced the rest of the Imperium to give them all sorts of power, using every stratagem legal and illegal that humanity had ever invented.

By comparison, the aristocrats of the Atlas System were a model of cooperation and friendliness.

No, it wasn’t a joke.

Yes, Atlas Secundus had given a nice refresher on how much financial corruption an entrenched elite could accumulate if it was allowed to go rampant for centuries with no one to stop or at least discourage it.

“And then,” Marianne spoke with determination, “there is Holy Terra.”

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

“What about Holy Terra?”

There was something deeply funny about a Living Saint trying to keep content an adorable white-furred cat on her lap all the while a very serious conversation was happening.

“Taylor, we all know you’re deeply unhappy about what they did to the homeworld of Mankind.”

“If by the ‘they’ you include the Arch-Heretic Horus and all his Traitor Legions, yes, I am,” the Angel of Sacrifice admitted without shame. “And I’m a bit more than unhappy, Marianne. For all its flaws, the Terra of M30 was rebuilding itself from the ashes of the Age of Strife. It had a large ocean and several growing seas. It was beginning to deal with all the problems of atmospheric pollution.”

The white teeth didn’t grit themselves, but they weren’t far from it.

“And then came Horus,” the accursed name was hurled away both as a poisonous dart and the curse of betrayal it stood for. “For someone who supposedly wanted to ‘save’ the Imperium and Mankind, he came closer to anyone had ever done to destroy utterly Mankind’s homeworld. I don’t doubt for a single second that if the Emperor had built the Imperial Palace on another planet, the Traitor Armada would have utterly destroyed Terra. These bastards worshipping the Ruinous Powers have a curious tendency to proclaim everything is the Will of the abominations before razing everything and proclaiming victory upon the mountains of corpses of the innocents.”

The Webmistress of the Adjutant-Spiders breathed out.

“But I suppose this isn’t the point you were going to make.”

“It is not,” Marianne acknowledged. “This was more of an introductory nature to the fact that pre-Heresy, Terra’s budget had a positive balance, to the point it likely had no peer economically. This allowed it to not only erase the damage caused by the Age of Strife across Sol, but it was a major source of relief for human planets that were left in ruins by the military campaigns of the Great Crusade.”

It had been a symbiotic relationship, or at last as close to one could likely exist. Terra invested in the reconstruction of Mankind; the newly rediscovered planets were rebuilt and gave out ever-increasing tithes, and Terra grew richer. Repeat the cycle, and the prosperity levels soared, not just for Terra, but for the entire Imperium.

As Taylor could calculate one million times faster than her, summing-up the problem was not very difficult.

“But now Holy Terra is a black hole, economically speaking. Where two trillion people lived, there are now quadrillions, and many of them are forced to survive day after day in abject poverty. The environmental damage is colossal, to the point it will likely need five centuries to rebuild something from this polluted disaster. Obviously, that’s not counting the oceans and some vital things. Mutants, I heard from my Adjutant-Spiders, are not an outlandish rumour, but a sad fact of life due to the industrial pollutants and the absurd lack of care for the planet.”

The Victor of Commorragh grimaced.

“Thousands of people are starving every day, and I don’t even want to imagine what would happen should one day the trade routes be disrupted in a significant manner.”

It would be chaos, and they both knew it. For all their efforts, the eminent Chartist Captains knew the granary mega-silos and the water reservoirs were utterly insufficient for a mild crisis.

“Terra is dangerously overcrowded,” the Regina of Wuhan commented in a dry tone. “But I don’t really know what we can do to remedy to it. We already have encountered *minor difficulties* of our own at Nyx and Wuhan. And these are planets where thanks to our lover here, we have options that are denied to the majority of the Planetary Governors. Many can’t propose land grants on the neighbouring Civilised Worlds, for example. We also have the religious pilgrimage more or less under control now.”

It had to be pointed out that Wei Cao had chosen to not pet the Mainz Cats, preferring to avoid fur and compliment the Adjutant-Spider so that her spider silk robes remained clear of other animal essence.

“To return Terra’s population to something a bit manageable,” the Regina continued, “we would have to organise the greatest exodus in the history of the Imperium, maybe the history of Mankind ever. Adjutant-Spiders or not, I’m pretty sure the transport ships for something of that magnitude don’t exist. And in the unlikely case they were built, where would we settle all these people?”

Marianne looked at the suddenly emotionless expression of the Basileia of Nyx.

“The Maelstrom,” she answered, knowing she had stumbled upon the truth. “It is the Maelstrom, isn’t it?”

**Regina Wei Cao**

Wei did try hard to not smile as Taylor rolled her eyes.

The mewling of a cat wanting more caresses kind of ruined the effect, it must be said.

“You speak like I was going to sell something before the first shot of a Crusade-level campaign is fired.”

“I’m not hearing a ‘no’,” Marianne teased her.

“Fine, you’re right, it is one of the options I’ve been studying. Obviously, we must first find a way to close the Maelstrom first, which in my opinion, will likely be the most difficult challenge of our lives.”

Since previous enemies had involved horrors that should have been exterminated millions of years ago, it was not reassuring at all.

“That said, I had access to the old Necron maps, and I could calculate a basic projection with my power of Administration. If we are really able to remove the Warp Storm, snuff out all the Warp abominations out of existence, and purify the area of space sufficiently so that human settlement is made possible, we will have enough worlds to create the equivalent of ten to twenty Sectors. But remark how many pre-requisites are involved.”

“But the benefits do not stop there, no?” Marianne astutely replied. “There are thirty to forty existing Sectors around the Maelstrom that are economically non-viable because of their proximity to said Warp Storm. The circumstances demand a significant military effort for all their Governors, even if it is not in the same league as the defences of the Eye of Terror. And yet pirates and heretical raiders are a never-ending threat because they have bases where the Imperium won’t dare to pursue them to.”

Just from this perspective, a blind citizen could recognise the massive benefits a removal of the Maelstrom would entail. Without the corruption and the other threats that were generated by the Warp Storm, the region would open up to imperial settlement again in large numbers. It would also decrease the dangers existing in the very heart of Ultima Segmentum. Trade lanes that could never be secured no matter how competent the Admirals were at last would require few convoy escorts. And it may open up the roads to the Galactic Core that had fallen out of use long ago.

Yes, the gains were literally galaxy-changing.

Unfortunately...

“The benefits are there,” Taylor conceded. “Not that I expect certain High Lords we have every reason to distrust to say it in public. And of course, if we can see the potential victories we can win with this move, it is a safe bet to say our enemies will move to stop us too.”

“Yes, I don’t expect them to take the prospect of a resurgent Imperium lightly. There will be retaliation, and on a different league of what happened at Atlas.”

“Agreed. That’s why attempts will be made to make sure they aren’t able to intervene in the first place.”

**Eye of Terror**

**Brigannion System**

**Plague Battleship Virulent Blight**

**Space-Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Warlord Gluthor Skurvithrax, the Ferryman**

Some warlords pretended the Brigannion System was cursed by the Gods. Others thought the Night Lords had unleashed a particularly vicious ritual in exchange of power beyond their wildest dreams. Many Sorcerers suggested it was a combination of the proximity to the edge of the Eye and the Firetide of the Astronomican having several times illuminated the region.

A few of these theories might be correct. Or not.

As always within the prison of the Legions, truth was incredibly subjective, and was malleable to the will of the Gods.

And frankly, Gluthor didn’t care.

The only thing that was certain was that it was not going to be an easy battlefield.

“Brigannion Six is still there,” the Watchmaster announced, and had the humour to not add ‘unlike the last time we came here’. “But it looks like the planet is burning in blue and pink flames.”

