**Decision Interlude**

**Destiny Unwritten**

*The Kokoda System was discovered in 317M34 by the Imperium of Man as the Mechanicus Explorator Fleet XYZ-6634 from Mars investigated numerous claims of STC fragments being found in the region.*

*In the case of the system they had just discovered, the Magi were forced to acknowledge in mere months there was no trace of extinct or living civilisations whatsoever. Furthermore, the asteroid belts, while they generated curious magnetic anomalies, were entirely devoid of the ore and resources which interested the Mechanicus. The same was true of the single inhabitable planet orbiting the yellow star. Magos Kokoda-2-Primus-Iota, unwilling to recommend this world received the industrial investment to build Mechanicus Forges on its surface, sold the colonisation rights to the Adeptus Administratum.*

*Unfortunately, the new discovery was quite far from any Hive World – five hundred light-years east of the Astartes homeworld of Mundus Pyra - leaving it dangerously close to the Eastern Fringe and the limit of the Astronomican. It was only in 399M34 the order to muster a colonisation fleet was granted, and it did not depart until 463M34, the Maastricht Crusade having taken away many transports and escorts which had been detached to transport missionaries, colonists, pilgrims and workers.*

*Still, the bureaucratic and logistical delays resulted in the situation that Kokoda was not the sole world to be settled by humanity when Colonist Fleet ‘Ultima Kokoda’ arrived in orbit of Kokoda Quartus. With the efficiency characterising most of the nobility when the opportunity to enlarge their personal empire exists, Knight-Tribune Finn Amritsar pressured the Administratum to incorporate the system in the newly proclaimed ‘Amritsar Sector’, which was done in 503M34.*

*For the colonists of Kokoda, this administrative take-over meant little. They were far too busy to survive day after day.*

*In the overwhelming majority of their explorations, the Mechanicus compiles data-libraries worth of information about the planets they discover. The Kokoda System had thus been thoroughly analysed, samples of water and earth had been taken, and the composition of the atmosphere had been searched carefully for any gas or life-form inimical to human life. The full report and its conclusions had of course been made available to the Adeptus Administratum when the transfer of sovereignty occurred.*

*No one knew what happened to it afterwards. The only certainty was that when the Colonist Fleet began its landing, the report the command staff had been allowed to peruse was the one of a mountainous Civilised World recently depopulated by a serf rebellion.*

*It had little point in common with Kokoda Quartus. Eighty-five percent of the planet was water and the lands above it were volcanic archipelagos covered in jungles and inhabited by dangerous predators. Humidity levels were extremely high every day of the year. The rainfalls were violent and poured torrents of water every day upon the heads of the colonists. The hurricanes and hypercanes were extremely common. The fauna and the flora was not enough dangerous to deserve the classification of Death World, but going outside the community walls without a lasgun was dangerous and not advised if you valued your life.*

*Twenty-six percent of the colonisation fleet died within the first ten years. And in spite of two new colonisation waves in 554M34 and 612M34, the total population rarely remained above the one billion-mark.*

*Clearly, Kokoda Quartus – shortened to ‘Kokoda’ by the locals and the rare merchants travelling to it – was never going to become a Hive World or a thriving Industrial World. For a few decades, there was the hope it would be able to be recognised as an Agri-World. Obviously there was no way to reach production quotas similar to those feeding Kar Duniash, but the thousands of volcanic islands were really fertile, and the oceans had millions of fishes just waiting to be caught.*

*On paper, this was not necessarily a bad idea. But it immediately collapsed the moment one arrived on Kokoda. Yes, the islands were fertile, but the high levels of volcanism and the numerous cinder clouds forced the harvest fields to be moved season after season. The tractors and other engines Imperium farmers took for granted rarely lasted long. When it wasn’t the rain, the humidity and the mud which caused malfunctions, the landscape was the culprit. There were thousands of hectares which could never been used as the slopes were too inclined, and that was when these were not near-vertical cliffs. The jungles were increasing the numbers of problems met by the human settlers. Past the first violent contact, many omnivorous animals trusted their primitive instinct and decided the harvests and the farmers were far more tempting preys than the militias.*

*It would be a lie to say Kokoda did prosper. By 650M34, the human colonists were concentrated on sixteen different islands – all had the particularity to be tectonically stable and away from the main hypercanes – and twenty large amphibious ships carved from void-faring transports. If the population was growing somewhat, it was barely one billion and twenty millions people. And both the Adeptus Administratum and the Departmento Munitorum in charge of the Imperial Guard recruitment operations were growing impatient.*

*To his credit, the Tithe-master of the Sector mandated by the Administratum understood the constraints the Kokodans were under. On the other hand, the Imperium had poured billions of Crowns in the colonisation of the planet. Many men and women far closer to the Segmentum upper hierarchy wanted a return from the initial investments. And the Munitorum emissaries were even less tolerant and willing to listen to the excuses of the locals. The first tithe demands were judged unacceptable by the Governor and the Kokodan population. Threats were made. A Munitorum envoy was thrown to the shark-like Megalodons.*

*Kokoda was declared in a state of rebellion, and the Guard regiments garrisoned nearby wasted no time, supported by numerous regiments from Amritsar itself, to crush mercilessly the poorly-equipped PDF. On 691M34, Kokoda was officially returned to the Imperium. The new Governor was named from the Amritsar nobility, and brought millions of unemployed Amritsar serfs with him to compensate the manpower lost in the years of war. Living conditions became rapidly miserable, and the average life expectancy decreased to thirty years. The new Master of Kokoda was an ambitious woman, and did not stop there. While agriculture and fishing cared for most of the needs, the idea came to the Governor the high humidity was perfect to cultivate the flower known as the Black Lotus. It also happened to be the main ingredient to create the Black Opium, a drug extremely popular in certain circles of Amritsar and beyond. At the very least, it would certainly pay for the Administratum tithe.*

*Thus Kokoda became the breadbasket of drug production for the Amritsar Sector in the following decades – the next Governors saw no reason to limit themselves to one plant or one flower after all. The divide between rich and poor did not grow larger; it literally exploded out of proportion. In their golden palaces protected by massive shields, tall walls, and massive cannons, the nobility feasted, celebrated, and spent in frivolities the large income they received from drug sales. Outside these bastions of wealth and decadence, millions of families trimmed and died to harvest leaves, flowers and roots for their masters in living conditions worthy of Penal Worlds.*

*This status quo lasted for centuries, until in 285M35, a new threat evaded the patrols of the Imperial Navy and invaded the Amritsar Sector from the Eastern Fringe. The Imperium had fought them before. These xenos were called Loxatl, and a short description of them began with ‘quadrupedal scale-less black reptiles armed with dart-blasters’.*

*Warmongering species would have ignored Kokoda and attacked far more defended targets. But the Loxatl did not care about a good fight. They wanted an Ocean World with a few islands where they could breed their horrible progeny and fight without suffering from the climate, their slimy skin condemning them to a short death if they stayed too long in water-less environments. From their perspective, Kokoda was perfect.*

*The invasion started with the arrival of a Kroot cruiser that the Loxatl had purchased from the treacherous xenos mercenaries. The small defences of the system were rapidly eliminated, and by the time a heavy squadron from Battlefleet Amritsar destroyed the trespasser, tens of thousands Loxatl were already ravaging human settlements, killing tens of thousands workers, and destroying the local economy. The PDF was routed in a series of humiliating defeats and rapidly recalled to defend the redoubts of their masters.*

*In the last five decades, Munitorum tithes had been especially heavy for the Amritsar Sector as a whole. There were no veteran armies in garrison ready to be sent at a moment’s notice. Lord Amritsar consequently deployed hundreds of freshly conscripted regiments to crush the black-hearted xenos with extreme prejudice.*

*The war rapidly unravelled into a bloody stalemate. For every Loxatl killed, ten to twenty men were slaughtered, and the climate of Kokoda was not healthy for an army transferred from arid or temperate worlds. By 288M35, it was estimated over forty percent of the Imperial forces on the surface of Kokoda were ill at any given time, and of those, fifty percent rarely fought for one month before falling ill again. Entire fortresses were nothing but improvised quarantine-hospitals. The number of dead was in the millions.*

*At long last, the Lord Militants of Blenheim had to acknowledge what was evident from the very beginning: Kokoda could not be purged from this xenos ulcer with the forces available to Amritsar. Ten Jungle Fighter Regiments from Vientiane were redirected from other theatres, supported by several more ‘expendable’ formations, including the 1st Nyx Pureblood Penal Legion...*

*The War for Kokoda*, part of Report MMX-10 sent to the Nyx High Command, 292M35.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Amritsar Sector**

**Kokoda System**

**Kokoda IV**

**7.886.290M35**

**Commissar Erik Centauri**

The problem, Erik recognised, was the bloody planet. It was not the fault of his regiment.

He had to repeat it five times per hour, and he didn’t believe it.

The world of Kokoda was horrible to visit, no hesitation about it. While he had not found the reports to justify his suspicions, he had a feeling this was one of the planets the Administratum bureaucrats had read the first and last page of the survey done by the Mechanicus, and then sent a colonisation full of desperate people a few centuries later when they opened an half-forgotten archive-vault.

Kokoda was humid, muddy, plagued by storms and rains, and the authorities of Amritsar had of course made the situation worse. The nobles couldn’t be trusted to rule in the first place, and here they had managed to do worse: they had covered the slopes of this island in black flowers for their huge drug market.

Erik did not like drugs. Even before entering the Schola Progenium, he had been disgusted by them, and Commissariat regulations and after-action reports had only increased his conviction drugs had no place in the Imperial Guard and any proper civilised society. Yes, there were moments drugs were an unavoidable necessity. But these occasions were rare and few between. When a brave soldier could be saved from his heroic deed and blocking his pain for a few minutes was vital for his survival. When the enemy forced a regiment to fight night and day without respite and not injecting stimulants was going to kill men as easily as lack of sleep did.

Consequently, having a rebreather mask on his visage because the air was saturated by drug toxins was putting him in a sour mood. The reality he had to shoot five men and four women to force the entirety of his regiment to imitate him had not raised his spirits. The rest of his clothes were already saturated with water, he was sure that he had received enough water since this morning for four or five showers, and the terrifying and lethal presence he usually presented effortlessly had been ruined in mere seconds. Despite his efforts, he was well aware he had to look like a drenched vagabond and he didn’t like that at all.

“You know the mission,” he roared as several Earthshaker batteries opened fire in the distance and the skies turned red and black as another volcano eruption was burning in the horizon. “Charge this slope, and kill everything. The enemy is one of those big four-legged xenos-reptiles. They have dart-guns, but those have limited ammunition. Don’t stop, under any pretext. The Jungle Fighters have finally managed to corner them, and if you fail, it will be necessary to begin again and again.”

And the sooner he left Kokoda, the better. Eric really didn’t like the planet.

Of course, before this great and pleasurable exit, they had to kill the Loxatl, the xenos vermin who had dared challenge the God-Emperor’s rule of the stars.

It was not going to be easy. The xenos were an abomination which deserved one thousand times their soon-to-come extermination, but they had built their camp well. If he could see it from his position, it was because the lair of the enemy was nearly eight hundred metres higher than theirs in altitude, and the only way to go to it was the slope behind him...a slope which in its least vertical passages had to be at twenty percent of inclination.

“Your redemption is at this price!” Eric shouted. “You have been sentenced to join the 1st Nyx Pureblood Penal Legion because your sins were great and odious! Yet you have been given a chance to win your salvation! Praise the God-Emperor, Immortal Master of Mankind!”