“Malicia and her pet sorcerers,” the Ferryman stated.

“Almost certainly, Lord.”

“The other planets?”

“Brigannion Five is crawling with some new kind of infestation, some of kind of Neverborn-looking slugs? There are entire flocks of Harpies battling them and calling for the Hosts to join the war. As for the other worlds, I’m afraid there are too many disruptive phenomena in the way.”

And what phenomena those were. From his bridge, Gluthor felt he was looking at a giant storm that also happened to be a maw.

Lightning shrieked like ten thousand beasts fighting each other. Asteroids were twisted before transforming into cascades of glittering pink crystals before reassembling into blue edifices that tried to befuddle their long-range abilities.

There were giant towers which appeared and disappeared into the void. The very earth of the Brigannion planets was altered to create tall structures that collapsed the next instant. Gigantic tsunamis of acidic fluxes destroyed everything on Brigannion Seven and Eight.

But all his experience of veteran told him to focus on the storm. It was between them and Brigannion Four, and it was beyond gigantic.

It was, of course, not worthy to be called a Warp Storm by itself. But it was more dangerous than anything else beneath that threshold. Baleful fire surged and struck, preceding or succeeding to black-purple lightning. The energy was pouring out of the Realm of the Changer to conjure a maelstrom of elemental power. The few laws of physics that were considered true even in the Eye of Terror were not applying in this chaos.

“Calamity,” one of his elite Legionnaires cursed.

“**Infernal Tempest**,” Gluthor corrected, the boons of his God empowering him without warning. “**But is she the Harbinger or the Queen?**”

The power faded as fast as it had appeared.

And it left him assuredly with more questions than answers.

“Lord Ferryman? We are able to detect significant fighting on Brigannion Four. So far, evidence suggests a significant cultist uprising is ongoing in the Forges of the Iron Warriors.”

How...unsurprising. No Legion tried to make itself beloved of the mortals, but the Fourth had a way to make itself truly hatred by everyone they happened to rule over.

“The Iron Warriors have in general plenty of contingencies to deal with rebellions. If they’re struggling to stop them, I guess this means Malicia is here.”

“We’re not seeing her ships, I’m afraid, Lord Ferryman. But it is the likeliest assumption, yes.”

“Warlord, the girl must be desperate to resort to this kind of scheme.”

“Desperate, or does she know something we ignore?” Gluthor asked before spitting seventh-blessed diseased saliva. “It doesn’t matter. We are going to approach this battle methodically and ruthlessly. Ji, Skalathrax, Harmony, the Broken Worlds; the prey has escaped the hunter every time. I think it is time it ends.”

“Warlord, we have a communication request from Brigannion Four. Old protocols from the Legion Wars, Iron Warriors origin is confirmed.”

“Accept,” he ordered.

It didn’t take more than five seconds for the hololithic image of a Legionnaire of the Fourth to appear. The quality of the communication was perfectly deplorable, but it was better than nothing, and the audio worked, though one could hear tortured screams playing in the background. Whether it was a result of the Tzeentchian sorcery or the planet’s defenders punishing their unruly slaves was not his problem.

“Gluthor Skurvithrax,” the voice the Ferryman recognised, by virtue of having fought by the Legionnaire’s side twice, and tried to kill him three times.

“Warsmith Manneus Drath,” the Warlord of the Death Guard didn’t waste any precious time in foolish pretences. “Are the sons of Change there?”

“They are here, yes,” the Lord of Brigannion Four growled. “Her cultists were able to spread enough rebellions for a beachhead to be seized in Sector Two-Delta-Four. You should have done your damned job at Harmony.”

“I didn’t see you telling ‘no’ to the Despoiler last time I checked.” The Grandfather in person had accepted that Gluthor couldn’t engage the Warmaster’s fleet, and if it was good enough for his God, then it was good enough for a corpse-maker of the Fourth.

“Give me a reason why I should spare your fleet.”

Oh yes, here came the arrogance of Perturabo’s gene-line again.

“I have enough knowledge to conjure a Rust Plague that will turn your little citadels into a scrapyard of broken hulls and perfectly infected machines, Drath. You can help me or you can get in the way. But if you choose the latter, I promise I will crush you.”

He could feel the pure hatred irradiating the organs of the Iron Warrior.

But in the end, the Lord of Brigannion Four chose the problem he hated the least.

“She is on her way to the Iron Chamber. You can still catch her if you hurry.”

**Brigannion Four**

**The Iron Chamber**

**Space-Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Some people pretending to be experts on the Iron Warriors proclaimed that the slaves of Perturabo enslaved the Cadians and every soldier or civilian worshipping the Anathema just to avenge themselves of the chains their gene-sire had placed around their throats.

It was a grave misconception.

The Iron Warriors were enslaving everyone that they had the skill and the capacity to enslave. Nothing more, nothing less.

Daemons. Humans. Xenos. Semi-sentient daemonic machines.

It didn’t matter who or what you were, the Iron Warriors could enslave you, they did it.

It was really unfortunate for them that against Transmutational Changestone, all their enslavement methods failed.

The Change-imbued Noctilith acted as a focusing lens for Ambition, and right now, the two main ambitions of the billion of souls of Brigannion Four were to gain their freedom and have their revenge upon their captors.

It had required only nine pulses for the rebellion to begin.

It had taken only nine requests to let it erupt beyond the ability of the slavers to regain control.

And once she landed, there were only nine Astartes to eliminate.

Now it was only a minor issue of expanding the state of disorder. The hated overseers were pushed into the lava pits by the former slaves while others roared and cheered. Daemon Engines went into a rampage against other Daemon Engines. The explosives that had been assembled in tears and blood were hurled against the vulnerable parts of the Forges.

The ammunition production was suddenly grinding to a halt as explosions rocked the ferroalloys’ structures. Energy blackouts became more and more common as the rebellious Mechanicum personnel diverted the output to wage their war against their former masters.

Predator Tanks that had just been completed out of an assembly line were now charging to shoot at the Iron Warriors which should have manned it in the first place.

It was the greatest slave rebellion Brigannion Four had ever seen, and the Iron Warriors, in their monumental arrogance, had ignored the signs until they received the first Bolter rounds in their ugly faces.

“**They are waiting for you**,” Antwyr commented as she incinerated some Mechanicum automatons which stood in their way.

“I know. I would have been almost disappointed if they hadn’t.”

It wasn’t like she had gone for something subtle. Her progression had been *insultingly* linear.

The Q’Sal sorcerers accompanying her were casting the same nine spells.

She had chosen the closest and most evident landing pad to make her entrance known.

There had been no effect of surprise to be won here, and she had not lifted a finger to make a diversion.

And now she stood before a daemonic gate that was hundreds of metres high, fortified by hell-pacts and the toughest materials available in the Eye of Terror.

“May **Calamity** befall you,” the Warlord spoke.

And she swung Antwyr with about half the power she could wield without hurting her arms in the process.

The gate was strong, too strong.

Malicia had no doubt that in a conventional siege, soldiers may have bombarded it for decades without creating a chink in it.

The Black Blade of Antwyr carved it apart in mere seconds.

Iron broke.

Iron roared.

Iron collapsed.

Millions of slaves nearby fell their collars fall apart under their disbelieving eyes.

The gears and the cogs stopped working.

Stupefaction died down, and new roars of triumph spread out.

Waves after waves of unchecked savagery and determination rose.

The Iron Warriors were good, but there were at one against one million, and their overseers were in an instant desperately trying to save their save lives for a few more heartbeats.

Malicia turned their back on them, and went through the broken gate, her sorcerers in tow.

There was a gigantic hall which offered itself to her view.

And at the end of it, on an elevated balcony that some Astartes Lord had forged in ancient times, was the object she had come for.

A Noctilith Crown.

It was a large ring-like structure, but obviously the name and the description were insufficient to convey the power, the threat, and the sheer potential of the artefact.

It was obviously a prototype, and Abaddon the Despoiler had given it to the Iron Warriors in exchange of unknown favours.

It was one of the few things Malicia knew could fulfil the objective of escaping the Eye of Terror.

But it was not yet hers.

The hall may have been empty hours ago, but now Space Marines had assembled here.

They were exactly seventy-seven.

On Terra, they likely would have been mistaken for the Horseman of Pestilence trying to replicate in large numbers.

They had scythes, and their colours were those of disease and contagion. They wielded power Scythes and Bolters, and the air around them seemed to die given how much they reeked.

Death Guard.

“I see you brought reinforcements, Manneus Drath.”

A door opened, and about fifty Iron Warriors went to take position around the Noctilith Crown.

You needed only a glance to know two-thirds of them were Terminators, and given their mutations, they were certainly veterans of the Long War.

“Your pathetic attempt to steal what is mine,” the Warsmith of Brigannion Four eructed in a tone which imitated particularly impressively the sounds of a machine, “ends here.”

“Really?” the young woman asked. “Because from where I stand, you seem to have a few problems. I mean, you didn’t have many Iron Warriors in the first place, and denying your gene-sire means you will not receive reinforcements any time soon. And of course all your slaves are busy rampaging across your Forges, trying to take all of the Iron Warriors’ heads.”

“Slaves can and will be replaced,” once again, the platinum-haired sorceress wondered what the hell was wrong with the Iron Warriors. They really sounded like machines without a trace of humanity left in them. “And when it comes to the Iron Warriors, I have now the Daemonculaba technology to replace my losses.”

The name meant absolutely nothing to Malicia. But it evidently meant something to the Death Guard. Unease spread through their ranks, and their Warlord turned his head back towards Manneus Drath. His helmet hid his expression, but it evidently wasn’t one to congratulate him.

“Are you insane? This horror was proscribed by the Mechanicum-“

“You are harvesting rotten fruits from your unwilling sire, Skurvithrax!” The Warsmith declared mockingly. “You don’t exactly have the position to remonstrate anyone.”

“You are-“

The Iron Warrior who had taken and held Brigannion Four for so long clenched his fist.

“And now I believe it is time to present you the weapon that is going to kill you all.”

A slave was pushed in direction of the Noctilith Crown, and suddenly all the Iron Warriors Terminators tried to get away from him as fast as possible.

It could have been funny, if one didn’t see the male human in question age visibly before her very eyes!

It was like the tormented soul was losing a year of life per ten seconds, and in his hands there was-

There was an hourglass.

“What have you done, you fool?”

There was a sinister laughter resonating within the hall.

“*You among all ensured I would not claim Eternity. But I certainly can take from you* everything!”

Nagash. The King in Yellow. Of all stupidities-

Two things happened at the same moment.

The Noctilith Crown activated.

And the slave carrying the hourglass threw it into the ring-like structure.

Reality screamed, and the true battle began.

**Warsmith Manneus Drath**

This was not his favourite method of destruction.

The enemies that were now at his nonexistent mercy should have been mercilessly gunned, down, slaughtered by a perfectly calculated fire of ten thousand turrets. They should have fallen down by the long-prepared bombardment of several artillery brigades specially trained for this operation.

Instead he had to rely upon this distasteful sorcery.

What was the saying again? Victory excused everything?

It certain applied in that case.

The Noctilith Crown was attuned to the strange hourglass.

It was not precise.

But it was something lethal.

The first Death Guard Legionnaires had no time to understand the depth of their mistake: one instant, they were shooting, the other their life-essence and their souls were ripped apart from their bodies.

Astartes knew no fear, but here and now as you saw the near-black stuff of the Warp shroud them and imprison them before robbing them of every scrap of life they had, the screams of terror couldn’t be missed.

All the training and the psycho-indoctrination in the galaxy couldn’t save you in the end from *that*.

“And here I thought that denying Perturabo made you a sane commander,” there had to be some sorcery at work, for Malicia’s word somehow could be heard without difficulty.

“I chose a weak Lord; it certainly gives me plenty of authority and opportunities to rise.”

“Weak?” the infernal child laughed. “I withdraw every compliment I ever said about you and your warband. Negotiating with the King in Yellow because he is weak is utterly ridiculous. All four Powers intervened to make sure his apotheosis didn’t come to be. There were many interventions of Anathema power, and pretty much every Daemon Primarch who could be committed was sent to the Tyrant Star.”

“This was then,” Drath growled as two more Death Guard Legionnaires fell, and the remainder tried to take cover as his Terminators unleashed enough firepower to kill ten thousand slaves. “Right now, he needs allies.”

“The King in Yellow has no allies, and for all his servants, the leash is undeath! I have a word for this! What was it, again? Ah, yes, it is ‘slave’!”

To his frustration, the target of his ire showed no terror, not even as the power of Death incarnate moved towards her.

Manneus wanted to see her fearful and begging for his pardon!

Why wasn’t she kneeling? Why wasn’t she trying to run away, proving her ideals were nothing but empty air to hide her cowardice?

“You have enslaved Legionnaires of my Legion too.”

“Temporarily,” the sorcerers in blue and gold were trying to cast minable spells, but the power of the Noctilith Crown dispersed them like the pathetic distraction they were. “I certainly don’t keep billions of slaves next to me, trying to give them a reason with every breath to hate my guts!”

“Do you think this weak justification will convince me to save you? You chose to come here without any Astartes and now you are completely defenceless! As for you, Skurvithrax, I will make sure you regret until the End of Times the threats you dared uttering in my presence! I am Manneus Drath, Warlords of Change and Decay, and I am going to kill you!”

“So to the last second, you didn’t ask yourself why most of my lieutenants were not with me when I landed on Brigannion Four?”

The abominable sword in the insolent’s hand struck.

The wall, built by the expertise of the Iron Warriors, exploded.

“Was it-“

Figures crawled out the smoke.

Small figures were emerging from the new devastation, and they weren’t moving like Space Marines or humans at all.

There were dozens of flashes, no hundreds of iridescent green flashes.

It was-

It was a salvo he had not accounted for at all.

The only salvation was the abysmal precision of the shots.

But terrible or not, it did too much damage.

Manneus Drath wouldn’t know if it had been luck or skill. His mind would always think of the former, but there would be a itch that couldn’t disprove the latter.

It was a single projectile, a tiny and ugly piece of petal that had been mixed with foul substances and one of the most instable and corrupt substances of the Eye of Terror.

It hit the hourglass, and the artefact that had been released into custody, which should have been unbreakable due to the power protecting it, was damaged.

There was a hole in it.

The fissures immediately spread out.

Precisely thirteen heartbeats after the impact, the hourglass exploded.

And most of the Chamber of Iron detonated with it.

**Warlord Gluthor Skurvithrax, the Ferryman**

Gluthor survived the titanic blast which saw the destruction of the cursed hourglass.

This was the good news. The King in Yellow had been stymied in his frightening plans of vengeance.

With the deactivation of the Noctilith Crown, Gluthor knew the souls of his Legionnaires had been freed from the torment the device had put them through. They had returned to the Garden of Nurgle.

That was the only good news the Ferryman could see in the Chamber of Iron.