“PRAISE THE EMPEROR!”

The Commissar was not impressed. The crowd he faced had shouted the appropriate answer, but their enthusiasm was non-existent. They did not look like a regiment of the Imperial Guard, these men and women. Some had decided, for a reason Eric couldn’t fathom to not don half of the clothes they had been delivered in the penal transport. As a consequence, instead of the pleasant uniformity a regiment took as granted, there was here and there nobility robes, cloaks, fake breastplates, tarnished brilliant shoes, and some had even rings, hair accessories and earrings.

Eric Centauri didn’t know a lot about fashion, but it clashed significantly with the heavy explosive collars around their necks.

“But before I give the order to sound the charge, there is a detail to deal with.”

He clicked his fingers and two of his enforcer-wardens dragged the wastrel to his position. Even with his clothes torn down and his authority removed, the prisoner was a treacherous slime. Eric knew very well the light beating the wardens had given him according to his instructions had not been sufficient to knock him out, yet the man was trying to present himself as a bleeding and crippled martyr.

“This vermin tried to desert before the transfer of this regiment to the battlefield.”

The Commissar of the 1st Nyx Pureblood kicked the coward in the belly and with a cry of pain his ‘victim’ was forced to stop faking unconsciousness.

“Nostradamus Vandire, you stand accused of desertion from His Holy Majesty Imperial Guard. What do you have to say in your defence?”

“This is a conspiracy!” the obese wastrel spat back. “I said it and I will say it again: I simply lost my way to the station. It is not a crime! I demand a judgement of my peers!”

Eric Centauri wondered what sort of substances the idiot had been given at birth before acknowledging inside his head he didn’t want to know.

“We are not in your little realm of justice and traditions, deserter. We are on the frontlines, and you have no peers anymore. You are penal scum, and I am your procurator, your judge...and your executioner.”

Eric drew the new flamer he had been presented by Lady Weaver the day before he had left Nyx with the Penal Legion.

“There were instructions very clear from my superiors and the Holy Inquisition if you tried to violate the oaths of this regiment. Remove your clothes. You are only authorised to keep your rebreather mask and the bayonet of your autogun.”

“You can’t expect...”

A fist in the jaw interrupted the protestation and forced the slime to comply.

“There is no redemption for you. You are an irredeemable pile of excrements, an oath-breaker, a coward, a traitor, and a deserter. For your sins and your treasons, Nostradamus Vandire, I condemn you to death.”

He nodded to the left warden, and the big-boned man threw the two vials he had been given beforehand. One contained the mucus the Loxatl beasts considered an aphrodisiac. The second was a human-spread drug that on the xenos creatures triggered a berserk rage.

“The sentence is to be executed by charging the enemy frontlines naked and with a half-broken bayonet.”

He supposed it was too much to hope the imbecile had carefully maintained it in the months spent in the void transport.

“May the God-Emperor judge you fairly when you will see the Golden Throne.”

The first line of the position took firing position, and Nostradamus Vandire began to run. At least Eric thought it was his equivalent of running. At first, it looked like he was waddling. Then he reached the real section of climbing, and it was more falling and trying to stand. For several seconds, all that was heard upon the battlefield was the pitiful shrieking of the aristocratic wastrel.

And as his crescendo of complaints and insults began anew, the Loxatl came. Attracted by the smell of aphrodisiac and drugs, by the noise and by the disturbing spectacle provided by Nostradamus Vandire, they descended the slope with their weapons.

The distraction was working.

“Take position but do not fire!” The Commissar ordered as five lines crouched behind sandbags and the trees which had been cut down to provide some cover.

The Emperor was with them, a new downpour commenced at this instant, hiding the regiment somewhat from the xenos.

Nostradamus Vandire was not hidden, and he had already lost his bayonet-knife before the Loxatl were less than one hundred metres away from him.

Unarmed, with a body that was evidence for decades of indulgence and idleness, the coward stood absolutely no chance. Five Loxatl rushed him and began to devour him, not even pausing to kill him before dismembering him.

The explanation for this death, he was going to sent it in the official record of the battle. Erik turned towards the rest of the Penal nobles waiting for his orders. They were far more determined now. Of course, it was also possible they were aware many Commissars and Guard veterans were ready to execute them the same way if they took a single step back.

“WE ARE THE SHIELD OF HUMANITY! CHARGE! CHARGE FOR THE EMPEROR!”

“FOR THE EMPEROR!”

Hundreds of mouths screamed and in the rain thousands of ‘pure-blooded’ men and women fired their autoguns and ran to face the xenos counter-offensive.

“Your Will be done,” Eric drew his chainsword in his left hand and his flamer in his right, before setting aflame a coward and joining the battle.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Chernobog Sector**

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**5.906.290M35**

**Joe ‘Young Viper’ Stout**

Emperor and Devil be praised, the Colonel had not said no to Bill and himself joining the Twenty-Second.

Of course, the Colonel hadn’t said yes either. Joe and his best friend had to prove themselves first.

He respected the Colonel for that, but he could wish the challenge hadn’t been a tiny bit easier. He was all for the nickname of the regiment being the ‘Acid-drakes’, but hunting one was not exactly his idea of fun. The territory of these large beasts was some thirty-five kilometres away from Bastion F-2.

It was death ground.

Like every boy who had lived long enough to celebrate his tenth birthday, Joe knew the rule. More than five hundred metres away from a Fort or any defensive installation on Catachan, the rescue would only come if there were enough volunteers gathered for the operation and the call for help was less than ten minutes old. More than ten kilometres away from a Fort, nobody was going to come to the rescue.

So they had made their farewells and started their journey. Twice they had to avoid the Barking Toads, and once their chance had almost abandoned them as their path met one old Catachan Devil – the damn thing had been bigger than the Fort they called home. But for a beast of this size, there were far juicier preys around than two humans, and they had been ignored for a Megasaur. Joe wasn’t going to complain.

Really, he was all for presenting the Colonel the biggest trophy they could find, but you couldn’t fight a Devil of this size, not with a Fang, a lasgun and a few grenades. The younger ones were already tough to kill, but the explosions wouldn’t even scratch the outer armour and spikes of this one. All they could do was to anger it...and as mother had repeated him over and over again, you didn’t anger the Catachan Devil. If you did, you were going to explain to the God-Emperor in the next seconds why you thought it was a good idea.

“I’m seeing the acid mountains, Joe,” Bill said once he removed the magnoculars from his eyes. “Two more hours of walk, I think.”

They were very close. But on Catachan, ‘close’ had not the same definition the other Imperial humans gave to it. To give an example, ten minutes later they had to make a large detour to avoid a house-sized cloud of Death Flies.

“We have all the harpoons and two-thirds of our ammunition cells. We can do this.”

“We just have to find an adult acid-drake,” Joe grinned, knowing in advance this was not going to be very difficult. The region was famous for being the lair for thousands of these beasts. Here, even the implacable flora of Catachan was sparse and burned; the breath of the acid-drakes was not as potent as the toxins used the Catachan Barking Toad –nothing was. But it was capable to damage adamantium, and liquefy heavy walls of plasteel in ten seconds. Few things on Catachan had the sturdiness to endure the acidic breath of these massive animals. And the animals which did...they had to content with the fact an adult acid-drake from tail to muzzle was roughly thirty metres long.

No, finding one adult acid-drake here was not going to be a problem. It was killing a large specimen which was going to be the big challenge.

“I’m seeing...something weird.”

Joe frowned. ‘Weird’ had a lot of connotations he didn’t like.

“Define ‘weird’.” He said, trying to guess what had attracted the attention of his friend. But without the magnoculars, it was difficult, especially as they had to crush the smaller flies and locusts trying to ‘taste’ them.

“I think there is a migration of yellow ants.”

“Are you sure?”

The colonies of yellow ants did not move often outside of the zones they considered their territory. But then these vicious little creatures didn’t need to migrate, right? A colony’s territory could spread on thousands of square kilometres, and when their warrior caste went on the offensive, it was a legion of ants which converged on the prey. Entire fortresses had been razed in centuries past, and doubtlessly dozens more would be razed in the future. Joe was a Catachan boy, and proud of it, but there wasn’t a lot you could do when the jungle itself was subdued by millions of grox-sized ants.

“Yes, I am sure. Don’t worry, there is a cliff nearby, we will be able to use at an observation point.”

Bill was right, as usual. The jungle stopped here, and there was a cliff one hundred feet away. It was going to force them to do a detour.

Of course, this was a rather secondary consideration at the moment. Because between their current location and the acid-mountains, there was a large river, a small jungle....and it was crawling with ants.

It was not a tale to impress the big girls at home. There were really that many ants. The river itself was full of them, and on its banks the jungle was devastated as armies of ants marched southwards.

“God-Emperor preserve us, this is a Devil-sized migration. What has provoked them to move in such numbers?”

It was at this moment he realised Bill had his mouth wide open like he was in shock. Silently, his friend gave him the magnoculars and pointed him to a point not far in the south-west.

Joe placed the magnoculars on his eyes and wondered an instant if he had not been trapped by a Barbed Vemongorse. But no, he was not hallucinating by venom or gas.

The ants were carving the mountain to create a sculpture. Millions of ants, all in a single location, and they were carving a statue from the mountain.

And it was human.

The work was not over, but the feminine visage, half of the upper body and one arm raised in a defiant gesture were, and it was more than enough. With the magnoculars he could also see the familiar representation of the aquila on the sculpted breastplate.

He lowered the magnoculars again and could not help but ask the question burning inside his lungs.

“What by the Great Devil is happening here?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**7.911.290M35**

**Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies**

There had been a ninety-five percent of probability the Tech-Priests he had been forced to receive were going to behave in an illogical and uncivilised manner, which was why he had received them in Chamber ‘5-Plasteel’ where no one could hear them.

Judging by the extremely loud binaric accusations, protests, insults and debates, this decision had been the correct one.

“This is scandalous! Nyx can’t keep this priceless ‘Bacta’ for itself! Let’s impose a quota...”

“We could heal the Omnissiah Himself with this healing factor!”

“Don’t dare bring the Secession into this debate, you stupid heretek...”

“The Machine-God will know its own, and we will never forgive these words!”

Hark-Alpha Dipodies was happy he did not have mechadendrites, because otherwise he would have used them to tear apart a few of his augmetics. The Mechanicus was supposed to be logical, loyal in its worship of the machine, and united. Clearly, the very opposite of the image these squabbling Magi, Archmagi, and Tech-Priests of all ranks were presenting. Thank the Motive Force this gathering had refused to admit Adepts of other Imperial organisations. It didn’t matter if the Mechanicus representatives spoke in binaric or not, the Ecclesiarchy and the Administratum delegates would have understood enough to die of laughter.

“SILENCE!” The Arch Genetor born on Dantris III canted, his patience completely exhausted. “SILENCE IN THE HALL!”

The furious exchanges finally stopped their illogical and deeply emotional ruckus.

“You are Tech-Priests of Mars, not ignorant priests preaching in the streets! You will behave as the former, or you will be expelled from this assembly! Am I clear?”

There was much grumbling, nods, and a few Magi cursed him in secret cants, believing he didn’t understand. He made himself the promise to pass their names to Lady Weaver the moment this meeting was over.

For the sixth time today, he regretted not having pushed hard for this gathering of high-ranking Tech-Priests to be limited to twelve members. The level of the tech-cants and the conversation would have been far higher.

“Since you were unable to determine who was going to speak first, I am going to choose in your stead. Archmagos Sinead-Gear, step forwards.”