Living to serve the Grandfather another day was of course a great blessing.

But watching tattered banners be hoisted over the crumbling ramparts of the Iron Warriors was not.

“Foolish girl,” the Ferryman spat, “what were you thinking-“

“THIS FORTRESS-WARREN IS NOW-NOW RULED BY CLAN SKYRE! PRAISE-PRAISE **MALAL**!”

They were a multitude. Their very appearance was both one of ugliness and cowardice. They hated themselves as much they hated their enemy.

Mortal slaves had joined their ranks, but the rats still formed a majority of the lawless mob that was scurrying out of the holes.

 “IRON WITHIN! IRON WITHOUT!”

Manneus Drath called Brigannion Four to war, and Brigannion answered.

The ceiling was pulverised by enough artillery to make a Hive breach, and Heldrakes and colossal Daemon Engines entered the fray. Two Soul Grinders charged and trampled the Skaven, and bathed in their vermin’s blood. But no matter how many were killed, no matter how many hundreds were slaughtered, the numbers seem to have no end.

“FOR TZEENTCH! FOR THE GREAT ARCHITECT OF LIBERATORS!”

“THE MUTATION WILL SET US FREE!”

“YOU ARE ALL COACKROACHES! IRON WILL PUT YOU IN YOUR RIGHTFUL PLACE!”

“VOLLEY ON MY COMMAND, YES-YES! ANARCHY CONQUERS ALL-ALL!”

It was assuredly proper Chaos the likes the God enjoyed. With the trap revealed and broken, Malicia was unleashing her followers at last; tens of thousands of slaves that had pledged their allegiances to the Great Liar, supported by thousands of beastly mutants, and behind them the sorcerers played the role of long-range batteries.

The Iron Warriors counterattacked by deploying gigantic turrets and all the arsenal of dangerous machines they were known for. The Skaven horde had more numbers crawling out of its ramshackle breaches, and used Warpstone-fuelled weapons that appeared to kill more of their own troops than they did the enemy.

It was a three-way battle.

It should have been a four-way battle. It should have been his moment to strike!

But an ocean of fangs, claws, and death machines separated him from Malicia.

And as much as it was painful for him to acknowledge it, Gluthor didn’t have the resources here to accomplish his mission. He had thought that bringing seventy-six of his Legionnaires in addition to himself would be enough for the victory and preventing Manneus Drath from stabbing them in the back.

In this regard, the Ferryman had been proven wrong.

Now there were only thirty-three Space Marines left dedicated to the Grandfather, and many of them already had wounds that would have killed a lesser Astartes.

No, it was time to go.

His haste had been ill-advised, but there were other ways to accomplish the will of his God.

Besides, while he had lost here today, Malicia hadn’t won. In this confused melee, the possibility of claiming the Noctilith Crown was so low he wasn’t worried about it. The servant of the Great Liar was as trapped as they were in the Eye of Terror.

And his fleet could intercept everyone who survived this three-way clash long before they could get away from Brigannion. That was the problem with this bastardised version of a Warp Storm, yes. You could blind and restrict your enemy, but it was making Warp travel synonymous with painful death if you activated your Warp Drives too close to it.

“Reverse the Contagion Vanguard Ritual,” Gluthor Skurvithrax gurgled as his weapons reaped hundreds of rats and human-sized Daemon Engines. “Prepare for Plan Fever.”

This was a reverse, but it wasn’t the end.

His fleet was coming ever closer to Brigannion Four, and soon there would be no escape for the girl and her warlock acolytes.

Sorcery teleported him out of the Iron Chamber, but not before watching the Soul Grinder be toppled by the rats and uncontrolled explosions of Warpstone.

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

At least twice per battle, Malicia thought that taking the ‘sorceress role’ had been the best decision she could had ever made.

Cast a few spells.

Stay at long-range.

Be patient.

And let the arrogance of her enemies do the rest.

Most of the time, it was enough to convince her enemies she was a ‘coward’ and that she was no threat at all to them if the fighting turned out to be at close-quarters.

“**The Ferryman fled with his tail between his legs. A pity, I would have loved to be the instrument of his end**.”

“Unlike some people, Skurvithrax can recognise when a battle is lost, Antwyr.”

The parahuman sorceress gave nine new orders to her troops, and then stopped pretending.

She sang to her power, and her power answered.

A second later, she flew into the melee and began to massacre them.

A Venomcrawler stood in the way, and she tore it apart.

Skaven tried to stop her with a concentrated salvo.

Her power’s shield went down for the first time, but the platinum-haired Warlord was already among them, hacking and slashing, punching and kicking, claiming hundreds of their lives.

There had been a chaotic three-way fight before.

In a couple of minutes, the two armies of the Skavens and the Daemon Engines were separated and cut off from each other.

Worse for them, the actions of her Astartes began to tell.

They were not in the Chamber of Iron, this had never been their mission.

But thanks to their teleportation raids on other strongholds, the reinforcements of the Brigannion Four defenders completely dried up.

As for the followers of Anarchy, their so-called ‘gnaw-hole’ was disrupted by a simple ritual.

No doubt the rodents were going to open up another one soon, but for the time being, they only had what troops they had been able to deploy before being cut off.

The rifle specialists were dangerous, incredibly so. But that was exactly why she had gone for them first, and now the lone survivors were running away as fast as they could.

The mob-like horde tried to overwhelm by the numbers.

Wielding Antwyr in her right hand and sorcery in the other, the Skaven sworn to the Beast understood incredibly fast that it had been the greatest error of their short lives.

It was somehow exhilarating to create a mountain of corpses.

No wonder the Khornate enjoyed it every time they could, the mad bastards.

Malicia soared again, and then charged towards the platform of the deactivated Crown.

The last Iron Warriors Terminators tried to stop her, and lost their heads for it.

Manneus Drath was more of a challenge...or he would have been if she had intended to fight only like a Brute. Unfortunately, Malicia was a Brute *and* a sorceress.

It took three seconds and a Subjugation Spell to have him kneeling before her.

This was enough for the rest of the fighters.

While the Daemon Engines didn’t surrender, and as such were put down one by one, the Skaven and every ex-slave which had pledged his arms and soul to Malal fled without looking back.

“You believe,” the Warsmith snarled, “you are strong enough to hold Brigannion Four? Others will come. The Iron Warriors and all the other Legions will come.”

It was amusing that for the first time, the voice was not so quite mechanical. Fury and hatred were apparently some emotions the Legionnaires of the Fourth still understood incredibly well.

“I don’t care about Brigannion Four.” Malicia replied honestly. “I am here for the Noctilith Crown, and nothing else.”

“By the furnaces of Medrengard, why?” Manneus Drath asked. “You have more of your corrupted Noctilith than anyone save the Warmaster!”

“You answered your question yourself, Warsmith. I have Transmutational Changestone, which by its very nature, is imbued with the essence of *Change*. It can serve no other purpose.”

Malicia wondered when most of the galaxy would consider the implications of this reality.

That the Noctilith, once it was correctly prepared and imbued with the Power of a God, could not receive another Power. You could break it into several fragments. You could steal it with significant difficulties. You could destroy it utterly by several methods.

But once Noctilith was Transmutational Changestone, it could not become anything else.

It was a bit ridiculous, since **Tzeentch** was **Change**, and **Change** was **Tzeentch**, but it was something that couldn’t be altered.

Weaver was aware of it, of that Malicia was certain. Abaddon, the Anathema, and several others knew it too.

“I could have tried something, of course. But you see, what I need is to create a stable route which will lead me in relative security outside of the Eye of Terror.”