This was one of the most reasonable Archmagos from Mars who had been invited, at least by reputation.

“Arch-Genetor, are the rumours true? Does the substance called ‘Bacta’ can truly heal everything?”

“No,” Hark-Alpha Dipodies admitted. “In fact, when the Catachan Queen-ant produces Bacta as an undiluted golden liquid, it is worse than useless.”

His blunt answer, of course, generated a torrent of protestations. Thank the God-Machine a third of the Archmagi began to scream for order before he had the time to demand silence once again.

“The rumours were false, then,” the Martian Tech-Priest commented in a disappointed outburst of binaric.

“Oh no, the rumours were perfectly exact,” Hark-Alpha Dipodies contradicted him. “Bacta will heal you. Unfortunately, this substance was genetically conceived by a Death World species with an ability to resist physical injuries far greater than a human. It will heal any wounded flesh-crafted human body...but it will inflict a strain on the body that will minutes later provoke a series of biological disorders invariably leading to death.”

“What about the psykers?” asked a Magos from Gryphonne IV. “There are many orders of psykers in the Adeptus Astra Telepathica which teach how to master the skills of their body via psychic means.”

“Psykers, I’m afraid, have no chance at all to be healed by bacta.” The Dantris III Tech-Priest regretfully said. “Every time we tested it on an injured one, the wounds did not heal and the head exploded in mere seconds.”

“This is illogical,” the remark came from the back of the assembly.

“No,” and indeed it was not. “Bacta is generated by an omnivorous species which has crossbred with a *Xenos Horribilis* threat. The Catachan ant has been certified to possess no Warp-empowering abilities...and yet the Queens of each colony have capacities to control the different castes of their colonies. I think we are in presence of a species which validates the Kindi Psychic-Divergence Hypothesis.”

Dipodies knew he was taking a risk here. Archmagos Kindi had been a respected Martian leader of M32, but shortly before the explosive end of his career, his radical proposals had made a lot of people unhappy on Blessed Mars.

“The Kindi Psychic-Divergence Hypothesis is inherently flawed!” shouted a Graia Magos. “There is no evidence...”

“That’s why it’s a hypothesis, tech-hammer!” a Triplex Phall representative cut him short. “Please continue, Arch-Genetor.”

Hark-Alpha nodded in thanks to this half-ally and resumed his speech.

“For those who did not study the works of Archmagos Kindi, the Psychic Divergence Hypothesis is the theory that while every power coming from the Warp is naturally psychic by its very nature, not all psychic-based phenomena are tied to the Warp.”

“This is ridiculous...”the same Graia Magos muttered loud enough to be heard by everyone.

“Why?” the Master of Healing of Nyx asked sincerely. “When a starship wishes to travel through the Warp, we use the Warp drives to open a breach between our reality and this dimension. The psykers of every organisation and plenty of abominable xenos species do the same thing, albeit in a smaller and less reliable manner. Since it is obviously possible to connect the Materium and the Warp in such a manner, why wouldn’t it be possible to connect this galaxy to another dimension and generate new hive mind capabilities with these connections?”

“In theory, nothing,” convened a Tech-Priest hidden under Ryza robes. “In the forges, however, our lack of understanding where Warp drives are concerned would prevent us from creating this modified technology.”

As about two-thirds of the participants approved, Dipodies did not go further. He had not come today to convince them innovation was to be encouraged anyway.

“It is only a hypothesis, my fellow Magi and Archmagi, but I think certain creatures of the Death World of Catachan have assimilated psychic capacities of a different source than the Warp. Neither I nor my assistants have advanced enough in our researches to present formal results, but we have already enough results to know that psykers can feel massive interferences in close proximities to a Catachan Queen-ant.”

Data was transferred to the Noosphere higher levels, and to his relief, there was only a moderate amount of questions and opposition. Presenting his ideas as hypothesis to be verified had starved the die-hard conservatives of ammunition.

“This is logical and precise, Arch-Genetor, but the facts spoke for themselves: this ‘Bacta’ is a failure,” intervened another representative of Mars.

“I would not go that far, Magos,” Hark-Alpha Dipodies politely answered. “It is true that in its undiluted form no person has yet survived being plunged in a bath of bacta.”

Although Lady Taylor Hebert probably would. The healing matrix of the Bacta produced by the Catachan Golden Queen-ant was reacting and evolving quickly to meet the impulses of her insect-commands. How, he had no idea. It was a mystery the Omnissiah had not wished to share with him...

“But we have not stayed idle, since the Catachan ant was tamed, and we have observed the dilution of Catachan Bacta into a solution prepared with STC nutrients and Mechanicus knowledge. Consequently, we can create a healing substance, which, while only able to heal minor and medium injuries, does not kill the patient. We called it ‘Bacta-1-20-20’, but I understand ‘Red Bacta’ is already a popular term in our genetic labs...”

The debates and the choir of protestations instantly assaulted his senses, as Tech-Priests either applauded and canted congratulations, while other screamed and vociferated this was a grave fault to introduce this substance in the Imperium.

Hark-Alpha Dipodies was not going to keep them quiet this time. Mixing Bacta, Ruby Algae and Euclid Spice was not exactly something shameful, but the longer he kept the secret of Red Bacta, the better. There were huge benefits to gain in this endeavour. Logically, all the Throne Gelts and the resources went first to Lady Weaver, but the more results and Bacta produced by his labs and his subordinates, the higher he would be in the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s favour.

“We must establish quotas...”

“This sort of unshackled innovations must be stopped at all costs!”

The sooner this meeting ended, the better. It was unproductive and illogical...

**The Webway**

**Abandoned City of Galadavilin**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

Theoretical: being corrupted by Warp entities had not prevented the Alpha Legion detachment from being lost in the Webway.

Practical: their ability to notice the ambush he had prepared for them had been abysmal. Chaos was not a factor of prudence and intelligence.

Aeonid Thiel gave a last disgusted glance to the thirty-plus corpses of the Alpha Legionaries he had just killed. An eternity ago, he had admired the professionalism and the sheer level of training the Twentieth was willing to endure to achieve its missions. The Ultramarine had not been fond of the collateral damage and the smugness they felt they deserved, but their operations had been well-thought and their success rate spoke for itself.

Times had changed. He didn’t know how many years had passed since the Heresy, but it was obvious judging by the spikes, the awful eight-pointed star of the Warp abominations and the mutations that many sons of Alpharius had decided to sell themselves body and soul to the monsters of the Immaterium.

Theoretical: they had done so to gain power.

Practical: their lack of discipline, their Warp-infused arrogance and hatred, and their mutations made them less efficient and coordinated than they had been during the Heresy.

Conclusion: the so-called ‘Chaos Gods’ were at the same time empowering and weakening their slaves.

The former Sergeant of the 135th Company didn’t try to grab ammunition, weapons, or supplies from the bodies of his corrupted cousins. What the Warp touched, it rarely left unmarked and unaltered. Better to have no weapon than to risk wielding something which could transform you in a decade in the unholy union of a purple crustacean and an eldar carnivorous reptile.

“Theoretical: I am lost in the Webway. Practical: find an exit.”

It was easier said than done. Not because there were no exits from the ruined city he was using as a temporary base. There were thousands of portals and tunnels on the outskirts of what had been an eldar city, if the statues and the architecture were any indication.

But by some technology he hadn’t managed to elucidate, whatever path he chose, whatever direction he chose to walk to, Aeonid was always finding himself back to this abandoned city-crossroad.

It was intensely frustrating...and inconvenient.

Tactically, his supplies were diminishing fast, and his weapons had been used twenty times longer without proper maintenance than what the Codex prescribed.

Strategically, he could not help the Primarch if he was trapped here.

Ancient pain echoed in his two hearts. This quest, as insane as the odds were, was the sole light of hope he had found to erase the shame of failure. He had failed that cursed day, in the corrupted halls of the *Pride of the Emperor*. The Ultramarines had failed. They had been unable to do save their Father when he was torn apart by the serpentine abomination Fulgrim had become. They had done everything they could to save him...and in the end the only thing they had been able to was to put him in a stasis field before he died.

Theoretical: Roboute Guilliman wasn’t dead.

Practical: the Primarch had maybe thirty seconds of life left in him at best. No known human technology could save him in so little time.

When it had became obvious they would not be able to do anything save bring him back to Macragge and let him rest until someone found a solution, Aeonid and over a hundred sons of the Thirteenth Legion had volunteered to travel across the galaxy and find a means to heal their sire.

They had to find an antidote to the hellish poison used by Fulgrim. They had to discover a cure for Roboute Guilliman.

And in over one hundred and six Terran years before being baited in the Webway by these treacherous Eldar, he had only failure to show for his efforts.

“How many years have passed since my disappearance, I wonder?” The Ultramarine Astartes said aloud.

He regretted this moment of weakness. Be it a century or a millennium, the theoretical and the practical told him there was nothing he could do to turn back the march of time. He had to escape this trap, for this was obviously one, and begin to explore some tracks he had not yet pursued.

First step, clearly, was to leave this ruined city before something he wasn’t able to handle found him. From time to time, he faced enemies who like him were exploring this maze. The Alpha Legionaries were the last group of a long list.

Aeonid Thiel returned to his camp, analysing every portal he came nearby to see if there had been any change. There wasn’t. The Webway portals were remaining as disturbingly passive as they were when he posed his eyes first on the deserted Eldar settlement.

It must have been a magnificent place, millennia ago. There were enough spires, statues and decorations left intact that the son of Macragge knew the splendour of this nexus-city must have been celebrated by its inhabitants. Diamond-like crystals had been used to provide lighting, and the streets and the many buildings had been built by architects who did not have to bother with the laws of gravity.

He was seeing his camp when he noticed something was wrong. The decapitated head of an eldar statue was painted in blue. Two of the traps he had armed with grenades and razorwire were not armed, despite the fact he had triple-checked them before going to slaughter the sons of Alpharius.

But his camp was as deserted as it had been before. Everything was in the same position as he had disposed it...why had his traps been removed?

A gust of wind which should not have been there manifested itself, and from behind the ruins of Eldar architecture a card flew to him.

It was an image of him, with a single word in High Gothic, and his mind immediately translated it as ‘Trapmaster’.

“I know you are here.” His plasma gun was already drawn, and he prepared to do the same with his power sword. “Show yourself Eldar!”

There was a moment of silence, and then an explosion of light and music which managed to completely disorientate him, no mean feat after everything he had endured.

When he was able to assess three heartbeats later, Aeonid saw he was surrounded.

There were over a hundred Eldar, and while the orange, pink and black costumes were unfamiliar to him, the attires were not. The murder-clowns of the Webway, the Harlequin, were here. Knowing very well the lethality of one of these Eldar, the Ultramarine Captain knew that if it came to a battle, he was doomed.

There was another flash, and the Eldar circle disappeared. All the xenos were gone...all save one.

“Aeonid Thiel, the Errant Trapmaster of the Ultramarines,” the Harlequin mask did not sound like it was speaking, and the whisper came from everywhere and nowhere at once. “Lord of the Red-Marked, Hero of Calth, Knight of Guilliman.”

“Since you know my name and my titles, it is only polite to present yourself, *Eldar*.”

The white-blue mask bowed mockingly.

“I am Ciarel Snowlight, Ice Sword of the Twisting Path. The presentations are done, ha, ha, ha!”

Aeonid didn’t lower his gun. This particular breed of Eldar was as duplicitous as it was insane.