“Go to the Cadian Gate, then, *witch*!”

The young parahuman sorceress rolled her eyes.

“Do I look like Lorgar?”

Dying explosively against the Imperial Navy and the Imperial Guard may have sounded good for fanatics like the Word Bearers. Most people not completely insane were not so eager to be martyred for no good strategic reason.

Back to the main topic. Transmutational Changestone could open a route across the Warp Storm. Unfortunately, as was only proper for the Master of Mutations and the Architect of Fate, this would be a twisted, ever-changing route. It may be even more dangerous and chaotic exit than those who ended up killing all the challengers.

“Prepare the Noctilith Crown for reactivation.” The Destiny Unwritten ordered her sorcerers. “And for the love of the Gods, check first that the King in Yellow’s influence is gone. I really don’t want one more intervention of his damned undead piles of bones here.”

The Eleventh Primarch was a massive problem before, and it seemed the ruination of his Eternity plans had not ended his threat in the slightest.

It took several minutes for her warband’s specialists to do their job, as more echoes of battle shook the planet. There were reports that Boros Kurn and other Astartes were withdrawing, their diversions accomplished. And of course the Iron Warriors were now recovering and launching vicious counter-attacks in her direction.

“They are coming,” Manneus Drath told her.

“But not because of loyalty,” Malicia commented idly. “The price the King in Yellow paid you...it was a ritual. He tied your soul to theirs. As long as you aren’t dead, their souls won’t be dragged to the Empyrean and devoured by the Neverborn.”

The Iron Warrior didn’t have anything to answer, which meant her statement had struck right at heart of the problem.

“The Noctilith Crown is going to activate in nine seconds, Warlord.”

“Good,” Malicia drew a little box from her pocket. The thing had cost her a fortune, but it had been worth it; no matter how close the rituals and the influence of many daemons, it had remained intact.

She opened it.

The artefact inside could be best described as a little ring.

It was a ring, and yet it was more than that, for it burned in orange flames that were not and couldn’t be natural.

“**This is madness**,” Antwyr sounded...impressed.

“This is not Fate, and I write my own destiny.”

The ring was thrown right as the Noctilith Crown activated.

And Malicia uttered one name.

“**Addaioth**.”

There was an immense shockwave, and Brigannion Four shook from its spires to its foundations.

**Warsmith Manneus Drath**

For eight seconds, nothing happened, and the Warsmith prayed that it had failed.

That whatever the Tzeentchian sorcerers had prepared had failed.

But then orange flames began to pour out of the gate in the ring of the Noctilith Crown, and Hope died.

Darkness extinguished the lights of the room.

The Engines that had fallen down began to burn and reassemble, but...different. They were burning.

They were burning even as darkness fell.

But so close to the heart of the ritual, it was not the obscurity which ruled.

It was the flames.

Controlled, incredibly sentient orange flames, shaped like furnaces and forges...but wrong. All wrong.

Manneus saw xenos whipping humans into submissions, and the screams of defeat of his Legion.

It was an all-consuming flame. It was also glory, glory that had been forever denied to the Iron Warriors.

Manneus Drath hated it on sight.

And it didn’t matter, for he couldn’t move a finger. He was condemned to stay on his knees and watch the Noctilith Ring twist the machines of Brigannion Four into something abhorrent.

“**The Bearer of Calamity, the Reign of Terror’s Harbinger, the Herald of Change**,” screams merged to speak in a single voice were heard. “**Speak**.”

“I am here to propose you a bargain.”

“**We don’t need a bargain**!” the flames screeched. “**We don’t need *anyone***!”

“In that case, I am going to melt the Noctilith Crown and change it into something far proper. And this conversation will never have taken place.”

“**Wait**,” darkness danced into the flames, and Manneus was very glad he couldn’t see deeper into the twirling vortex of hell that had opened.

“Yes?”

The abomination didn’t come out, but for a single heartbeat, there were two burning eyes glaring, emerging partially from the depths of the Warp.

“**Name your bargain**.”

“I want to go to a place where I am assuredly not welcome,” Malicia spoke as if she was conversing with a tradesman that happened to be a bit stubborn. “And I was told you could help me. In exchange, I give you the souls of all the Iron Warriors of Brigannion Four.”

That witch, he was going to-

“I was told the previous Master was weak. And yes, he is indeed far less powerful than he was then. But all this means is that they are even more vulnerable when other Gods come for you, because the King in Yellow will not offer succour or protection to those he can’t puppeteer like his undead.”

“**Truth**.”

Several sections of the Iron Chamber began to collapse, and lava began to flow.

In the distance, furnaces began to beat again, and the pulse of the Forges began anew.

But wrong. Everything was wrong-

“**They are Unclaimed. They will serve. What is the rest of your bargain, Destiny Unwritten**?”

The next words were uttered in a language that Manneus Drath had never heard before. It was melodious, and yet harsh, guttural.

“I will never serve that xenos monster. I’d rather crawl out and ask my unworthy gene-sire to turn me into one of his Myrmidon Androids!”

Eldritch blue eyes turned towards him.

“A good thing, then, that you aren’t given a choice,” the Tzeentchian sorceress spoke like he was mud under her boots. “You have broken your oaths to the Anathema, and that was pretty much the only valuable soul-protection that could have allowed you to keep your free will. Now? Perturabo don’t care, and the Gods are very eager to break their new toys.”

“I know,” the Warsmith grimaced as several spells of torture slammed into his flesh, “that one day, someone will place your head on a spike and place it at the top of the walls of Brigannion Four. I don’t care who will do it, the dogs of the False Emperor, my Legion, or someone else. But I curse you to rise and fall hard! You are not of the Legions! You do not believe in the Long War! You frown upon our methods, but you enslave as readily as we do!”

“And yet at this hour, no one is coming to save you.”

But as these words were uttered, darkness fell, and the orange flames seemed to lose in power.

The sounds of battle faded away.

And then the sun rose over the walls of Brigannion Four.

“**The Firetide**,” the things that had crawled inside the carcasses of the Daemon Engines shrieked in fear. “**THE FIRETIDE! THE FLAMES OF DAWN! THE ANATHEMA WATCHES US! THE LEGION OF SACRIFICE COMES**!”

Death came for the traitors and the rebels.

Death came in the form of an Astartes riding a giant Moth of flames.

The skies of Brigannion began to burn gold, and in the Chamber of Iron, Manneus Drath laughed.

**Warlord Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

“FIRE! FIRE! SHOOT ME DOWN THIS MOTH!”

This was not one of the flying Titans of Weaver, or was it? None of them had died, so they couldn’t-

They shouldn’t be here.

Yes, the call to a Ruinous Power had been made, and every action allowed an opponent to launch a counter-action.

But the Anathema had no Astartes follower on Brigannion Four...

“SHIELDS!”

Ten thousand guns and turrets fired. For a few seconds, all the beings, no matter their allegiance, understood the danger.

This enemy could not be allowed to succeed in his goals, no matter their own bitter feuds.

Enough shells and lasers were sent into the skies to exhaust the stockpiles of several armies.

It worked.

But it didn’t work fast enough.

The flying vehicle of light slammed into the section where the gates of the Chamber had been broken, and the impact was devastating.

Countless Neverborn were vaporised, and thousands of cultists screamed their last breath as the golden flames incinerated them.

There was no corpse left behind.

There was only an inferno of flames, which was forcing the Amberflame of Addaioth to choose between retreat and being devoured.

And at the centre of it, there was an Astartes rising.

Malicia’s eyes widened as she saw the red armour and the Egyptian-theme equipment.

“Thousand Son...a loyalist Space Marine of the Thousand Sons...”