“Three roads open to you for the next cycle, Hero and Trapmaster!” Even with his transhuman eyes, he didn’t see the Harlequin move. One instant it was on top of a pillar, the next it was dancing in front of his tent. “The first sees you try to return to your legion of blue and blue, and fail! Your thread is cut and the Primordial Annihilator laugh!”

The Eldar made three jumps that no living creature should have been able to and was out of his gun range in a second.

“The second is noble and cruel! The sorcerer of Ruin and Rubric is on his way to this city! You will try to stop him, and you will fail!”

The sorcerer of Ruin and Rubric...was the Harlequin speaking about Ahriman? If so, it was incredibly bad news...

“What is the third?”

“It is a story of tragedy and triumph!” his inhuman interlocutor laughed, and the sound was madness, joy and promise of violence in one. “It is a legend of disaster and victory! It is a tale of hardship, ice and great swarms! You will find hope at the end of this road for your Primarch! Oh, oh, oh! Or you will be a Hero, again and again!”

Everything in him pushed him to refuse and blast the head of the Harlequin in a thousand blood fragments. Aeonid did not share the hatred many Ultramarines felt for xenos, but the Eldar race as a whole was not to be trusted. But assuming he managed to kill this warrior and survived the vengeance of the others hiding nearby, he was still going to be trapped here, and Ahriman was possibly on his way. While he had dealt his fair share of corrupted Librarians and Sorcerers during Horus’ Rebellion, dealing with the chief lieutenant of the Cyclops was out of his league, since he was alone and unsupported.

So he spoke the words he was sure he was going to regret very soon.

“Tell me more.”

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Scelus Sector**

**Craftworld Ulthwé**

**8.999.290M35**

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

Eldrad was old for a Farseer. Sometimes Farseers of other Craftworlds thought the fact made him arrogant, but truthfully he was more of a burden. After all, if the Asuryani who often spoke against him took a few seconds to think about it, they would realise there was a big problem with their views.

Eldrad was powerful and the light of his mind burned brightly, yes. But he was hardly exceptional in power. Every Asuryani had a fair measure of psychic power, and the moment any aspirant donned a Seer mask, the power was there to answer. For those like him who were unable or unwilling to change of Path, their skills and their abilities grew with each cycle. By all rights, in a galaxy where the Seers exploited their talents to their full potential, Eldrad should be one among several thousand Farseers.

He was old for a Farseer, but not that old for an Asuryani. And he knew for sure there were thousands of Exodites and Harlequins who were aeons-old when the Fall had happened and he was not yet born.

All of this to say the narrow minds of several Craftworld-born Farseers were hitting on his nerves more and more frequently these last cycles.

“The Shadowpoint has increased in size again, Master Eldrad,” Auric Stormcloud said. The young Farseer was one of the emissaries he relied considerably when he wasn’t able to travel himself. “Near the entire eastern galactic region is covered in its shadow.”

Eldrad nodded and presented him refreshments. The other Farseer looked like he needed them.

“Your reports unfortunately confirm my observations. The future is clouded and dark. We are the next best thing to deaf and blind to the storm about to strike. And for the two thousands and eighteenth time, don’t call me Master. I am not so old and decrepit to deserve the title.”

“As you wish...Master,” Eldrad Ulthran did not groan but as he watched his student drank the elixir he had prepared, he knew he was not going this battle today. “I must confess never having seen a Shadowpoint of that size before. The biggest I was able to see in the future before this one was limited to a single planet.”

“Shadowpoints are rare events.”

Eldrad did not say ‘fortunately’. The very existence of these obscuring phenomena to the Farseers’ sight implied the existence of a conflict between two powers having a chance to triumph.

And since the Fall, the number of Shadowpoints where the Asuryani had been involved could be counted on both hands with some fingers spare. Some Autarchs may convince themselves of the contrary, but Eldrad unfortunately knew the truth: the Asuryani were not able to stand against the might of the Primordial Annihilator in open battle. Elite forces could be dispatched across the galaxy to inflict defeats to the servants of the Four, but long campaigns were out of the question.

Ultimately, there was one Empire which mounted guard around the Eye the Aeldari had created in their folly, and it had not a drop of the precious blood the children of Isha had in their veins.

“If the Shadowpoint continues to grow...it may rival in size if not in strength the one which darkened the galaxy during the human civil war, the conflict they call the Horus Heresy.”

Having lived during these times, Eldrad was not that eager to plunge head first into a second galaxy-sized problem of this magnitude. Unfortunately, it seemed that no one had asked him opinion...

“Master, you have to stop it! It is yet time to act!”

“The faith you have in my abilities makes my heart sing in joy, Auric, but I am not omniscient. My visions have grown more and more unreliable divination session after divination session. And what I saw is not enough. All I know today is that the birth of the Shadowpoint has taken place somewhere in the east, and that the belligerent Biel-Tan warriors were in the middle of it as per their bad habits. Besides, the messengers I sent to their Craftworld were rather rudely escorted out before they learned anything worthwhile. What makes you think trying to send a second delegation will do something more than antagonising our war-like cousins?”

Part of it was his fault, admittedly, though Ulthwé prejudices were also involved. Eldrad had never been a great supporter of the factions thinking that the Eldar Empire of old could be reconquered on the corpses of the humans when he was young. After watching in vivid details what could happen to any Asuryani fleet – or one of their dark kin’s for that matter – when they were opposed to an endless flow of ‘Space Marines’ he had known there was no glorious song of victory to be sung there.

Biel-Tan could not win. This was the truth. Biel-Tan could not win, because this was a war the Asuryani could not win. Many younglings ignored it, but a large reason the humans did not hunt their race to extinction was because on a purely benefits/losses calculus, they weren’t worth the trouble.

But if every Craftworld chose to behave like Biel-Tan did, the threads of fate he had explored shifted in a heartbeat. The Empire of the humans was sluggish and diseased, but when it was presented a threat, it could answer with terrifying ferocity.

“No, Auric, the Shadowpoint is too advanced to act in a hurry, and I became aware of it too late to manipulate the darkened threads and turn them to a positive outcome. I’m also afraid that since Farseer Kaeran and several of his allies cordially hate me, my presence would throw more inflammable materials into the fires of war.”

The young Stormcloud of Ulthwé bowed, though Eldrad could see he wasn’t fully convinced.

“Hypothetically, the shattering of Biel-Tan and the utter annihilation of its Infinity Circuit would not be able to generate such a large Shadowpoint.”

“Yes. It is why we have already alerted all the Craftworlds we are in good term with, and we are recalling all our forces and sealing as many gates and portals as possible. Ulthwé will not face this storm defenceless.”

The two Farseers saluted each other and departed each for executing their duties. The wheel of fate was turning, and darkness waited for no one.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**7.129.291M35**

**Tech-Priest T-11001100-Zeta**

There was a sentence aboard the station which had the power to make every tech-Priest shiver in terror.

“I think I have solved all the problems this time.”

If it was followed by:

“They are going to recognise my genius with this invention.”

Then it was time to run and never go back.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

**Before the first engine exploded, T-11001100-Zeta had run out of the compartment. He had become very good at it, in all modesty. Why, he was now the senior Tech-Priest on the station and the new Magos in charge safely installed in an office two million kilometres away had told him that if he survived until the Sanguinala, he may have the Omnissiah-level honour to leave this place of horror and damnation.**

**Maybe.**

“NNNNNOOOOOOOO!”

It hadn’t worked. Maybe next time.

No. By the Machine-Force, why try to believe in something impossible? It wasn’t working. It was never working.

He had served months aboard *Danger-Prototype-Central*, yes the name had stuck for some reason. The ‘successes’ were terribly outnumbered by the ‘explosive decompressions’, the ‘fatal incidents’, the ‘tragic security problems’ and a variety of other events **T-11001100-Zeta would have preferred not watching with his new augmetic eyes.**

**There was also the problem that with each new arrival wave of Tech-Priests, there were one or two saboteurs. There were not traitors or hereteks...at least he thought so. T-11001100-Zeta had known a few of them had been arrested by the Heracles Wardens and/or the Inquisition, so it was possible these Tech-Priests had been sent here as a disguised death sentence.**

**But to be honest, while sabotages and the sheer terror many Tech-Priests felt at the idea of being blasted apart caused a lot of accidents, the problem lied with the parahuman known as Leet. After seeing in action for months, T-11001100-Zeta had realised his ‘Tinker abilities’ had to be defective. It was the only thing which made sense. Even if he *wanted* to make everything explode, no one would be able to cause so many disasters and damage tons of resource in so little time. Even the greenskins were not that destructive, and the green brutes were destruction incarnate.**

“Praise the Omnissiah for our survival today.” He prayed in front of the two dozen Tech-Priests which had run to the damage control section like him.

“Praise the Omnissiah!”

“How many dead?”

“One. Tertio-4-Beta was operating on a coolant tube. But the coolant spontaneously became acid.”

Mechadendrites rose in prayer for the soul of Fin-4-Beta. It was not the worst death **T-11001100-Zeta had heard since his arrival on *Danger-Prototype-Central*, but it was not one he wanted to share.**

“What was he working on today?”

“In his own words, a prototype of ‘bio-computer’. No, I have no idea what it does.”

“I thought he was forbidden by Lady Dragon to do anything biological. Remember the foam-fungus incident?”

**T-11001100-Zeta and the other Tech-Priests shivered. This particular...disaster-level event had been bad. Really bad. They had to improvise and use flamers to fight their way out of the contaminated compartments.**

**Mechanical prototypes were bad, but in general provoked ‘only’ mechanical explosions. Biological ‘inventions’ were infinitely worse.**

**“There has to be something we can do,” a newcomer in the robes of Blessed Mars said.**

**T-11001100-Zeta sighed. This conversation came back with a depressing regularity.**

**“I will advise you not to assassinate him. It’s like there’s a probability factor protecting him from his explosions and failures. Tragic accidents are waiting those who walk on this path.”**

**“It’s...good to know, I suppose.” The very junior Tech-Priest from Mars, whose name was Corcovado Gamma if he wasn’t mistaken, replied. “But I was thinking on a more...peaceful and alternative tactical approach.”**

The Omicron-Iota-level Tech-Priest frowned.

‘Explain your...alternative tactical approach.”

“I think we have all seen what happens when our dear ‘parahuman overseer’ tries to invent something new with the raw components he has at his disposal.”

Everyone nodded. They had indeed seen it. They had also felt the pain and received new metallic replacements for it.

“The problem, as I see it, is that this parahuman has no comprehension of the finer mysteries of the Omnissiah, and whatever skill allows him to imitate our works and create a vulgar spark of machine-life is at best non-compliant, at worse tending towards abominable intelligence.”

“I understand what you are trying to say.” **T-11001100-Zeta stated. “You are saying that even if by some miracle of the Omnissiah a device works, like the demon-banisher, the object in itself will be flawed by its very conception, and will naturally unravel towards hostile behaviour in a few days or a few months.”**

**“It is indeed the logical reasoning I have arrived to,” replied Corcovado Gamma.**

There were a few chuckles and laughs at the word ‘logical’ before tempers returned to a work-like attitude.

“It’s...interesting. And I mean this in the best of ways.” **T-11001100-Zeta began. “But I really don’t see how you want to solve this dilemma. The ignorance of Leet where Mechanicus doctrine is concerned is not the fault of the higher authorities having not proposed formal or informal teachings to him. As far as I am aware, it is his fault that he is pursuing this path of tech-heresy and explosions. Magos Dragon Richter and the Chosen of the Omnissiah did not encourage him to create aberrations.”**

**“It is why I propose, respectfully, we don’t give him the choice anymore.”**

Mechadendrites went limb and silent.

“I have neither the authorisations nor the expertise to strap him to a Biologis-surgery table and implant him some advanced cogitator-implants, or psycho-indoctrinate him until his behaviour become acceptable.” The Graia-born Tech-Priest warned his Martian counterpart.

“Do not be worried. What I have in mind is much, much worse. I think we only need to be sure the higher authorities won’t debark tomorrow and see what we’re trying to do.”

“You will understand if I need a bit more of a plan that this vague assurance before risking what’s left of my career,” **T-11001100-Zeta replied tartly.**

**“Fine. First I need we need to exploit Leet’s prejudices and fascinations. I don’t pretend to know why, but he has a fascination for starfighters. According to the vault-manifests, we have an extremely damaged Faustus Interceptor in Section 25. I propose we transfer it in Section 4-K while he’s asleep. After that...”**

Listening to the plan, **T-11001100-Zeta admitted he could very well work. Of course if it failed, there were going to be unpleasant consequences. Crazy and explosive he may be, but Leet was officially the station’s commanding officer.**

**It was still better to wait for the next explosion, in the end.**

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**0.300.291M35**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

As they all took their seats for the soon-to-come dinner, Nicephorus couldn’t help but think he should have found an excuse to justify his absence.

A little voice in his head objected he had already done that three times, and each time his eldest brother had simply delayed until he ran out of excuses and ‘official matters of state’.

In theory, the Solar Guardian of Records – third most important Adept of the Office of Records of the Most Supreme Adeptus Administratum – should not feel threatened by any man save his direct superior, Secretary General Al-Rachitic, and the High Twelve of the Senatorum Imperialis.

In practise, both Nicephorus position and privileges were not under attack because he had the might of Clan Vandire supporting his decisions and his powerbase.

All of this could be revoked in a heartbeat if the Head of Clan Vandire said a word...and the Head was Lord Adept Xerxes Vandire, Secretary Minister of the Departmento Exacta, aka Nicephorus’ eldest brother.

So he had obeyed, as usual. He had left his wife and his children at home, though. No need to involve the younger generation in this sordid affair. It was bad enough Xerxes had authorised his unbearable spawn to dine with them.

His younger brother had shared this opinion, but alas Trismegistus was even less confrontational than he. He had tried a few apologies and delay too, but unlike Nicephorus, his duties of Secretary Minister of the Logis Strategos were such he met Xerxes every day.

There was no hope something looking like logic and sanity would emerge from the rest of the assembly. Xerxes’ wife, Lady Waltrude Vandire nee Reitz, began to stuff herself with food the very moment the hors d’oeuvres were in her range. Anyone who watched the scene would be forgiven to think the rumour of one of her sons being dead was just that, a rumour.

Fortunately for his stomach, the servants had placed her seat at the other end of the table, some fifty metres away. Thank the God-Emperor for small mercies. He had no wish to observe the gluttony of this grease mountain longer than necessary.

He had already his eldest brother to content with. As the second son of the regretted Cagliostro Vandire, he had been given the seat on Xerxes’ right, while Trismegistus was granted the left one. On his right, however, he had Censor-Patrician Zoroaster Vandire, Xerxes’ eldest son. Trismegistus had not been spared either. On his left was Vice-Admiral Ormuz Vandire, Xerxes’ second son. The children most likely to be the reasonable ones, Questor-Investigator Zenobia Vandire of the Adeptus Fidicius, and Magistrate Abagnale Vandire of the Ordo Sabatorum, Xerxes’ sole daughter and his fourth son respectively, were more than ten metres away and not likely going to be invited to give their opinion.

The first branch of Clan Vandire was mustered in a single location at the same time. This was not going to be pleasant.

The hors d’oeuvres were just being removed when his eldest brother commenced his rant on the issue everyone knew was the reason of this ‘family dinner’.

“I want them dead, you hear! They dared, dared, killing my son! My son! They dared killing a Vandire of Holy Terra!”

For his poor ears and the suffering of his brain Nicephorus toned down the ranting and presented the same facade he always did to the endless queues of schemers and useless messengers he was forced to tolerate at his door in the Mega-Archive of Records every day.

It was not like he had not heard Xerxes rant before. Though in general he limited it to Trismegistus and himself, and did not involve his spawn, pardon his children, in the high affairs. Of course, Xerxes was more furious than Nicephorus had ever seen him. Strangely, he did not think it was so much the loss of a son who had angered the patriarch of the Vandire Clan. Nostradamus had not been sent to the galactic eastern regions because he was diligent, competent, influential, and in good terms with his genitor.

“I want them dead!”

The rant ended in a powerful shriek. Nicephorus eyes met Trismegistus’, and the Solar Guardian sighed. His younger brother was going to owe him a nice favour for that.

“Forgive me, brother, but who are the ‘them’?”

“Everyone involved in the death of my son! They killed a Vandire, they must pay! The bitch they call Weaver must be slaughtered! The Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor must have his throat cut and his body disembowelled! The Commissar and his Penal Legion overseers and menials must be wiped out to the last man!”

The Adept of the Office of Records breathed in. Oh yes, what a brilliant idea. Kill everyone involved. For the moment, he had been able to reduce the death of Nostradamus to mere rumours. But if they began to act brazenly and openly, their enemies were going to realise the rumours had a solid core of truth...and they would certainly not stay idle behind the scenes. It was easily the kind of situation which could see a coalition of Clans and Great Houses unite to destroy them. No Vandire was in the High Twelve of the Senatorum Imperialis; the support of one of the High Lords or one of the big players immediately under the Hive Twelve could doom them.

“The Penal Legions and their Commissars have extremely heavy attrition rates, brother.” He answered coldly. “Since the opposition was consisting of the Loxatl species, I have no doubt their losses were extremely high in the first days of action, and there is a good chance the Penal Legion has already been exterminated on Kokoda. The information has just not arrived to his ears.”

Zoroaster, the impertinent little bastard, began to laugh.

“Our dear uncle has a golden tongue! No doubt he is going to convince us the rest are also going to end dead...eventually.”

“No, I don’t.” The glare he gave the ungrateful spawn he was forced to call his nephew cowered him for a few seconds. “I was going to say trying to assassinate a Sector Lady or a Lord Inquisitor is a stupid idea. Have you ever thought about the consequences of your vendetta?”

“Nyx is a third-tier Sector at best!” Ormuz Vandire retorted dismissively. “My Battlegroup could disintegrate their pathetic Battlefleet in one hour and conquer the Sector in one month!”

Trismegistus almost snorted and Nicephorus was a breath away from doing the same. The part of Battlefleet Sol Ormuz was part of had not left the Sol System for more than one hundred and fifty years. It was heavy in capital units assuredly, but its victories and war-time engagements were all dating terribly. He would be very surprised if there was a single man or woman in the Battlegroup of his nephew who had ever ordered to fire at a xenos or a heretic ship.

“It isn’t the point, and you know it.” He supposed he could be forgiven to feel a little annoyed. “If we try to kill a Lord Inquisitor and fail, we will have an angry Lord Inquisitor coming for us. If we succeed, all the other Inquisitors who were allied with him will come for us, to teach us no one ever tries to think killing Inquisitors is a good idea.”

By that point the only thing to do would be to kill themselves and make sure the Inquisition had not the ability as some claimed to resurrect fresh corpses to torture them again. On a lambda planet, Nicephorus did not doubt there were places to hide from the Inquisition. But they were on Holy Terra, and the planet had constantly hundreds of rosette-bearing women and men sniffing for any sign of treachery and heresy.

“I agree with Nicephorus, brother,” Trismegistus added. “Killing a Lord Inquisitor is just not worth the trouble. If the Inquisitorial Representative decides the men is worth listening to or avenging, our whole Clan could be arrested in a single day and disappear into the Inquisitorial dungeons. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to die screaming under the Inquisition’s blades.”

“And while I have not been able to ascertain his real prestige among his colleagues, Odysseus Tor was granted a Venenum Assassin for a long-term assignment.” Xerxes looked really to explode and he had to speak in an apologetic tone. “The Officio Assassinorum does not look fondly on people who try to assault their agents or launch missions putting their pet killers at cross-purpose.”

“And the so-called Lady Nyx? Are you telling me I can’t touch her either? We control three Sectors of Segmentum Solar and I can’t touch a rat with delusions of grandeur?”

Nicephorus wanted to answer this obviously rhetorical interrogation by a ‘yes’. The assassination of anyone possessing the level of authority of a Sector Lord was never a good idea. It wasn’t a smart proposition, because if it failed and a massive Sector-wide rebellion erupted, the Administratum as a whole and a lot organisations like the Arbites and the Navy were going to ask themselves who was the imbecile responsible for this fiasco. The Imperium would send the troops, all right. But they would punish the culprits before, and there were fates no one sane wanted to endure. It wasn’t a good idea, because Nyx was incredibly far from Terra, and his knowledge about this Ultima Sector – or the Clan’s knowledge, really – was partial and outdated. It wasn’t a good idea because if Kar Duniash had evidence to show to Terra, there were going to be earthquakes in the bureaucracy of the Administratum, as the Adepts of Ultima screamed the Sector was in their area of responsibility and this act was a gross overstepping of their authority. And this was just the first arguments which arrived at the forefront of his thoughts.

Alas, looking at his brother, he knew that answering this would dismiss all his other arguments, including the one about not assassinating a Lord Inquisitor. And for all the consequences, Nyx was far away while Xerxes was less than a metre away from him.

“Do with her as you wish.” It didn’t please him, but the explosion was averted and his brother calmed himself.

Xerxes grinned in one of his frightening smiles, and the Records’ Adept already regretted his reply.

“Our good friend the Callidus Frost has three apprentices ready to pass their final test before they become full-fledged Imperial Assassins. All I’m assured are loyal to our cause...I am going to send them against this lowborn commoner who had the gall to rise against her betters and her advisors.”

“That’s a brilliant move, father!” Zoroaster complimented his patriarch.

“Yes, it is,” Xerxes affirmed, trampling humility and prudence in three words. “The blades of Hannah Bator, Cass Damascus, and Tziz Jarek will avenge Nostradamus and teach our enemies nothing can stand between Clan Vandire and the glory of the Senatorum Imperialis.”

**Apprentice Elena Kerrigan**

She had hoped to watch her first Assassin-versus-Assassin duel today.

Instead she had just watched a one-sided humiliation. Xanaria, her teacher, had been younger than Iphigenia Frost, but this didn’t explain the incredible difference of speed, technique and skill. There was a reason one was Clade-Primaris of the Temple, and the other a mere Clade-Quintus.

The ‘duel’ had not lasted more than twenty heartbeats before her mentor cut the right arm of Frost and knowing her defeat was unavoidable, the traitor had activated her suicide protocols.

The corpse dissolving itself from the inside was not a pleasant sight. This was far from the first woman she had seen die in the Temple, and since her induction in the Seventh Level, she was aware of the suicide protocols. But seeing them in action and knowing the same fate could happen to her once she was recognised as a certified operative was not fuelling her with happiness.

“What lesson did you learn from this duel, Apprentice?” Xanaria asked.

“I think the most evident is that capturing a Callidus Assassin when she doesn’t want to be is an extremely difficult task.”

“Precisely,” her teacher agreed. “Frost was never good enough to become a Clade-Quartus, but I never doubted that the moment she began to sell herself to a new master, she would take enough precautions to never be captured alive.”