There had been rumours some had managed to escape the pursuit of Tzeentch, but why would one-

No. There was only one reason he could be here today. The same reason she had gone after the Noctilith Crown. The Space Marine had sacrificed himself to open a path for his battle-brothers, to sacrifice everything so that the other loyalists could make their breakthrough out of Hell.

“Kill him.” Instinctively she knew there was not going to be any negotiations. There couldn’t be one. This Space Marine had been led here by the Anathema to kill them all. “KILL HIM! DON’T GIVE HIM TIME TO CAST AN ANATHEMIC SPELL!”

The transhuman enemy drew his Khopesh.

The eye protections shattered as golden flames erupted from his very eyes.

“FOR THE EMPEROR AND FOR MY BROTHERS!”

The Space Marine of the Thousand Son charged.

For a moment, Malicia stood gaping.

Thousand Sons were master strategists and first-rate psykers.

The sons of Magnus were thoughtful, prudent, and calculative.

They weren’t World Eaters.

The first strike of the Khopesh killed over two hundred of former rebels who had pledged their lives to her.

It was nothing she’d ever seen before.

It was golden flames.

It was fury out of her experience.

A Soul grinder rose, burning with the flames of Addaioth.

It was immediately cut in half, an exploit as impossible as the last.

Lasguns and Bolters, Turrets and grenades, everything vented its fury.

Most of them found their mark, and blood began to flow, but always it burn in golden flames, and always the Thousand Son took a step forwards.

The Daemon Engines were broken like they were nothing.

The cultists died in a hurricane of violence.

Her sorcerers burned, praying Tzeentch to save them.

This was a juggernaut that couldn’t be stopped!

They couldn’t stop it!

The Thousand Son kept charging.

He was a berserker of the Anathema.

He was something out of this world.

‘KEEP FIRING!”

The platinum-haired parahuman drew Antwyr and attacked.

“WHY AREN’T YOU GOING TO DIE?”

“**Beware he is**-“

There was a horrible sensation of pain, and suddenly, her helmet felt hellishly hot, and then it broke.

She was flying, and not under own power, suddenly she was feeling...powerless.

Her helmet was no more, and it had saved her life.

Malicia mustered all her strength. Antwyr? Where was Antwyr?

She was defenceless, her shield had taken the brunt of the attack and-

The Space Marine towered over her, Khopesh raised.

In that second, Malicia knew she was going to die. She was-

“**The bargain is accepted**.”

The inferno of the Warp, orange flames and darkness, hit the servant of the Anathema, and threw him away.

Addaioth had saved her life.

It had been...way too close.

And it was not over.

Once again, the Astartes burning in golden flames was stepping forwards.

But this time, the Space Marine was slow.

The enemy was heavily wounded.

A Venomcrawler was there to intercept him.

The Daemon Engine was eliminated, but it bought her a few more seconds.

The Khopesh rose a last time.

And it was thrown in the depths of the world below, a terrible and brilliant spear that annihilated everything that stood in its path.

“**He can’t kill you, but he will deny Brigannion Four! He will break the Steel and the Planet!**”

The Space Marine didn’t answer, for he collapsed and hit the ground.

There was an intense flash of gold that forced her to close her eyes.

When Malicia reopened them, she knew the son of Magnus was dead, and his soul gone.

“This has really not been a day of good surprises.”

Manneus Drath would likely have agreed, but it was the moment Addaioth decided to claim his soul.

The Warlord of the sons of Change grimaced and ignored the screams.

A bargain was a bargain, and this one had saved her life.

Though she couldn’t say the same about Abaddon. Did the Warmaster know her little Atlasian plot was going to result in such a Weaverian escalation?

“If the answer is yes, I swear that you will pay a heavy price for this, Despoiler...”

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**The Boros Gate**

**Boros System**

**Inquisitorial Prison Ship *Vigilant Knight***

**Date Estimation – [REDACTED]**

**Ignis**

The prison was to be sure comfortable.

It didn’t matter in the least when the bad news arrived.

“Our brother failed, though he was able to strike a blow against the enemies of Mankind.”

“How?” Ignis asked.

“It seems that a sorceress you’re very familiar with decided to bargain with the new abomination the Drukhari are praying to. It was the will of the Emperor that this pact be stopped by the death of both parties, but unfortunately, it failed. However, our brother was able to destabilise Brigannion Four and begin burning it in **Sacrifice**.”

Ignis was hardly a Forge-Master, never mind someone who frequented Iron Warriors during the last centuries.

But it didn’t take a Techmarine to know that extremely unstable things were stored in the arsenals of the Fourth Legion, and any world in the Eye of Terror was bathed in aetheric agents that could react very explosively with the Firetide.

“I see. I can’t say I am pleased; I would have liked plenty of souls to have been freed by Malicia’s death. And obviously, the detonation of the Noctilith Crown could have hurt the xenos construct significantly.”

Thousand Son or not, you didn’t shed a tear at the Dark Eldar being on the receiving end of the punishments they so richly deserved.

“The Ferryman?”

“He survived. It is likely Decay will call him back. Not only he will have to fight tooth and nail against Vainglory, the patron of Malicia seems to have acknowledged too that the more he refuses her support, the more his favourite girl seems to escalate in answer. At some point, amusement or not, things can get unproductive real fast. Their leashes are tough; they are not unbreakable.”

Thankfully for them, the Ruinous Power of Change had acknowledged that truth a bit too late. Or Kairos Fateweaver’s Master had been too sure of its ability to stop Ahriman when defiance burned in their hearts.

It was something to meditate upon. No one was omniscient. Everyone could and did make mistakes.

“And now?”

“Now, there is a choice to make.”

Ignis had been afraid of that, and it wasn’t a figure of speech.

This might very well be the second lesson of today: they were mortal men transformed into Astartes so that when the time came, the threshold to be paralysed by fear was absurdly high. So high that one of the most common sayings across the galaxy was that the Space Marines knew no fear.

It just wasn’t true. ‘Absurdly high’ didn’t mean it wasn’t possible to reach it.

And the times to come may very well prove the wisdom of staying humble.

“There are only two hundred of us left.”

Ignis wished to blame Tzeentch for this, and certainly the accursed vulture had played a major part in the downfall of so many brothers.

But unfortunately, other factors had played a role. Many of the Thousand Sons were ex-Rubricae eager to seize a second chance. But not everyone was willing to forget Prospero, even if the sons of Horus were the architects of this tragedy.

And sadly, staying in the Eye of Terror was hardly something that left your soul pure and untouched.

There was **Sacrifice** at the end of the journey.

It was hard. It was painful.

And the Enemy made it so easy, so pleasant, so *seductive* to abandon the dream.

Astartes or no Astartes, they were only human, in the end.

“Which makes it the more vital that all your talents can be exploited like they should have been.”

“Where?”

There was a silence.

“There are two libraries. One of them is on Terra and is dangerous in ways that test the soul of someone. The second is stranger, and tests everything.”

“Beating the arrogance out of you?”

“I would describe it more as harnessing our infamous curiosity for greater purposes.”

Ignis blinked.

“There have always been rumours about mysterious knights of grey, who continue the work the Sigillite once masterminded.”

“I obviously can’t tell you anything, and especially not so close to the Eye of Terror.”

“Yes, of course.”

The other Thousand Son left his seat, the scarab artefact that shone in golden light in his left hand.

“Can I ask for your name, brother?”

“I am Psamtic Mehhur.”

Ignis nodded. He didn’t recognise the name, but it wasn’t like he had memorised all of them.

“I suppose this is a goodbye, then.”