Elena understood the test. The majority of the persons aware there was an Officio Assassinorum believed the contrary, but there were rules the Imperial Assassins had to respect. And nobody would have said a word if Iphigenia Frost desired to manipulate a Chartist Captain.

“Her patron was important enough for her to protect his or her identity, but not so to protect her from elimination if she was discovered.”

And the treachery in question may have never been discovered. She had only managed to break through her insane security measures with her shadow abilities.

“Truth.” Mistress and Apprentice left the training hall as the clean-up servitors and other Assassins arrived to harvest the few mortal remains of the traitor. “The High Twelve are not involved, I think. None of the current High Lords have ever tried to infiltrate our temples that way. But they can’t be ruled out. On the lower scale, no one having a rank lower than Prefect or an equivalent in the Adeptus Terra would have interested our disloyal Clade-Quintus. How many people does that leave us to investigate, Apprentice?”

“I estimate it at approximately twenty three million, five hundred thousand more if they acted during the Sanguinala.”

“Good. The lessons are assimilated.”

Xanaria shifted back into her regular Callidus appearance – at least she assumed it was the Clade-Primus official appearance, her teacher had so many secrets she only revealed drop by drop.

“I want your opinion on the choice of sending three Apprentices of the First Level.”

The tone was conversational, but underneath Elena could almost taste the killing edge. It didn’t surprise her. If there was anything the Callidus Assassin had told her in blunt terms concerning her doctrine, it was that she did not suffer foolish politics to disrupt the work of the Officio Assassinorum. Politics were not for Assassins, their job was to kill the enemies of the God-Emperor, be they xenos, heretics, mutants or politicians trying to tear the edifice apart with their ambitions.

“I say this is stupid. They were trained by the same teacher, with the same weapons and the same Polymorphine methods. If their opponents are alert and they manage to stop one, they will be on their guard and be able to kill three of them. It is the diversity of the Officio Assassinorum to adapt its killing methods to the target. Not knowing the identity of the Apprentices’, I can only speculate the means it will have to prevent an assassination, but bodyguards are a given, and once the effect of surprise is passed, Callidus operatives have lost a potent weapon in their arsenal.”

“You are right. It was stupid.” There was no roll of shoulders or shrug, but the slight silence following the judgement functioned as one. “But not for the reasons you imply. If Frost’s master sent three Apprentices of the same Temple instead of a mature and veteran Clade-Sextus or Quintus, or Apprentices from several Temples, it may be because he had not the contacts to do so. By acting in a hurry, he gave us an opportunity to prepare against other infiltration attempts. Still, there are going to be large searches and investigations in the coming days.”

A dagger was sent in her direction and Elena caught it with two fingers.

“Now we have to see if Frost’s former Apprentices followed their teacher into treason. We were not able to catch in time the three who left for what they believe to be their assassination graduation, but we can root out the traitors who believe themselves safe inside the Temple.”

The last sentence was uttered with something looking like joy and Elena shivered.

May the God-Emperor have mercy on the souls of these Apprentices and Assassins, because Xanaria Lythis would have none for them.

**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**Eastern Fringe**

**Solemnace World-Engine**

**8.366.291M35**

**Trazyn the Infinite**

He found Neferten in the Krork Gallery, like he had known he would. The Phaerakh was inscrutable even for him on certain subjects, but gene-engineered creatures were one of her rare weaknesses.

And the Krorks, for the misfortune of every metallic and living being of this galaxy, were the perfect gene-engineered creatures.

The War in Heaven had shattered the very concept of time, but the Necrons had not forgotten that the Old Ones had condemned them to abandon the stars, if only for a few stellar rotations. Unfortunately, while the thirst of vengeance was not satisfied, the Necrons Phaerons and Phaerakhs, had forgotten the most important lesson of all.

You don’t corner a wounded animal. You kill him before he shows his fangs.

The Old Ones had finally understood that their most promising toys, the Hrud, the Rangdan, and the Aeldari, were not up to the task. Time-distorting abilities were of no use when your opponent was built in necrodermis. The capacity to eat and mimic flesh-based beings was of limited utility when the enemy did not require anything biological for sustenance. The Aeldari were the Warp-hybridisation of what Necrons should have been, but they could not be produced in trillions like the cannon-fodder Skinks.

Thus the Krorks had entered the galactic arena. And for the first time, the Necrons had known fear. Trazyn knew exactly where he was and what he was doing – requisitioning the sword of a Morai-Heg Priestess – when he had seen for the first time the Krorks take the battlefield.

After keeling before the Nightbringer, he had believed there was nothing that could scare him anymore.

The Krorks had broken this belief.

They were impossibly tall. Yes, there were taller species in the galaxy, but twelve metres-tall was more in the category ‘aberration’ than the category ‘common’. Their spores guaranteed that they would never lack reinforcements. Kill one army of Krorks, and in the time it has taken to win this victory, five more have been equipped and are now rushing in your direction. Their Warp-matrix allowed them to shamelessly cheat with the laws of reality. Technology worked because they wished it so. And they were frighteningly, impossibly intelligent.

The Krorks were the green tide of ten thousand apocalyptical planet destructions.

And if they had been vanquished, it had been by a succession of desperate tactics and insane use of world-killers that even the C’Tan had refused to use at first against the Old Ones and their reptilian progeny.

The Krorks had to be annihilated, and they were. Unfortunately, their debased descendants the Orks were still giving him headaches millions of years later.

Still, the ten Krorks in his gallery were the sole survivors of their race. There were as such, a priceless part of his collection, and one he would never discard under any circumstances.

“This Krork was not there the last time we spoke.”

“Unlike the other ones, this specimen grew during the War of the Beast. I captured it a few minutes before the humans gave the killing blow to their green empire.”

Neferten slammed her sceptre against the ground.

“And why pray tell didn’t you deal with them before the humans did?”

“Because they were not true Krorks,” the Collector justified himself. “Outwardly, they look like Krork, but they did not have the ability to create more of their kind. They may have gained it with a new elevation, but at that point, they didn’t possess it. They didn’t have the full technological knowledge either. Spores’ generation, strategies, cunning, social structure...everything they had, it was inferior to the Krorks. And they were never more than six of these ‘Krorks’ at the beginning of their great galactic attack.”

Apparently his answer satisfied the mind of the Necrontyr he had an eternity ago called lover.

“You know the humans have an expression for what you’re about to do. They call it ‘high treason’.”

Neferten clicked her fingers in annoyance.

“I believe your refusal to enter the Great Sleep per Szarekh’s wishes was also ‘high treason’, Trazyn.”

“You know very well I always had hearing problems when Szarekh spoke.” He cheerfully admitted.

The Silent King had few qualities, and ‘my orders are pertinent’ was not one of them.

“But he has destroyed the command protocols. And I can assure you, his flagship truly left this galaxy.”

The Phaerakh-Cryptek by side snorted in disbelief.

“After everything he has done to our race, I will not apologise for the precautions I am taking. The command protocols are gone as you said, but should our delusional Silent King returns, I don’t want him to hang the other protocols over my head. I spent the War in Heaven fighting for this peasant’s soul in a Phaerakh body, it was enough for the rest of my lifetime. And if I have to use the humans to achieve my goals of liberty and independence, so be it.”

Trazyn decided to look at the new situation from the good side. Between Taylor Hebert and Neferten, he was going to have plenty of opportunities to enlarge his collection.

“I would prefer you do not give the humans...how do they call it?...the templates of several of our advanced technologies. Weaver and the red robes had the opportunity to see and study a few samples of our arsenal. They can’t do much with what they have with their limited technology, but...”

“Trazyn, do not take me for an idiot. I don’t know how the Aeldari have missed it, but there’s a word to describe the humans, and it’s ‘threat’, not ‘Mon-keigh’.”

“Threat? I will grant you my dear friend the Emperor was one, as were his Primarchs. But they aren’t walking in this galaxy anymore...”

“They were not created by the Old Ones. They did not benefit from the help of a superior species to develop their technology. They built an interstellar empire by sheer force of will. They have the strength of will to stand against horrors that even we Necrons did not face on open battle. They are surviving and expanding in a galaxy which wants to kill them at every instant. Give them three or four thousand of their years in peace, and they will either fall apart or build something which will make this galaxy cower in fear. If this is not the definition of a threat, what is?”

Her reasoning was as impeccable, as always. He should really enlarge his human galleries before they became too dangerous...

“I am going to begin my muster, Trazyn. I will wait for you at Pavia.”

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Caradryad Sector**

**6.457.292M35**

**First Harrowmaster Machiavelli Gonzaga**

In the dark future of the 35th Millennium, there was only paperwork.

The term was a bit of a misnomer, obviously. Though humanity still used paper for important documents – and cutting billions of trees each hour to satisfy the Administratum demands – most of the support was digital. Data-slates, electronic chips, holo-scrolls, flexi discs and plenty of other objects were now used by the bureaucrats.

It had not decreased the levels of paperwork in the slightest. In fact, it seemed to encourage the scribes, the menials, the accountants and all the other bureaucrats to generate more and more useless documentation. Instead of taking an initiative and settling something they could agree upon in a committee of two or three persons, they put it on a new data-archive and by the time every administrator had given his opinion on it, there was enough to do a library about an oil requisition supply.

Machiavelli Gonzaga, by all rights, should be above this. He was sure even the High Lords of Terra, high in their golden towers, would agree with him.

Why would a Traitor Astartes of the infamous Alpha Legion bother with paperwork?

The answer might have surprised them. Despite not having left the *Beta*, Gloriana-flagship of the Twentieth Legion, in the last decade, he had the next best thing to fifty thousand members of the Adeptus Administratum on his payroll. And while these agents were to various degrees traitors to the Emperor, their betrayals ideals had not exactly convinced them to tone down the bureaucratic nonsense.

It was enough sometimes to tempt him to execute a ‘Kurze Option’ on a planet of the Administratum or two. It would even be a great favour he would do the Emperor.

Unfortunately, this sort of carnage would attract unwanted attention. There were still cousins out there who felt their duty was to cut the heads of the Hydra one by one. On the other side of the barrier, there were daemons, xenos, and many factions wishing to destroy this warship and make sure the Twentieth became their instrument.

As a consequence of this grey situation, the First Harrowmaster began his day like he had done in the last decade, not giggling before a planet burning the fires of Exterminatus, but visiting the Administration level, and trying to assert if there was something demanding his attention.

Machiavelli had realised centuries ago there was simply no way for him to read a tenth of the information arriving every day by the three Astropathic choirs of the Gloriana Battleship, the relay ships, the destroyer scouts or several other means. Therefore he wasn’t trying. His subordinates, some he had trained himself, were taking the decisions themselves and diminishing his workload. Only for certain important affairs the judgement of the Legionary Astartes was required, and only after that he was personally stepping in.

The First Harrowmaster still had something like seven hundred messages on average each day waiting for his answer.

This was not the life he had dreamed when he had said ‘yes’ to an Astartes. But it was necessary. The Great Plan demanded someone stayed at the helm, and since the other Harrowmasters staying loyal to this ideal were not exactly storming the *Beta* to relive him of his duties.

Sometimes he wondered if it was what the Despoiler had to deal with the Black Legion’s administrative issues. But he was probably deluding himself. Machiavelli was rather sure Horus’ favourite killer had developed some eldritch method to make sure paperwork never came closer than five kilometres from him.

“Hannibal,” he greeted his second-in-command. “Any disaster I should be immediately concerned about?”

The good news were so rare he was generally woken up just to listen to them and give new commands to exploit the possibilities offered by a victory.

Century after century, there were fewer of them.

“The last hours were rather calm,” replied his smirking subordinate. “There only were three catastrophes requiring your attention.”

“Tell me.” He said as over two dozen Astartes and fifty men and women clustered around the hololith. To his displeasure, he recognised the visage which appeared first.

“Arkos.”

“Yes Lord Machiavelli, we have finally a report on him.”

Given that Hannibal had mentioned a ‘disaster’, it was not hard to arrive to an unpleasant conclusion.

“He has decided to become a Chaos Lord, hasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

The next hour was spent listing how much the treachery of Arkos – who for a reason the Ruinous Powers only knew had decided to proclaim himself ‘the Faithless’ – had cost the Twentieth Legion. It was a lot. One battleship, the *Anarchy’s Heart*, lost. Two cruisers and four medium escorts, lost. Three hundred Space Marines, two-thirds of them veterans from the Heresy, lost.

“We should never have authorised him to stay close to the Eye of the Terror for so long.” It was easier to say in hindsight, but they had badly the intelligence sources and the knowledge on the movement of the followers of the Warmaster. “Recall the other warships of the five Eye deployments. We must save something of this debacle.”

And hope Arkos had not helped his new masters localising them, before converting Astartes and non-Astartes to the worship of the Chaos abominations.

“The second problem fell upon our laps due to bad luck. There was a xenos infestation at Magdeburg.”

“I thought the forty operatives and the one hundred Astartes we left for the sabotage operations of this Hive World could defend themselves against a few third-rate giant crustaceans.”

“The xenos are not the problem anymore,” Hannibal explained. “The conflict has attracted the attention of the Black Templars. And I’m afraid that while Sigismund zealots are not renowned for their intelligence, even they could not miss the reports of unauthorised Astartes presence in a war. Our forces need either extraction or reinforcements badly.”

There were no reinforcements to give, and everyone around the table knew it very well. Maybe in the Great Crusade era the Alpha Legion had been able to boast one hundred and fifty thousand transhuman operatives, but these times were long past.

A Frigate and two Thunderhawks would have the grim duty to extract what had survived from this defeat.

“Third problem.”

“Our agents have been able to confirm the location of Harrowmaster Isley and his Cohort in Ultima Segmentum.” The Sergeant who had announced it presented a stony face. “You are not going to like it.”

“I don’t like his name being mentioned in the first place.” Machiavelli told humorously. “We don’t know if Voldorius fell to Chaos before or after their little spat, but learning he sabotaged our operations and helped the Imperium for centuries and that all his time we never suspected him of disloyalty to the Great Plan was a hard blow.”

In a way, this was the fault of the Harrowmasters aboard the *Beta*. Ninety-nine percent of the time, Machiavelli and his predecessors were concerned about protecting the Astartes of the Twentieth Legion from the ravages of Chaos. As Arkos had just proved, Alpha Legion Space Marines were not immune to the temptations of the Four, especially with the tight rope they were always forced to work upon. Betraying the Legion for the sake of the Imperium, however, was incredibly uncommon.

“What has he done, this time?”

“His forces surrendered to the Imperium and a gathering of Blood Angels Chapters. We have not all the details, but a few days later a new Chapter, the Heracles Wardens, was added to the rolls of the Astartes formations present in this Sector.”

Machiavelli for once was totally surprised, but he hid it with the practise of long habit. Many of his Captains and subordinates were more expressive.

“Do we send a Kill-team to get rid of him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the First Harrowmaster replied. “If the report is true, there are sons of Sanguinius in the same Sector. Besides by the time our assassins will arrive to kill them, all the information Isley and his veterans have would have been disseminated on ten thousand worlds. And the difficulty of the endeavour...it will be onerous. We are not speaking about infiltrating a society of blind and naive Ultramarines descendants. We are speaking about going against veterans of the Twentieth, who know all our tricks, our technology and our skills. And they will have undoubtedly trained the local troops against our infiltration methods.”

To sum-up, the planet they had taken residence in would be a worse proposition to assault than Terra, from an Alpha Legion perspective.

“First Harrowmaster...should we?”

“Not right now. The Primarch needs to recover, not to be concerned with treacherous Harrowmasters...”

**Segmentum Pacificus**

**Kilberhar Sector**

**Forge World Urdesh**

**4.518.292M35**

**Fabricator Nehru K-2 Marcus**

And to say that when his predecessor had voted the secession of Urdesh from the Imperium, the exponential increase of the tithes had been the principal justification.

Logically, many Tech-Priests of Urdesh had shouted other grievances with their vox-casters. It could hardly be otherwise. Mars was not a kind master, and while the Kilberhar Sector was not a few light-years away from the intergalactic void, it was impossible to deny Urdesh was on the extreme western frontier of the Imperium, low on the list of planets the Adeptus Mechanicus felt it needed to reinforce against the xenos, the mutants and the pirate-raiders.

So yes, the decision in 250M35 to join the Nova-Terrans in their secession had been extremely popular.

Urdesh became part of a realm far more likely to appreciate its contributions, received full dominion over the Kilberhar Sector, a Battlefleet would be sent to protect and enforce its interests, the tithe was reduced to eighty-percent of its nominal value...the terms had been accepted.

His predecessor should have remembered the first thing about politics. Politicians lie.

The Battlefleet they had been promised had never materialised.

The ‘appreciation of their efforts’ was a nice expression written on a holo-scroll.

By 285M35, the production requirements – that for some reason the Nova-Terrans refused to call a tithe in their exchanges – were back to the level of the Martian demands...and then their Secessionists ‘friends’ began to want even more.

At the same time, the correspondence went from semi-cordial to outright threatening.

The patrols and the garrison regiments which had been taken for granted for so long were withdrawn. Urdesh was maintaining its current quotas of production, but several neighbouring planets weren’t able to do so.

And now Nova-Terra was sending a ‘Nova delegate’ to understand the ‘inexcusable failure to deliver the war and civilian materials’ Nova-Terra wanted. They had brought four Lunar-class Cruisers to the Urdesh System to intimidate him and his Tech-Priests, a futile gesture if there ever was one. He had ten Cruisers and fifteen Light Cruisers to defend the Forge World. Did they think their old ships in dire need of maintenance and overhaul were going to frighten him?

Yes, the ‘Nova-Terra Imperium’ could probably crush Urdesh with its fleets and armies. But logic dictated that when you increased the tithes of the Forge Worlds, it wasn’t because the wars you fought were tending towards a victorious outcome. All his calculi were formal on this point.

Nehru K-2 Marcus unfortunately didn’t know which rumours were true and which were Nova-Terran fabrications. Urdesh was too far away from Mars-controlled territory.

But the Lunar Cruisers now in orbit had been built in late M32 and by the looks of it, had certainly been drawn from the mothball shipyards a few years ago in all haste. The Secessionists were not presenting the image one expected from victors.

Bah, this made easier what had been agreed upon.

“The glorious Nova Delegate Lord Jefferson Buckingham, Plenipotentiary Count of Nova-Terra!”

As the herald announced the multitude of titles the not-modest envoy had added to his name, the Skitarii took position. The ramp of the Aquila Lander opened, and a group of Nova-Terrans descended it before walking in his direction.

He was really going to have to order the servitors to polish the ground with sacred oils at the end of this ceremony. The moment he saw the delegation in its insulting appearance, Nehru murmured ten prayers to the Omnissiah. What could possibly possess these delegates to don clothes with so many feathers of rare birds?

It was such an illogical course of action, done against good sense, appearance and productivity that he wanted to tear out their eyes right now with his mechadendrites.

The first words which came out of the mouth of this bird-lover were not of a nature to calm him.

“It is protocol to bow before a Nova Delegate, Lord Fabricator.”

“I know.” And he didn’t make a single inclination of the head or any sign of submission.

“Ah...err...this is the protocol, you see...” Clearly he had managed to destabilise his audience from the start. Against a Magos he would have considered it a success, but these delegates were so lost their unpreparedness was evident.

“Let’s agree to forget all this protocol nonsense.” The Fabricator did not voice it as a question.

“Quite...err...” the white teeth of Buckingham shone so brightly it was clear this was not their natural colour. “Our presence here is due to your failure to increase the supplies the True Sons of the Imperium need. The war against the corrupt and oligarchic bastion of depravity of Old Terra is progressing well, but we need more tanks, bombers, transports...”

“There is no failure. The Forge-Masters of Urdesh and myself have debated lengthily and ultimately decided your demands were unacceptable and contrary to the propositions of the Treaty of 250M35.”

Like every emissary who had just seen his proposals refused, the Nova-Terran visage became more agitated and angry.

“You have seceded from Mars! You answer to our authority now!”

Nehru gave him five seconds of silence, letting the weak human believe he had marked a point. Then he turned slowly to his right and loudly spoke the words agreed two days ago.

“Secession can be rescinded. May I present Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl of Blessed Mars?”

The tall figure in the red robes of Mars which had stayed behind two Thanatar robots now advanced, and the Nova-Terrans shivered under the magnificence of one of the Great Artisans of the Quest For Knowledge.

“This is treason most foul,” seethed one of the courtiers. “Tech-Priests! Arrest the Fabricator and the Archmagos!”

Naturally, not one Skitarii accepted the orders of such a disgusting fleshy being.

“I am the Fabricator of Urdesh, and I represent its interests far better than you would ever be able to.” He answered curtly. “And you betrayed this Forge World first. The pacts signed between this planet of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Council of Nova-Terra are now null and void.”

“Mars is far from here!” Buckingham shouted back. “And the Archmagos won’t always be able to protect you from the wrath of our mighty Battlefleets!”

This threat was all logic and the service of the Machine-God required. Cants were sung, and orders went through the Noosphere. Three seconds later, the Skitarii and elite boarding troops in orbit were starting their attacks against the four Lunar-class Cruisers.

“The Omnissiah protects.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Golgothan Sector**

**Sarum System**

**Hell Forge Sarum**

**8.615.295M35**

**Hell-Lord Assyrian Barthelme**

The lone Iron Warrior was not screaming, but the five thousand Hell-Priests were more than compensating for him. Being crucified as lava and acid were poured on you thirteen drops after thirteen drops was not painless. The punishment was dolorous enough to make the servants of the true Omnissiah voice their pain and their suffering to every witness.

It was going to get worse for them, of course. Soon the Harpies circling over the Fields of Punishment would have the right to touch them and lacerate their skins. Then daemons would be summoned into them, corrupting and devouring them from the inside. And after...well, he would have to improvise.

It had been so long since anyone had disappointed him like this, and he had to devise a truly exceptional punishment for them. The price for failure had to be great; otherwise the servants would believe it was acceptable to return in failure to Sarum.

“How bad were the losses of the convoy?” Assyrian demanded to his Executor-Reductor as the screams rose in intensity when the hell-whips were brought into action on the metal and the flesh of the crucified prisoners.

“They were effectively total,” the Executor-Reductor grunted. Taller than an Astartes in Terminator Armour, the origins of the Tech-Priest, his name, and his real name remained a mystery. The Hell-Lord knew he was the fifth ruler of Sarum to use his services, but apart from his implacable willingness to crucify the failures and his lack of ambition, there was surprisingly little else known about him. “In hindsight, we should have abandoned the depots of Sodom long ago. We knew the false-servants of Ryza were aware of its coordinates. We knew they had conducted long-range surveys of the system. We relied too much on Heldrakes to protect the depot and the ships at anchor there.”

Had it been anyone else speaking, Assyrian Barthelme would have thought his interlocutor tried to find excuses, but the Executor-Reductor was colder than him and only concerned about facts.

“The details of the losses, Executor-Reductor.”

“Three thousand and four hundred Heldrakes of the Sarum Second Fleet have been lost. The Hell-Forge of the depot was destroyed. Fifteen capital warships and over seventy escorts have been wiped out from our order of battle. And we lost the convoy from Xana II, which was I believe the enemy’s primary objective. Two thousand Heldrakes and over six hundred major Daemon Engines were transported in its hulls or participating in its protection.”

“Xana II is going to be very unhappy with us.” And that was the real problem, in the end. The defences of Sarum were strong, so Assyrian was not exactly worried about a direct attack of the weaklings and narrow-minded creatures self-styling themselves the masters of Mars.

Xana II was an entirely different problem. Sarum was on the Maelstrom’s doorstep, and while in normal circumstances it was a boon as the flares of the Warp Storm protected them from the counter-attacks of the False-Omnissiah slaves, it was inconvenient in this instance. Xana II’s Hell-Lords had a lot of influence in the Maelstrom, and could choose to make Sarum’s existence if they wished.

“I will have to present apologies and tribute.” It was going to delay the rebuilding of his forces, but there was no way Sarum could survive alone if its rear-lines were under attack by the Xana Cohorts.

“How long will it take for our forces to recover from this defeat?”

“Between eighty and ninety standard years, depending on the activity of the Ryza false-priests.”

This was not pleasing him at all. The Second Fleet was in ruins, and they had been several greenskins’ offensives on their rimward flank.

“Tell me what you have discovered about the new unit our Ryza enemies have introduced.”

The Executor-Reductor grunted again and began to cant in eight layers of binaric.

“Basically, they for once decided to entirely discard their principles against innovation and build a flying vehicle vaguely looking like one of our Heldrakes, but far better armed for long-range and close-combat fighting than our winged Daemon Engines are.” His mechadendrites increased in activity, or was it frustration? “They are also completely immune to the large arsenal of scrap-code we had stored at Sodom.”

“The false-priests of Ryza are slow to innovate. Either it is a long-term project they spent two or three millennia to push to completion, or they bought the schematics from another Forge World.”

“It is the logical conclusion, Hell-Lord. But whoever built the first machine, the fact remains the Heldrakes have proved completely obsolete facing this new ‘Dragon-Nyx’. The fusion of machine and flesh imbued with the Immaterium has great advantages, but it also makes the final result feral and illogical. Since the Ryza unbelievers use this new weapon in space like they use Knights on the ground, we need a counter for this.”

“Are you sure you aren’t a bit pessimistic? Heldrakes have served with distinction in every Chaos fleet I’m aware of...”

“Heldrakes will soon be nothing more than targets, Hell-Lord.” The Executor-Reductor barked in a tone tolerating no debate. “Five thousand and four hundred Heldrakes lost for the destruction of sixty-plus ‘Dragon-Nyx’ is not a loss rate we can endure for a dozen major battles without seeing the enemy invading our most valuable colonies.”

“I agree.”

The problem, of course, was that he had been caught by surprise as much as his subordinates at Sodom by the deployment of this new weapon. The Heldrakes had received some minor improvements to be sure, but these had been incremental Warp-mutations and a few new weapons. The False-Omnissiah’s servants had been unable to find a counter to the magnificent fury of the Heldrakes, so why bother imagining something more devastating?

For the first time since the thirty-second millennium, Ryza had gained the upper hand in one strike. And Hell-Lord Assyrian Barthelme felt he really, really didn’t like it.

**Eye of Terror**

**Temporia**

**Captain Boros Kurn**

Assuming you had done nothing to anger Tzeentch, the Dark Mechanicum and whatever factions lived on Temporia, the planet was relatively safe for recruitment operations.

It was dangerous to be sure, but not as insanely dangerous as some parts of the Eye. The hovering manufactorums were protected by the rains of magma. The helical factories were nine times out of ten unscathed by the maelstrom of mutations the reigning Duke of Changes regularly sent against the cogboys and the other mortals.

Moreover, it was safe from outside aggression. The masters of Temporia were proud of their neutrality and the astronomical profits hundreds of warbands were paying for their machines and their supplies. The planet was as such formidably defended, even by the standards of the Eye of Terror. There were over one hundred daemonships in orbit encircling the planet, five of them big enough to qualify as battleships, and a myriad of torpedo batteries and laser defence grids were supporting them. There were also tens of thousands of Daemon Engines and a Great Company of former Iron Warriors who had sold their allegiance to the Mechanicum, preferring Temporia over the murderous tantrums of Perturabo.

It was the main reason Boros was here, not that he would admit it loudly in public. As the leader of the warband of the True Sons, his presence – not to mention his military assets – was not enjoyed in many, many planets of the Eye.

Why? For the simple reason Boros was a Son of Horus. Worse, he was a Son of Horus who had made the unforgivable choice – at least in the eyes of others – to refuse embracing the union with Abaddon and his Black Legion.

The True Sons were not as famous as the Sons of the Eye, nor were they stronger than the Swords of Heresy. But for the Despoiler, dangerous or not, they were to be hunted. For all his pretensions about brotherhood and unity, Abaddon was just like the rest of the warlords. Every Son of Horus had to paint it his armour black and join his ranks, or die. Boros had managed to evade the hunting fleets after him, but force was to admit the pursuit had come terribly close quite a few times.

So close he was in need of new recruits. The ranks of the True Sons had been cut down to five hundred Astartes and three capital ships. If the Black Legion’s hounds came closer, he would return alone to Temporia next time. Or he would be dragged in front of the Despoiler. Neither outcome was particularly enticing.

“Try to see if there are any of our Sixteenth brothers present in the macro-forges,” the warband leader said to the four Space Marines who had accompanied him when they crossed a large bridge over the magma lakes. “Accept the Iron Warriors if any are willing to join us.”

He had not much hope on the latter. His warband had not the relics or the vehicles to impress the dour and grim members of the Fourth Legion.

Escorted by two of his most devoted bodyguards, Boros tried hundreds of meeting grounds, cultists’ lairs, and manufactorums. It was depressing. While the numbers of mortals ready to participate in raids and bathe in the blood of their enemies were more or less constant, the Sons of Horus’ warbands had almost disappeared. He managed to convince eleven Astartes to join in the Burning Eye district, but it was a one-time event. Eleven Space Marines. By the ruins of Prospero, where were all the Sons of Horus? Surely they had not all fled to polish the floor of the Despoiler’s bridge?

There were a quarter of a million cultists to bolster his ships’ crews and his host, and some of them might even be useful, as they had some heretek training. But to fight a serious campaign the true heirs of the God-Warmaster needed Space Marines in great numbers. It was useless to try to leave the Eye of Terror if the first battle against the slaves of the False-Emperor crippled the warband.

The recruitment among the other Legions was not better. As a rule, he refused to recruit Astartes of the Twentieth, the Fourteenth and the Third. The sons of Alpharius could not be trusted under any circumstances, and those of Mortarion decimated the mortal crews with their plagues. As for the Emperor’s Children, Fulgrim degenerates were parodies of Astartes and after Bile had experimented on the God-Warmaster’s mortal coil, Boros Kurn would rather ally with Abaddon than call a Legionary of the Third ‘brother’.

It wasn’t that much of a sacrifice anyway. He didn’t see a single Marine in the colours of the Hydra – not that it was a guarantee of their absence of course, and the biggest warband of the Death Guard was fifty strong.

It took much research and discussions, but the Son of Hours found a small warband of Raptor Night Lords willing to don the Eye of the Great Horus on their armours, bolstering his numbers by seventy-one veterans and one Cruiser.

He had not left the Bridge of Pain that the first assassins struck.

“**Death to all Thrice-Cursed Traitors! Glory to the Warmaster**!” The crowd of black-cloaked figures surged forwards and Boros and his bodyguards welcomed them with bolter shells.

“For the God-Warmaster Horus! Death to the Despoiler!” He roared back.

It was going to be a hard battle, he immediately recognised as the small figures shredded their robes and revealed their abnormal legs, limbs and heads. All of these mortals were Possessed, granting them strength and speed far beyond human skills. Only a single one died when his shot disintegrated his head, his chest and his legs.

Boros drew his sword and threw a grenade into the crowd of assassins, growling as the dreaded Tech-Daemon Guard of Temporia didn’t materialise to punish the peace-breakers. An officer of the Black Legion must have bought their blindness for this assassination...

“**Blood for the Warmaster**!” cackled one of the Possessed before he was decapitated.

An instant later, a storm of orange energy burned the bridge and the forty-plus assassins shrieked and shouted their agonies to the ashes-filled clouds.

It was not an uncontrollable attack. The sorcery stopped well short of his position, allowing him to destroy the last Possessed with ease.

Before the acrid smoke of burning demons had the time to dissipate, the Rubric Marines marched out in formation.

They were twenty of them, and by themselves, they were not an unusual sight.

Except...they were not painted in the blue and gold of the Thousand Sons. Which was impossible. Boros had hired several times a sorcerer of the Fifteenth when they had arrived in the Eye, and while the son of Magnus had been unwilling to share his sorcery secrets, he had confirmed that the paint of the Fifteenth Legion, both for the Sorcerers and the Rubric Marines, was a Warp artifice enforced by the Cyclops. It took a prodigiously strong Sorcerer to fight against it, never mind overturn it.

The very fact the Rubric Marines forming an honour guard were in dominant dark orange with streaks of white was a careful reminder that no help came without favours and strings attached in this realm of the Damned.

Thirteen heartbeats later, the Sorcerer revealed himself. Though he had to amend his words. It was a Sorceress...an impossibility in practise, for the Thousand Sons had never tolerated any mortal giving orders to their precious dust-consumed brothers.

But here she was. The unknown sorceress was tall for a mortal. Of her traits there was almost nothing that could be discerned. Everything from her feet to her head was hidden behind her orange power armour burning with Tzeentchian white runes. The only pieces of equipment which were not an Astartes Power in miniature were the sceptre in her right hand and the demonic golden mask covering her head.

For some reason, Boros felt unease observing it. It was like he had been specifically built in opposition of the angelic masks of the Ninth Legion.

“I heard you were recruiting, Captain Boros Kurn of the Sons of Horus, Leader of the Warband of the True Sons.”

“Somehow, I doubt that was all you heard, Sorceress.”

It had been a long time since he had believed in coincidences, and arriving right on time to slaughter the assassins of the Black Legion was such a classic plot of Tzeentchian sorcerers it barely raised eyebrows anymore.

Laughter answered his words.

“If not for me, you would have died today, Astartes. One of the Despoiler’s squadrons is coming this way, and the leaders of Temporia have already agreed to sell you to the highest bidder.”

“If you are so high in favour with Tzeentch, then you could have sold your services to Abaddon.”

“I am not interested in a failure. The Despoiler failed his Primarch, and now proclaims he has the fortitude and the talent to do better than his gene-sire. With him in charge, no one currently living in the Eye save the servants of the Gods will see the end of the Long War.”

Bold words, especially for a being who was not a Space Marine. Of course, she was a servant of Tzeentch, which meant he was going to have to watch her moves constantly if he didn’t want to be ousted by the next campaign. But if she spoke the truth and an enemy squadron was on his way, he couldn’t afford to stay here. And one Sorceress protected by twenty Rubric Marines was better than nothing.

“What is your name, Sorceress?”

“I am Malicia, Herald of Tzeentch and Parahuman Sorceress. I am the Destiny Unwritten.”