“A farewell,” the other Astartes agreed. “*They* should be here tomorrow.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Azkaellon Stadium**

**2.715.313M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

There was a multitude of ways she as the Queen of the Swarm could have commanded the Catachan Ants that had first landed on Nyx.

For today, Taylor had decided to keep things easy.

The colony had been fed, and then they had been released into the empty Azkaellon Stadium. A single order had been given: show her what they could do.

As a Lady Militant General of the Imperium, she had to say it was an impressive spectacle.

Within forty minutes, they had already built an anthill and first-class defences around it.

“I think your challenge was very opportune, Webmistress! Everyone was beginning to get really bored after the quarantine and the journey back! Everyone needed to stretch their legs!”

The insect-mistress chuckled.

“There’s no need to prove your tenacity, Bellona. You can return to your hover-pillow.”

“Yes, Webmistress. Forgive me-“

“I told you, there’s nothing to forgive. The panel of Generals thought your performance extremely satisfying. Yes, you made a few mistakes, but who doesn’t make them? And while some traps of the Tyranids looked obvious in hindsight, everyone is wiser after the fact.”

Of course, she had already reassured the Adjutant-Colonel several times, mentally and vocally. It was not the first time they had a similar discussion today.

“You will be ordered to spend as much time as is necessary with your sisters in the next days,” the Lady of Nyx commanded as she kept her eyes on the Catachan Ants. “The Swarm will cheer you up and help you recover, with several drinks of Bacta and honey mixed together. It won’t negate the **Sacrifice** you did, but it will bolster some of your remaining strength. And once Artemis will think you are fit again, I may give you a role of weapon instructor for the next generation.”

With one hundred and twenty Adjutant-Spiders born within two years, the expertise of their predecessors was in hot demand, no matter how much her **Administration** power helped.

“And evidently,” the Lady Weaver finished. “There will be a mark in your file that under no circumstances you are to return to Catachan again. The same applies to all the non-Catachan forces that went with you.”

Most of the expeditionary force had not arrived – the need to repairs plenty of ships has led Rear-Admiral Yamamoto to make a detour to Ryza – but the small squadron which had returned was filled with traumatised personnel.

“I am really happy to hear that, Webmistress.”

“I know. Catachan was and is a Green Hell where humanity has not its place.”

If she had known-

No. It was useless to ponder on all the ‘what if’ questions.

Taylor had not known about the Guardian, and there had been no way to discover the huge jellyfish before he woke up.

And without the Guardian, Bellona and her forces would have won decisively, though of course the price would have been several orders of magnitude than the worst estimate.

There would be critics, of course, from outside parties, but then there always were.

The only real alternative was of course to go to Catachan in person, but Nyx couldn’t be neglected these days, there were way too many big projects in the pipeline. And Catachan had appeared to be a manageable campaign, even if the Tyranids had known something was coming for them.

It had been, with the benefit of hindsight, a very optimistic assumption.

Sighing, the Queen of the Swarm banished the thought.

Instead she went for a subject that had most concerned her when Bellona had informed her of it this morning.

“Ryza.”

“Yes, Webmistress! Artemis is crunching the numbers and-“

“I trust you, and I am confident in your numbers, Bellona.”

It was the strategic picture she didn’t like at all.

“Oh...well, Webmistress, my estimate of seventy percent of all industrial output assigned to the military is...significant?”

Significant. Yes, one could call it like that. You could qualify it of ‘ruinous’ and ‘the military devoured the Adeptus Mechanicus, including everything on the civilian sector’.

And this was a number obtained some years after the Fall of Commorragh, which had allowed the Archmagi of Ryza to return to lessen their burden and fulfil several massive infrastructure plans for new Frontier and Civilised Worlds.

Forge Worlds were never supposed to be only arsenals for the armed forces of the Imperium. Yes, they had been conceived to play that role in times of war, but it had been only one of many.

“But no one thought the wars would last that long...” she murmured.

The more her Adjutants and all her subordinates dug in the archives, the clearer the holo-pict became, and the more appalling predictions were calculated.

The Imperium had not passed the tipping point where it was about to fall into the abyss, but it had been too close.

It had been far too close to comfort.

“By their own predictions, Ryza will be able to gain one or two percent more in the next decade. Of course, Webmistress, it depends on we of the Swarm to avoid triggering massive conflicts in the region.”

“I think we can give them that, Bellona. One or two decades, at least.” Weaver just didn’t know if she could offer them more than that. Catachan was not the only location where the optimistic assumptions had been overturned in short order.

“Hopefully, what I have ready for the next year will convince the Warp parasites to stay quiet for a while.”

“You know you have my full support, Webmistress!”

Taylor giggled.

“I never doubted it, Bellona. And since we speak of amusing subjects, now give me the full tale of your negotiations with the Blood Ravens.”

“I wouldn’t call their kleptomania amusing, Webmistress!”

Taylor raised an eyebrow.

“You offered them free ammunition. They could hardly steal it from you if it’s offered, no? Ah.”

It took several seconds for her Adjutant-Colonel to transfer all the memories and the data.

“They are bloody thieves!” Bellona grumbled. “They were way too disappointed that they couldn’t properly steal your gifts! And it was only the problem of the quarantine that prevented them from coming onboard to rob us! I know it, Webmistress! If I had a direct line to the Necrons, I would have called their thief to rob them!”

Note to self: in addition to keeping Bellona as far away from Catachan as it was humanly feasible, it would be good to prevent her from coming into contact with the Blood Ravens again...

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Gothic Sector**

**Bhein Morr Sub-Sector**

**Luxor System**

**High Orbit above Luxor**

**Battle-Barge *Armageddon***

**7.716.313M35**

**Captain Nimlot Zephyr**

“Chapter Master, I think we should...be increasingly prudent. For the good of the Chapter.”

A Captain of the 3rd Company should not have to say this to his supreme commander.

But then Nimlot supposed, most of the Chapters weren’t the Blood Ravens.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Nimlot.”

Damn. Here they go again...

“Chapter Master, with all due respect, the reputation of our...our exploits is beginning to spread. Several Inquisitors have already refused our offers of assistance because they feared we would pillage their secret stashes *before* dealing with the enemy.”

“Which is completely false,” the Lord of the Blood Ravens mused. “We absolutely can accomplish *both* *at the same time*.”

Nimlot Zephyr had the urge to smash his head against the adamantium prow of the Battle-Barge. He had the feeling that by sheer exasperation alone, he would be able to break it in a few decades.

“We need to stop that. Already we have close to eighty Chapters who refuse to work in the same War Zone as we do. We have no allies, and with the Space Wolves gone, we’re really in the top positions of the black list of the Adeptus Astartes.”

“My predecessor did these ridiculous Penance Crusades,” Chapter Master Radamun shrugged off the matter like it was no big deal. “And nothing we have done since was illegal.”

“The emptying of the Arsenal of Vostok-Brest?”

“We weren’t going to let these poor piles of shells gather rust when they could come with us!”

“The Super-Heavy Armour of Paragon?”

“What an idea it was to keep these vehicles in full view of the parade grounds!”

“The Mechanicus deliveries of Fractal II?”

“They wanted us to get rid of the Orks and save their precious machines. We purged the Orks and saved their precious machines.”

Yes, by stealing them.

Needless to say, this small Mechanicus enclave was not going to hire them ever again.

And it was a really big problem.

A Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes was sworn from the very moment of its Founding to defend the Imperium of Mankind from all kind of threats.

But how could you do it when the worlds in question wouldn’t call you, even if they were in a life-or-death struggle?

For a few seconds, Nimlot Zephyr wondered what he had done in a previous life that the Emperor had judged good to give him clarity and sanity in a Chapter where even the Aspirants had clear kleptomaniac tendencies?

It must have been something quite horrible to be sure.

“In the end, all is well that ends well, no? Ammeris answered the call, but didn’t have to mount a rescue operation on Catachan, since the battle was already over. And he received plenty of ammunition, some of them manufactured by Ryza. We also got two Strike Cruisers repaired. And many old Mark IV Armours we had are going to be refurbished. All of this, and we have work to crush a few rebellions with no one looking over our shoulders.”

“There was an additional condition.” Nimlot had to point out.

“One we would have done for the fun of it,” the Lord of the Blood Ravens gave him an excited grin. “Monitoring the moves of the Marines Malevolent is something we do every time just to enrage these bastards.”

How was it possible to forget it, when the Armageddon was originally a Battle-Barge of the Marines Malevolent that had been ‘taken away’ by their Chapter?

Yes, and they had been very lucky the Marines Malevolent had an even worse reputation than they; the Mechanicus had refurbished the Battle-Barge without complaints after the ‘appropriation’.

“It is true most Adeptuses won’t care what we will do with the monitoring as long as it doesn’t end in a full-scale war.” The Captain of the 3rd Company was forced to concede. “The main problem, I think, is going to find them.”

“The Marines Malevolent haven’t been seen campaigning anywhere? This is very unusual for them.”

It was. Much like the Blood Ravens, the other Chapter needed constant wars to ensure it could receive irregular flow of supplies coming from Solar. As spectacular as some thievery acts were, you always needed things that were rarely found anywhere near a battlefield. Spare parts for Battle-Barges and Strike Cruisers from Mars, for example.

“A third of the Chapter was in the Reductus Sector about five years ago. And the Novamarines grudgingly told everyone they played some part in breaking two or three heretics’ cults across Obscurus during the Black Crusade. Two companies were involved. But since then? Nothing. And no, the Salamanders haven’t smashed them apart recently.”

“Strange,” Radamun nodded. “But I’m sure we will find them eventually. One Thousand Space Marines, especially the Marines Malevolent, will be noticed wherever they are mustering. We may even be called to settle matters with them, given past history!”

No, no they wouldn’t. The reputation of the Blood Ravens in recent times spoke for itself; no matter how generous the Planetary Governor, he or she didn’t want to be robbed of his relic weapons and have his or her strategic depots emptied...

**Nyx System**

**High Orbit above Nyx III**

***Ferrus’ Revenge* Shipyards**

**Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl**

Watching a Battleship yard from above was a spectacle any Archmagos Dominus of his seniority was familiar with.

Watching a Battleship yard from above with first-class refreshments followed by a tantalising supper where a fish soul had been cooked, and the perfume of spices was so powerful it managed to slightly disorient his mechadendrites?

It was far less common.

And then there was the added benefit he had been invited to state clearly what were the good and bad points of the construction teams he saw several hundred meters beneath his feet.

Usually, his Archmagi peers didn’t want his honest opinion.

They were already afraid when he opened his mouth in the first place!

No, most of the time they wanted either political favours or some technology he was the only one who could deliver in time and hour.

They were advantages to being considered a Radical by your peers, or so he always said to his new students.

Lady Weaver was the only one after Guilliman to ask him this in...five, no six decades.

It was very refreshing, Belisarius Cawl had to admit.

“As I’m sure Archmagos Sultan and Dragon already told you, you need more nano-printers.”

“Some are on their way from Mars and Ryza. I would prefer to have more, but demand is high.”

Cawl nodded as a large flight of servo-owls flew past them to find the Magi requesting additional information. He was maybe too old to change the two or three favourite servo-skulls he had around him, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t see the sheer potential of the new devices. That’s why he had brought hundreds of them during his last journey here. And in all likelihood, he would buy hundreds more in the next weeks.

“You also need more electromagnetic cages for your Fusion Reactors.”

“Also correct, though this problem applies to every part of Nyx.” The golden-winged Lady replied bluntly. “We’re expanding the industry to make this System a precursor in Nuclear Fusion Technology for the rest of the Quadrant, but as I’m sure you have guessed, the logistical issues can’t be solved with a smile and a click of fingers.”

“It demands a considerable amount of resources and connections.”

“Speaking of experience?”

Belisarius Cawl snorted.

“Did I ever tell you how I managed to convince the Fabricator-General of the time to let me build Knights for House Taranis?”

“No, I’m afraid you didn’t, Archmagos.”

“Hmm...this is an amusing tale, and the long-term version can’t be rushed. But to keep the basics short, the poor Fabricator-General had heard the worst sort of tales about me per very biased sources, and I was forbidden to set a foot on Mars for as long as he was in charge.”

“That seems uncommonly severe.” The Basileia paused. “And how did you evade this ban?”

“I didn’t,” Cawl replied cheerfully. “Our dear Fabricator-General had forgotten he needed to attend the Council of the High Lords; I certainly didn’t.”

Several Space Marines were evidently stupefied before his audacity.

“The High Twelve are heavily guarded, they don’t allow anonymous people to approach them on a day-to-day basis.”

“Yes,” Belisarius smirked. “That’s why I went into a little apprenticeship to become a master chef, one good enough that the High Lords were begging for my services when they wanted a tenth-star meal.”

“And...it worked?” the incredulity of the young Sororitas was really admirable, the Archmagos thought.

“It took me seventy-eight years to master the noble art of cooking.” The Martian-born master of all talents answered cheerfully. “Of course it was late M32, so I may need some refreshing course here and there. Plus the cuisine of the Imperial Palace changed a lot in the last millennia.”

“I know you are recognised as a master of all masters, but I didn’t think it applied to as something as special and un-technological as cooking,” Weaver shook her head.

“Why wouldn’t it be? For all we embrace the machine, the majority of the Tech-Priests of Mars and beyond need to eat.” It was something that slightly unnerved him every time he saw holier-than-thou Conservatives. “And I always loathed the taste of certain rations. I am old; I need some spice in my life.”

“And?”

“And everyone needs a hobby. It helps to not go crazy when you have eternity at your fingertips.”

“Hmm...” Weaver hummed a soft tune, but didn’t comment further.

The Adjutant-Spider in the corner, however, tried to hide from his inquisitive eyes the large book she had been consulting a few seconds ago.

“Was this an indirect way to ask if you could participate in the next STC Templates’ auctions, by the way?”

“No,” Cawl told her sincerely. “But now that you mention it, I admit I am very interested by the potential to build Knights with improved machinery and in larger numbers.”

“I suppose that given the support you’re providing, you can be allowed to attend. Anything else?”

“Yes...I think.”

Cawl’s eyes returned to the agitation below, and the tens of thousands tons of metal which were eventually going to grow and grow again until in this yard stood one of the most devastating warships that the galaxy had ever seen.

“A great ship needs a great name.”

“It has one. It will be the *Redoubtable*.”

It was not an arrogant statement like the Invincible had been, and it was not an assurance of religious faith.

It was a warning. It was a warning to all the enemies of the Imperium that for all the Angel was not leaving Nyx for now, this lull was not going to last forever.

And once this period of peace was over...

There was no doubt in Belisarius Cawl’s calculations that when the *Enterprise* would be seen, the *Redoubtable* would not be far behind.

**Author’s note**: The Legacy will continue in Legacy 13-4 Legacy of X (and yes, X stands for [REDACTED] right now).

It’s time to break the status quo and escalate...again.

I hope that you enjoyed the chapter!

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption