This isn’t a teaser – 22 November 2023

**Legacy 13.1**

**Legacy of War**

“*All your promises of Golden Age will turn to dust! This Light you worship as miraculous is only the candle that precedes the return of Old Night! Soon, your False Saint will understand that the Gods are the only salvation Mankind can count upon!*” Words attributed to Larxias, self-proclaimed ‘Oracle of Fate’, executed on 313M35 in the Atlantic Sector for heretical speech and hundreds of other crimes.

**The Warp**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

Thought for the day: Carry the Emperor’s will as your torch, with it destroy the shadows.

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

So far, the journey through the Warp had been relatively calm.

As he watched the tired expression of Lady Weaver, however, Odysseus knew that it may not have been calm for everyone.

The black-haired Living Saint was sipping her tea with the kind of expression the Lord Inquisitor had too often seen on the faces of his peers which had spent too many nights purging entire Hives from the taint of the Ruinous Powers.

“Problems?” he asked neutrally.

“Nightmares,” the Heroine of Macragge grunted. “Nightmares sent by the abominations.”

“Ah.” Why did he think he wasn’t about to hear bad news? “You could have stopped them long before they were a nuisance for you.”

“I could,” the starry-eyed Angel confirmed. “But the most sensitive souls of this fleet would have paid the price. I can see the lies in the visions the Four sent me. I can’t promise the same will happen for those confronted with the spectacles of horror of the Calyx Hell Stars.”

“The Ruinous Powers showed you the Calyx Hell Stars?” Odysseus cleared his throat. “An interesting choice.”

“They *only* showed me the Calyx Hell Stars. Each of the Four sent nightmares of a different part of this hell pit, but it was still the Calyx Hell Stars. I trust you understand the significance.”

“The Arch-Enemy is preparing something. And though unity is for them a thing of the past, they are ready to keep everything dark where we are concerned.”

“This is what I deduced too.” The woman who had destroyed Commorragh gave a nod, and a medium-sized beetle came forwards to bring refreshments. Odysseus Tor took it like the subtle invitation it was and took a chair.

For a couple of minutes, they emptied their respective cups of tea. Odysseus had tried chocolate since they left Macragge, but in his opinion, it was too sweet, too sugary. Or maybe it was the effect of his mouth being completely ravaged by an entire life drinking bad recaff?

“I was told,” the Lord Inquisitor said conversationally, “that the Ecclesiarchy found a new designation for the ruler of the Calyx Hell Stars.”

“Yes,” the lips twitched in a shadow of a smile, “they want to call her a ‘Cambion’, if my sources in the Ophelian Synod. It will likely take an official vote to confirm it, but I think it will pass.”

“You seem relatively unenthusiastic about the idea.”

“I understand the propaganda value.” Lady Weaver answered bluntly. “But it will be of only limited use. Unlike the previous Red Angel, the new Queen of Blood can’t be banished like a Greater Daemon would. By all rights, the levels of Warp corruption past the boundaries of the Calyx Hell Stars are not sufficient to allow Greater Daemons to endure outside of the battlefields. She should have already been on her way back to the abomination she serves. Yet she is still there.”

They had spoken of the similarities between Valkia and Living Saints before, and Odysseus had no reason to start again the conversation today. It gave him the urge to grimace. If the Nyx Sector was to be the heart of Weaver’s power, then it was clear Khorne wanted his Queen’s to be the Calyx Hell Stars.

“Were you able to gain some interesting information from these nightmares, at least?” He asked after aborting this depressing line of thinking.

“A few,” the star-filled eyes grew thoughtful. “Though as always, I think we must stay prudent. I could ascertain the visions were true, but I have no idea of the time scale. It could have been what is happening this year, or it could be future events. I lack the reference points to be sure.”

Yes, this was always a big problem when it came to the Ruinous Powers.

“The first thing I can tell you is that the new Red Angel does not have a capital like a Sector or a Quadrant Lord would. Her powerbase is concentrated aboard the *Conqueror*. It used as some sort of military headquarters, royal court, and other functions, I guess.”

“It survived the Battle of the Tyrant Star.” The Ordo Malleus hadn’t been sure.

“Judging by the visions I had,” and this time the Living Saint made a genuine grimace, “the thing is more daemon than warship by now. As such it devoured several hulls to regenerate, including the former flagship of the Blood Muse. As a result, this disgusting pit of damnation has now an impaling theme, along with the blood pools and the arenas.”

“Two out of three I understand,” Odysseus remarked, “but the blood pools?”

“I think these are heretical indoctrination chambers. They allow them to keep away their newborn Traitor Astartes from the arenas in the first period of their transhuman life.”

That was extremely bad news.

“And of course, they stopped implanting Butcher’s Nails into the skulls of their elite.”

This wasn’t a surprise anymore, but it was still a confirmation Odysseus would have preferred to be wrong about.

“These were visions sent by the Red Angel’s Ruinous Power, I suppose.”

“Yes. The Ruinous Power of Change was far busier taunting me with the shipyards of the world they call Clar Karond. To be honest, I’m not really impressed, but it is possible that being aware of the Imperium’s shipbuilding capacities, I am privileged in that regard. They can build Eldar warships there nonetheless, albeit with a very small dry dock infrastructure for capital ships above Cruiser tonnage.”

“Why this visions in particular, in your opinion?”

“I took the title of Aeldari Empress, don’t forget.”

“True. But that still remains...” Odysseus didn’t have the right word on his tongue.

“Childish? A lamentable way of taunting me? Yes.” The golden-winged Angel rolled her eyes. “I failed to find the humour, at any rate. I was more worried about the nightmares Decay sent my way. The system that was known as the ‘Lathes’ has been completely taken over by the Dark Mechanicum factions sworn to the Red Cambion.”

The Living Saint was right; it was far more concerning. Khorne-worshipping Eldar were in short numbers anyway, so no matter how many hulls were built, the Calyx forces still had to crew them, and Odysseus seriously doubted Traitor Astartes would be invited aboard them to compensate for the lack of Eldar crews.

“They are truly building their Traitor equivalent of a Forge World.” His peers of the Ordo Malleus had been worried about it when he met them in several secret Councils at Ultramar.”Do they still call themselves the ‘Archaeologists’?”

“Yes.”

A new cup of tea – the old Lord Inquisitor acknowledged the blue-white set had been purchased in the home system of the Ultramarines – was very much welcome.

“And the Fourth?”

“Anarchy was very much busy showing me systems where the greenskins battle heretics.” The Lady General Militant admitted. “Not very useful by itself, as most of the Granithor brutes are dead or left shortly after the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star, but it confirms that the Orks consider some planets holy ground where they can wage hostilities for as long as they like, and they don’t care about the influence of the Ruinous Powers.”

“How sad for them,” Odysseus commented with a total lack of sympathy.

“The Traitor forces are going to be able to rebuild their cadre of veterans which was decimated by the King in Yellow.” His host warned him. “And I don’t think in the end the greenskins can represent a problem for more than a few decades. The green WAAGH are disorganised and lack a powerful leader. But it will give us time. And each world the Traitors and their auxiliaries battle upon is critical, because given the sheer scale of the destruction which happened recently, the Calyx Hell Stars don’t have a lot of good strongholds that the *Conqueror* can use to muster a new Blood Crusade.”

“And the ‘realm’ seized is far smaller than the Ruinous Powers wanted.” The name of the Calyx Hell Stars was apt, but the borders drawn by the corrupted Noctilith of the Khornates didn’t include most of the region, and the Inquisition had been able to contain the problem with Guard and ex-Frateris Templars assistance. “Speaking of auxiliaries, I take it some of the Tau are involved in the battles?”

“They are present, though in most visions I was able to study, they are used as a sort of strategic reserve.” Lady Weaver shrugged. “They don’t have much left in common with the Tau I met so far. With their daemonic-shaped helmets and their Impaler-type weapons, they are very much a traitor counterpart to the Tempestus Scions.”

“Except the Scions don’t field Battlesuits.” Odysseus noted drily.

“Except that,” the Living Saint agreed. “But I think-“

The sentence was interrupted, but reassuringly, a happy expression blossomed on her face.

There was a brief sensation of being directionless, of their surroundings being suddenly far safer...and suddenly the Battleship had left the Warp.

“I am back home.”

**Nyx System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.501.312M35**

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert**

There was something reassuring about contemplating Blue Anchorage for several minutes.

No matter how powerful you were, the enormous Blue Giant also known as Nyx Sextus was still there, making you as insignificant as the first day you saw it.

Taylor sighed when Kratos cleared loudly his throat, partially ruining the moment.

“Yes, Gamaliel?”

“My Lady, I believe Kratos has something to speak.”

“I know,” the insect-mistress grinned. “That’s why he’s going to wait for several seconds. Every ship of the fleet has arrived?”

“Every ship has safely completed translation out of the Warp, yes.” The Blood Angel nodded. “One thousand, two hundred and eighty-seven ships, all safely returned from Macragge. The Pylons are really changing Warp travel as we know it.”

“They may never be enough of them to deploy for single squadrons, never mind lone ships.” Taylor smiled. “But having one for an entire Battle Group is more than sufficient to change the course of an entire campaign.”

From the moment the Heresy broke out to the thirty-fifth millennium, it was hard to not notice that in thousands upon thousands of Crusades and operations waged into enemy territory, the Imperium had kept losing warships to the malevolence of the Warp. Sometimes it was one or two ship per year on a specific front. In darker times, two or three flotillas disappeared and were never seen again.

“Of course, we still are far from making it a common asset for Crusades and other important campaigns. Present my compliments to Chancellor Achelieux, please. Pylon or not, this was still a remarkable navigation performance.”

Taylor counted up to twenty, slowly, and then acknowledged the inevitable.

“Yes, Kratos?”

“I wanted to say that your second wife is on her way.”

Now with the benefit of hindsight, Taylor knew that the decision to make the Flesh Tearer wait before speaking was very much the right one.

“Marianne is not my second wife.”

“Only because no vows were exchanged...”

Taylor’s hearing was beyond human now, but even then, she was unable to say for certain who had just spoken.

“Someone,” the black-haired parahuman mused, “really want to volunteer for these funny exercises against my Swarm. You know, the ones where I gather most of my Swarm and you are vanquished in the end no matter what you try.”

Taylor paused before smirking.

“Still, I am a very merciful woman.”

“As thousands of Tyranids, Word Bearers, and Necrons can vouch for, my Lady,” Gamaliel said gravely, completely ruining the effect in mere seconds.

Taylor groaned.

“I will pit each and every one of you against Bellona.” The insect-mistress promised. “You are not going to have fun, believed me. She learned a lot watching the Queen of Blades.”

Of course, this didn’t work on Kratos and the most bloodthirsty Space Marines.

Fighting a giant arachnid was very much like their idea of fun, even if Blue Bacta had to be used in the aftermath.

“Can you feel them, my Lady?”

“Gamaliel?”

“Your Adjutant-Spiders, my Lady. Can you give them orders from that distance?”

Taylor closed her eyes and focused.

Twelve spider-lights danced in front of her, as her power rejoiced and sang a beautiful melody of Light and Sacrifice.

“No. I can feel them at this distance. Giving them orders or controlling them like I am next door? Not a chance.”

“Do you hear that, Kratos? We are still going to be in the middle of great battles!”

This time the culprit was known, and the Black Templar was going to enjoy a big punishment for his effrontery.

“Now it has been proven you can’t speak seriously for a minute, what about contacting the kitchens and see what is on the menu? One of my Adjutants is busy enjoying delicious food at Nyx, and I am of the mind to imitate them with my guests.”

“Your second wife, you mean, my Lady.”

“Gamaliel, double the punishment of Kratos. And make it sure it doesn’t involve any fighting.”

“Maybe attending infiltration duties with Pierre, my Lady?”

“That’s cruelty!” A suddenly far less confident Flesh Tearer protested.

Taylor chuckled.

“An excellent suggestion, thank you.”

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**Syntagma Square**

**Thessala Bar-Restaurant**

**Naxos Creed**

They said that Hive Athena never slept.

Naxos had seen many grand festivities last all night, and he could confirm there was some justice to it.

That said, everyone needed to sleep. And in the middle of the week, the majority of the citizens were joyously snoring in their beds.

If there was any need to confirm it, Syntagma Square and the nearby streets were near-empty. And this despite the fact there were two big hab-blocks where a lot of Ministry employees worked. Most of the days, they had queues in front of them. But those were no longer seen several hours past sunset. There were still a few servo-owls flying over his head, but it was a slow trickle at best.

Naxos gritted his teeth. One more day where his job-hunting had registered nothing but failure.

And it was way too late – or too early – to go to Grand Central and catch up a train. Night trains existed everywhere on Moira, but you didn’t use one without reservation and spending a lot of Gelts. It was easily three times cheaper to take a day train, and Naxos didn’t have big pockets.

He would have to wait, and the establishment was still open, like a lot of Syntagma bars...Thessala, uh? Well, it wouldn’t hurt to have a sandwich and a glass of juice fruit. Naxos loved the new sandwiches.

The Thessala Bar-Restaurant was not the kind of thing young men like him went in the middle of the day. There was some decoration in Amazonian wood, and some Colorado marble. The soft music was very much the kind of thing nobles loved to listen to. It wasn’t the chorus songs many famous singers and millions of spectators gathered for at Hive Trinity.

Naxos descended the stairs, and searched for the employee, wondering if the soft lights meant-

The young Nyxian had turned the corner and was now in the illuminated room.

He froze.

Naxos was sure nobody would have blamed him, because there was a gigantic spider comfortably installed at a table!

“Don’t stay like a sting-beetle hit you!”

“Err...” Naxos wasn’t able to find the correct words.

“Early riser?”

“No,” the young man found at last the strength to shake off the surprise. “I mean, I didn’t go to bed. I just wanted-“

“A meal? Then you’ve come to the right place! I was finishing my shift, and I am in need of company!”

Naxos had heard of the great ‘Adjutant-Spiders’, of course. There were certainly the second holiest animals of Nyx, since Lisa and all the Titan-Moths were standing above them, according to the Priests. Many were seen regularly on the news and in different hololithic displays.

But he had never seen one in the flesh, and they were...this one was bloody huge!

“I wouldn’t want to cause problems, I’m sure-“

“If there is any problem, it is the lack of company!” the giant arachnid grumbled. “Not that it is the fault of this great establishment, of course. Some sanctimonious fraudsters are to blame. They made me work overtime. But I caught them. And now I lack company in my favourite establishment. Now sit. I will pay your meal in exchange for the conversation.”

“You...but you don’t even know it is going to cost!”

“You realise,” the insect servant of the Basileia replied, “that this is my second ‘Super-Gourmet Menu’ that I am enjoying? Furthermore, I am certain that the Webmistress is not going to blame me for adding a few Throne Gelts to the bill. I am pretty certain we were supposed to listen to her subjects, and my investigations devoured a lot of my free time recently!”

Naxos was a bit reassured by the arrival of the waitress, which assured him something like that was relatively normal. Epona – for the Adjutant-Spider’s was answering to this name – was well-known here, and loved to invite Nyxians randomly to her table.

It was very good luck, because the food was absolutely delicious. The holy spider shared the same view, clearly, because the huge plate in front of her was soon empty, and another replaced it, this one visibly presenting a salad of yellow-coloured fruits, surrounded by ice cream.

“Praise the Webmistress for giving me the authorisation to taste those marvellous sweets once per two weeks!” Epona voiced before focusing several eyes in his direction. “What kept you so long at night, if it is not too indulging my curiosity, Naxos?”

“Job-hunting,” he answered honestly, now that his belly was beginning to be filled satisfyingly.

“A principled quest,” Epona did the spider-equivalent of a nod. “And how is it going?”

“Not well,” Naxos admitted. “I failed Tech-College in first year I’m afraid. My parents insisted I needed a job, so I took an oath and joined the PDF.”

“Judging by your accent and the hornet tattoo on your arm, certainly the 1503rd Regiment, based in Cartel Hive.”

Naxos gaped.

“How did you...do Adjutant-Spiders know everything?”

“No! But I conducted an inspection of the PDF regiments there a month ago. But where I am my manners? I interrupted you, please continue.”

“Not much else to say,” he said trying to keep his unhappiness out of his tone. “I served two years, but my Sergeant saw that I was unhappy, and there are many volunteers for the mechanised infantry. I went job-hunting, but Cartel Hive is not exactly good if you can’t present a Tech or Economic Diploma from a College. And I can’t.”

“You could try Tech-College again,” Epona the Adjutant told him gently. “The Webmistress allowed every student to have two chances!”

“The problem,” Naxos hesitated, then decided that since Epona was paying for the delicious meal, she deserved his honesty. “The problem is that I can’t exactly say it will change anything. I didn’t have the skills to succeed in Tech-College. There are many things we were supposed to take for granted at the first lesson. I know College is just giving us the basics to be under Tech-Priest’s supervision, I really do...but there are too many things I don’t know. And our teachers can’t exactly give us time to catch up.”

“They can’t.” The ice cream was attacked with celerity, and then came the turns of the fruit. “This is a problem which returns quite often on the data-slates these days, unfortunately.”

“Really? You aren’t saying that because, well-“

“Webmistress be my witness, no!” The maw opened to swallow more fruits before speech resumed. “It is not exactly a state secret Nyx’s education system is incomplete and inefficient. The Webmistress wanted a deep reform, but the Adeptus Administratum of beyond the Quadrant, swimming in its usual incompetence, decided to block the efforts. But now that we don’t care of the grox’s opinion anymore, we may soon be able to open preparation to schools to ensure coming generations aren’t disarmed facing College. I mean, sending you with incomplete foundational knowledge to College is much like sending an Ultramar Auxilia soldier to fight a Carnifex. It tends to end in failure and you knew it before it began.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Naxos answered. “But I suppose reforms are going to take years.”

“Most probably,” Epona admitted before finishing the contents of her plate with sounds of delight. “The Webmistress wins quickly, the cogs of the Imperial bureaucracy are slow compared to her. There are more job openings in great numbers these days. The formation sessions of Agri-Hive Ceres are about to begin in two months.”

Naxos had heard of that, yes. There was just a slight problem...

“Once we’ve ended our formation, the Cartels waiting at the door demands *flexibility*.” And if he said the word like a curse, it was because it was one. “And since no new Agri-Hive was built, that means-“

“WEBMISTRESS! YOU ARE BACK!”

The shout really deafened him for a few seconds.

“Oh, sorry, Naxos,” Epona apologised immediately. “I was too enthusiastic. But-“

“Don’t worry, I will keep the secret.” He promised.

“This is not really a secret!” the Adjutant-Spider protested, before catching his astonished expression. “Fine, it is one, but only for a few hours. The fleet has arrived, everyone will know of it by dawn. And we Adjutants are going to be so busy organising the parades and the festivities in the Webmistress’ honour.”

A prospect that, clearly, was giving limitless joy to the big spider.

“Anyway, I think there are many jobs which you could find useful at Hive Ceres! Think about it! And please send me a letter telling me if it worked! I love having correspondence waiting for me at Thessala!”

‘Spidery Enthusiasm’ was contagious, and Naxos promised to do so.

**Between Nyx Quartus and Nyx Tertius**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**2.504.312M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Few men and women had been authorised to come aboard the Enterprise since it arrived in the Nyx System. This was not for lack of volunteers, quite the contrary.

Honestly, Gavreel thought that if they authorised everyone who wanted to come pay his respects to their Lady, they would not arrive to Nyx Tertius until next year.

Naturally, there were a few exceptions.

And some of them were more dangerous than the others.

Two landers opened, and two beings that any Space Marine could recognise to be a threat came out.

One was as big as a Jaghatai Battle-Tank, and the other was barely two metres-tall.

There was no question in Gavreel’s mind which was the most dangerous threat.

“Webmistress! I am so sorry I wasn’t able to protect your beautiful Arena!”

Adjutant-Colonel Bellona, resplendent golden arachnid, looked very much like she needed to be comforted.

Fortunately, it was nothing that some generous petting could solve.

“I’m sorry, Webmistress! I did everything I could, and it wasn’t enough!”

“Don’t worry, Bellona. The Adeptus Mechanicus is working on new plans. Many Magi think the solution is to build new types of modular structures we will be able to detach from the Arena itself when the Queen of Blades pays us a new destructive visit. It will be expensive in terms of engineering, but we will only have to rebuild the central part, and the artworks will be preserved.”

“You are the best, Webmistress!”

Gavreel tried not to snicker. He was successful. Unlike some many others of the Dawnbreaker Guard, who were coughing or trying to be as silent as possible with their reactions of hilarity...and failing monumentally.

After several more minutes of petting, Bellona went on take her place next to Artemis.

And though their attention had not diminished in the least, this time they doubled up when it came to vigilance.

The threat was just *that* dangerous.

“You look in good health.”

“I heal fast, my Empress.”

“As long as you are given enough blood to erase your wounds.”

“I have spent enough time playing the Crone before the Fall.”

The starry eyes fixed the threat emotionlessly.

Then reality seemed to shake.

There was a single word.

“**Kneel**.”

The long-ear female was a terrible presence. You could see it in her eyes. You could taste it in the air with every step she took. You could dread it as you contemplated the elegant flower-themed armour, which looked too close to the one used by the old monster at Commorragh to be a coincidence.

The golden-skinned, red-haired Eldar knelt without hesitation.

“My Empress.”

“This is forever, Liandra of Caledor. And this is a Path of **Sacrifice**.”

“I know.”

The Low Gothic was spoken flawlessly, but with a voice which made human excellence look limited and inexperienced.

“I have many duties in the coming hours, and I am not going to let you walk my side for now. Is there something my Adjutant didn’t notice or wasn’t made aware of?”

“One thing,” the long-ear female said. “I can’t ascertain it with great confidence, but I think the Lord of Skulls let me go so easily was because my enslavement allowed its essence to copy my Haemokinesis skills and my knowledge of Demigod-forging.”

Gavreel was sure he missed half of the context, and he still didn’t like the implications.

“And they say that out of the Four, the Ruinous Power of War is the least subtle and cunning.” His Lady snorted. “Yes, this would fit what I saw. What use are the old servants, if there is a new one that can perform better on the battlefield? Especially one which isn’t turned into a mad beast or filled with regrets?”

The golden armoured fingers seized the hand of the xenos, and helped her stand once more.

Everything was fluid and deadly.

It was as if two apex predators stared at each other.

“Will I get a suite as beautiful as the Queen enjoyed during her stay at the Arena?”

“No.” This time, Gavreel could definitely say the tone was smug. And a couple of seconds later, it was accompanied by a smirk. “You will be escorted by two of my Adjutant-Spiders. They will lead you to your quarters.”

“Not your personal Palace? I could serve you in incredible ways, my Empress.”

Was there something wrong with long-ears, or were they just attracted to the people who could kill them by the millions?

“I have no doubt, but if you don’t want the Queen of Blades to come back for a second unique performance where you would figure explosively, you will stay away from my bedroom.”

“As long as it is your desire, my Empress.”

Gavreel sighed. What was it with the Eldar and their total lack of self-preservation?

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**2.510.312M35**

**Regent and Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

The streets, as could be expected, were absolutely crowded with people.

When you saw such a spectacle, it was difficult to believe that dozens of other such parades were organised all across Hive Athena, and hundreds more had been spread out all over the three continents of Nyx.

And those weren’t even the first parades to celebrate the victories over the Necrons, the Chaos Marines, and the Tyranids. Many Guard regiments had in the previous months returned to be reequipped for the next campaigns in the stars, and the population had greeted them like heroes.

“By the Lotus and the Angels? What is that?” Teddy exclaimed by her side.

The ‘that’, of course, was a monstrous skull being presented to the spectators between two Companies of the Fay 20th, which, if the number of flowers sent their way, remained among the crowd’s favourites, in addition to being Taylor’s.

“That is a Tyranid skull.” Missy didn’t shiver, but she had to admit, she was rather glad this was a long-dead one. Even dead and turned into a partial skeleton, the monster seemed to generate its own atmosphere of terror. “From what I read from the reports, it is certainly what they called a ‘Hive Tyrant’.”

“The name is apt.” The Rashan nodded vigorously. “I don’t want to fight that.”

“Teddy, I don’t think anyone sane *wants* to fight that.” The Regent of Nyx – at least for a few more minutes – told her partner seriously. “It’s just that the Tyranids didn’t leave anyone the choice.”

Missy wouldn’t admit it, but she had had some bad nights after this dark threat was developed at length in the reports brought by the courier ships.

And she had been far away from the battlefield. Many guardsmen must have been traumatised for life by the sight of these six-legged aliens storming the defences of Ardium in an unending tide of chitin, fangs, and talons.

Of course, as the thoughts had to be refocused on someone else, Lisa began to sang and manifest her desire to be cheered.

And the applause skyrocketed, as the Titan-Moth sang and demonstrated her light orb’s creative abilities once more.

“We had a good idea to install there, half-way to Syntagma Square,” Missy might be a little smug, but so what? There had been some objections to organise the big parade so high into Hive Athena, mainly from certain nobles, for the two hundredth floor was one of the many success stories of the Capital Hive, and not everyone wanted millions to go so high in the Hive...despite the fact that the entrance was authorised to the average citizen every other day of the year.

“Lisa the Diva likes it,” Teddy grumbled. “And there come the Space Marines.”

The majority of them were Brothers of the Red, flamboyant and beautiful in their red armours, but there was a demi-Company of Blood Angels too, along with a dozen or so of Angels Encarmine.

Naturally, the spectators cheered and screamed in approval, with many clapping or raising small effigies of the Great Angel above their heads.

Those were not the only Space Marines to be present today, of course. Several Heracles Wardens had been in the vanguard – no doubt checking every security measure taken was up to their exacting standards.

The Magma Spiders had paraded before the Templar Sororitas, and the Black Templars had followed the Fists of Roma. As for the White Thunderbolts, they had chosen to be presented surrounded by Krieger regiments.

But whatever excitation had been present before, it was nothing compared to what existed now. Hundreds of thousands of voice rose, for the Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard were at last coming in sight, and behind them came Weaver, a large number of Adjutant-Spiders, Scorpiads, and other massive armoured insects at her back to cloture the parade.

And if you thought you had seen celebrations from the Nyxians before...

No, you had seen nothing.

And it wasn’t because flowers were presented, animal plush were distributed, or anything like that.

There was just an atmosphere of joy, mixed with relief and hope.

And each time she saluted, the crowd went wild.

Logically, it took long minutes for the soon-to-be-restored-Basileia to reach her.

For reasons that Missy was sure had exasperated her Space Marines, Taylor had insisted to walk most of the way.

It gave her the opportunity to watch her from afar, at least.

Outwardly, she did not appear to have changed much...except the eyes.

Yes, the eyes were going to take some time to get used to them.

Missy wasn’t going to pretend that she didn’t feel some relief to see her, alive and unharmed. Playing Regent for a short time was already something that wasn’t her cup of tea, but she really didn’t want it to become permanent.

“I don’t want to sound childish, but I want to inform you I stopped doing my paperwork a few days ago, your Celestial Highness,” the blonde parahuman told the insect-mistress in a voice that few would hear given the thunderous acclamations.

“I expected nothing less from you.”

Missy rolled her eyes, noticing alas that her taunt had been without effect.

Of course, the long glance to the woman waiting behind her was not exactly subtle.

Still, there was a hug, and they had all changed for the better.

“It’s good to be back, Missy.”

“Yes, now can I give you back the Basileia baton? I know you’re dying to kiss someone.”

“If you insist-“

The ceremony wasn’t done in a very professional manner, that’s all Missy was going to say.

And it didn’t really matter, because the moment it was done, Regina Wei Cao charged forwards and went on to embrace her wife.

The Nyxian and non-Nyxian spectators loved that, by the way.

Missy heard several Adjutant-Spiders proclaim to the Space Marines that they were going to be in charge of the bureaucracy for a few days, for some reason.

And then the ruler of Wuhan went up to kiss on the lips a certain blonde Vicequeen of Solingen, bringing even more whistles and surprised exclamations.

The exclamations turned into laughs and more manifestations of joy when a certain insect-mistress let herself be kissed by the two beautiful women, of course.

“You humans have really strange social customs,” a certain Rashan commented drily.

**The Gardens of Meditation**

**2.513.312M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“I’ve been thinking about using my Throne Gelts to pay myself some holidays.”

Taylor wasn’t exactly surprised by the sentence. Missy had been incredibly happy to see her, and not just because she was her friend.

“And where would these holidays take place?” the insect-mistress asked with curiosity, creating an expression of surprise on the other parahuman’s face.

“You’re agreeing that easily?”

The returned Basileia chuckled.

“Missy, I have commanded enough men and women in the last years to recognise when someone is close to burning out from stress, duty, and other factors. You’re not quite up to that point, but you’re feeling the strain. I want you to be happy, not slowly crumbing under the weight of your day-to-day duties.”

“Thank you, I guess.”

Taylor smiled and for many heartbeats, they didn’t speak, they just enjoyed their surroundings. In the distance, the Dawnbreaker Guard waited under fruit trees in their flowery phase. Adjutant-Spiders sat next to the benches, listening to the singing birds’ thrills.

It was refreshing and calm, and her Swarm had told her Missy had come here with ever-increasing frequency in the last months, making it a natural location to speak in private.

“But you can’t take your Rashan sidekick with you.”

“Teddy intended to go back to Lotus Haven anyway after the next Sanguinala.”

Ah, yes, that explained a few things.

“And I suppose this hypothetical holiday of yours would begin right after the days of celebration too.”

“Yes.” Missy admitted. “To be honest, I expected...greater reluctance from you, Taylor.”

“You’re a friend and incredible valuable subordinate, Missy. I am not going to arrest you and keep you in chains so you stay here at Nyx for the rest of your life, or eternity, whichever comes first.”

“So the rumours about Justice Reforms were incorrect?” the other parahuman teased her.

The Basileia merely shrugged.

“You did a good job with Justice. There is still need of reforms, but I think Education is going to take priority in the next few years. Everything the other Ministers and yourself heard in my absence tend to lead to the urgent necessity of reforming all the institutions of knowledge, job formation, and the various establishments associated with the education system. To be honest, I fear I’ve waited for too long.”

“Well, you had a lot of issues to deal with,” Missy replied sympathetically. “And you had to step lightly around the Administratum dinosaurs.”

That brought a chuckle in her throat, which naturally had to be expelled sonorously.

Dinosaurs...the name was extremely appropriate for certain bureaucratic specimens uncaring of how many problems they caused with their narrow-minded stagnant behaviour.

“That doesn’t excuse everything, Missy. I am the Basileia of Nyx. I have a responsibility to rule them and make their lives happy.”

“We told you one thousand times already you set up impossible standards for yourself, no matter how many Adjutant-Spiders you have to warn you of incoming problems, Taylor.”

Yes, they had told her that many, many times. And the ‘we’ included Dragon and other important parties, including but not limited to her wife.

“Incidentally, the ranks of my faithful Adjutants are going to grow in the short-term future.”

Missy gasped mockingly.

“We said none of the official business today!”

“My apologies, oh tyrannical ex-Regent!”

The two women laughed, giving amused glances to Artemis, who was busy feigning to nap in front of them.

“More seriously,” Taylor resumed speaking, “replacing you is not going to be easy, but I will find a new Minister, whether on a temporary basis, if you decide to take it back once you return, or permanently if you find something new to enjoy while you’re on holiday.”

And if Missy decided to leave right after Sanguinala, the selection would have to begin soon. But for today, it could wait.

It was a day of relaxation and rest, with wife and friends.

“Which world do you intend to visit, assuming you’ve already decided the destination?”

“I was thinking about Macragge,” her soon-to-be ex-Minister replied after a short hesitation.

There were many names Taylor had half-expected, but strangely, this one had never been near the top of the list.

“Macragge?”

“Macragge,” Missy repeated. “You sent me all these paintings and mosaics, did you think I wasn’t looking at them? It is a really nice stellar system. The Jewel of the Eastern Fringe, they call it.”

“They do. I was just surprised by your interest. Though we hadn’t much time to discuss it before Operation Stalingrad.”

“Yes. Weren’t you the one to tell me it was completely improbable we would be invited to visit, since it was under the control of isolationist and stupidly conservative Space Marines?”

Taylor giggled.

“One more point in favour of the evidence I am not able to predict very well the future.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” the blonde woman teased her once more before taking a slightly more serious expression. “But yes, I want to visit Macragge City and everything Ultramar has to propose. It looks like a very nice fusion of Greek and Roman architecture, and many of your soldiers who returned before you had only very good things to say about it.”

“We saved the system from the Word Bearers and the Tyranids, don’t forget.”

“I don’t think anyone is going to forget that anytime soon, from Cadia to the Eastern Fringe.”

This was the understatement of the century. The Battle of Commorragh had made sure her name was known to the galaxy at large, but the events of Macragge had sealed her fame in war and victories.

“I can make a few letters of introduction, if you want. Not that it will prevent you from meeting the Primarchs, you understand.”

“I thought only Lord Guilliman was staying at Macragge for the time being.”

“Who can say where the sons of the Emperor come and go?” Taylor took a virtuous expression before snickering. “Just don’t try to drink anything the Space Wolves consider ‘proper drink’ if you’re invited to the Fang. I understand it’s lethal for everyone who is not considerably augmented.”

The golden-winged parahuman paused for two seconds, before the delivering blow.

“And for the record, you’re completely forbidden to take a Fenrisian as your boyfriend.”

“Taylor!”

**Hagia Sanguinala (in construction)**

**2.519.312M35**

**Architect-Primus Cyrene Versailles**

“I’m afraid the heretics stole Erebus’ skull.”

“Some people,” Cyrene commented drily, “find curious excuses for us, poor mortal Architects.”

“You’re as mortal as I am.” The retort came immediately.

“I am so reassured you didn’t insult my pride and my honour of Imperial Architect.”

The two women stared at each other...and then burst into laughter.

“You changed, Lady Hebert.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Cyrene said confidently. “You did. If anything, you seem to have found your way in this world and across the galaxy.”

“I was young...and everyone is allowed to change.”

They climbed the red marble stairs, which by a game of carefully synchronised lights, looked very much like something straight out of a dream. Master sculptors had done their best to represent beetles giving a blade to a life-sized Space Marine statue. The ceiling had been painted to give their rendition of Sanguinius welcoming the Emperor on Baal.

“Personally, I am very satisfied the Word Bearers were annihilated.” Cyrene knew the Basileia was aware of her feelings on the subject. “Once upon a time, some of their members had stood for good things, but it was not the entire Legion, and it was millennia ago.”

“One might say,” the starry-eyed woman mused, her gaze truly hypnotic and beautiful, “that the Seventeenth Legion died several times. I bought a copy from Guilliman’s library, you know. I had learned the name before that, but I didn’t know the full history of the Imperial Heralds.”

“Lord Guilliman kept the book?” Cyrene wasn’t easily surprised, but those news definitely qualified. “Even after...” Even after the Word Bearers had butchered their way across dozens of the Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar, she didn’t have the audacity to finish her sentence.

Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, shrugged.

“I can’t speak for him, clearly, but I think the Primarch of the Ultramarines hate destroying books. He doesn’t like very much either the fact his personal library must be only opened to certain carefully selected visitors.”

“You were the ones to mention this problem to him?”

“Actually, this was something the Custodes took care of.”

Ah, that must have been a tense exchange.

“Anyway, Lord Roboute Guilliman made clear he would burn all the proscribed heretical texts to fall in his hands, along that everything that happens to be tainted. But he wasn’t going to destroy the history of the Imperial Heralds before Lorgar was discovered and transformed them into a religious sect. I suppose he thinks the Terran-born Legion does not need to pay for the sins of the Vile One and the Dark Apostles.”

“Most of the Old Legion had disappeared long before Monarchia.” Cyrene agreed. “Is Erebus still screaming?”

“I don’t know much about what happens in the realm of a certain Ruinous Power,” the Chosen of the Emperor smirked, “but the screams of the Vile One are very loud and everyone can hear them. There are whispers eight Greater Daemons have been given the eternal duty of torturing him.”

“Good.”

Erebus might have gotten a relatively quick – though absolutely not painless – death, but it was excellent that the demise has been only the beginning of his torment.

The Emperor knew that the bastard deserved every second of it.

“Since we’re on the subject of very good news,” the Architect-Primus changed completely the subject of the conversation, “we have done excellent work both on the Hagia Sanguinala and the Gaius Mausoleum. The former of course still has a long way to go, but the latter is nearly finished. I am not willing to rush things, but I think that for the Sanguinala of 313M35, it will be ready for the grand ceremony you will no doubt organise, with your Moths and your usual splendour.”

“You know me so well.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Cyrene bared her teeth. “I just have a clue or two how you function. And I have a guess or two that now you’ve returned Triumphant, you will honour your soldiers and other subordinates with another Weaverian Marvel.”

The groan coming from the Basileia was particularly loud and sincere.

“Not you too,” the Mistress of Spiders complained.

“Sorry,” Cyrene’s smile was a bit revealing how insincere she was for once. “I played only my humble part. I am not guilty of letting pilgrims believe that building marvellous monuments is your saintly legacy.”

**Hive Athena**

**Assembly Palace**

**2.524.312M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“You see? I told you it was going to be painless! The preparatory work of your faithful Regent paid!”

“Dragon? I think Missy is way too smug for this early hour.”

The Tinker considered and then nodded firmly.

“I agree.”

“Vile calumnies and betrayals!” the Minister of Justice claimed. “You’re just jealous.”

“You’re just jealous, your Celestial Highness,” Taylor corrected her.

“See, Dragon? She is now growing into the very tyrant we feared all along! Warlord Skitter is back!”

In case anyone had any doubt, no, triumphing at Macragge had not led to a great amount of respect being gained in the minds of several individuals where she was concerned.

Taylor smiled and let the jokes play for two good minutes.

Then she ordered Artemis to hammer the theoretical ceremonial drums, and the true business began.

“The support of every important faction is now assured for the Great Infrastructure Plan. The Mechanicus has confirmed we have the resources to commit to it, and the Banking Houses, now they have agreed to the size of their cake, are onboard with the project. Since this will largely benefit Nyx, I don’t expect many problems coming from the Nyxians themselves, especially given how many militated for several parts of the project. Now the question is how we proceed. Dragon?”

“Now that we have the resources,” the draconic Minister of Industry answered immediately, proving that she had thought long and hard, “my advice is to begin before the end of the year the construction of two new Agri-Hives. We’ve secured the funding for eleven in total, but building all them at once would not only require more spare manpower than I can divert there, it would likely provoke some nasty problems once all the Agri-Hives would be built. By buying two of them each decade, we preserve a lot of jobs, and the food security will increase regularly.”

“Hmm...that would mean that by 350M35, we would have six Agri-Hives functional, not counting Hive Ceres, and two more approaching completion?”

“Correct,” Dragon replied.

Each Agri-Hive, once all it has a proper work force and the maintenance needs established by the STC were properly done, could feed regularly and without problem one billion and two hundred million people.

Evidently, twelve of them weren’t sufficient for the needs of two hundred-plus billion people, but millions of tons of food sufficient to feed fourteen billion men and women was nothing to sneeze at.

“The Orbital Elevators of Class Olbia?”

“One per decade,” Dragon answered with the same level of assurance. “It is more complicated to build than an Agri-Hive, and of course the infrastructure project imply each time to build a new Space port, the railway lines connecting it to the rest of the transport network. Yes, there are only five of them funded, but I prefer not to provoke major upheavals and have the time to analyse the traffic alterations.”

“Duly noted. And the four hundred and twenty additional Fusion Reactors to power all of these superb projects?”

“Oh, no, those we built as fast as possible, along with the Amphitrite water plants and other critical things we have the Tech-Priests for. Let’s build everything.”

Missy giggled.

“For a moment, I was thinking Dragon had been replaced by a conservative Tech-Priest willing to delay all the reforms.”

There was a draconic ‘ahem’ that everyone around the table ignored.

“Jokes aside, the Great Infrastructure Plan is already something extraordinarily expensive...my Adjutants had a lot of fun with all the zeros.” It was in fact so expensive that for the time, the support of the Banking Houses had been necessary, and several Agri-Hives would have a sizeable percentage of them owned by private individuals.

“And evidently, it is just the infrastructure you intend to build on Nyx itself.” Missy commented idly.

“Yes.” It was the short answer, of course. “Nyx society needs a lot of energy to function, but they pale compared to the ones of the infrastructure which was placed above our heads in high orbit. As the shipyards grow larger and the assemblage really begin to look like a proper orbital ring, if largely with a lot of missing parts, we need more energy for it than ever. And that naturally results in large expansions of our facilities around Blue Anchorage and the other Gas Giants vital for the hydrogen, promethium, and the other things we really can’t live without.”

“Those parts should not meet too many hurdles,” Dragon reassured her. “In many ways, the expansion merely slowed down in the last three years. One might truthfully we have continuously expended it in the last decades, and it never really stopped. Besides, I don’t think the Imperial Navy is going to stop using our facilities here in the short-term future, no?”

“Since we noted an increase of almost four hundred percent of non-Samarkand Navy squadrons using our infrastructure to refuel and request minor things on their way to their deployment zones, I think not,” the insect-mistress noted drily. “Any other outstanding points which for one reason or another were added too late to make its way in the early draft of the document we read in front of the nobles, your peers of the Mechanicus, and the other important representatives?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Dragon searched through her pile of data-slated for three seconds before finding the one she wanted. “Yes, there. Your wife must have told you many Nyxians are extremely supportive of the idea of public bath houses.”

“She mentioned it twice,” Taylor replayed the discussion in her memories along with several more pleasurable things that had been happening at the same time...things that took a lot of her self-control not to blush. “I found the idea interesting, to be honest. We improve the hygiene and the health of the Nyxian population. We deal a blow to a certain Ruinous Power. And we use the opportunity to justify even more environmental measures that make Nyx a pleasant place to live in. Wei just didn’t mention where she took the idea.”

“Certainly from Samarkand,” Missy replied. “They have a lot of public bath houses, with different standards of bath houses for each great class order of their citizens. The poorest classes get the minimum, as can be expected, but the noble-only establishments have things that are more aquatic palaces than normal institutions.”

“The influence from the Japanese bath houses I was familiar with is strong,” Dragon smiled. “Though since time waited for no one, the Samarkand bath houses were influenced in decoration and function by some sources I am not completely familiar with. But the principle and the purpose remain the same.”

The holo-picts Dragon showed looked very convincing, it had to be said.

“The funding and the resources?”

“Your Minister didn’t tell me no, and the simulations tell me that compared to an Agri-Hive, the price is quite cheap for the benefits expected.”

And just for the opportunity to weaken the influence of Decay and Disease, Taylor would do it. And honestly, she had already the equivalent of an aquatic complex just for herself and the people close to her, surely the rest of Nyx deserved some nice facilities now that the problems with water supply were resolved!

“Very well,” the Angel of Sacrifice told the Tinker. “You have my permission to go ahead. I will want a plan for it, clearly. It’s out of the question for some Hives to have public bath houses and some others not to.”

“The Council of Ministers tomorrow is a bit too early,” her Minister of Industry and Public Works informed her. “But I should have something ready for the next one in ten days?”

“Next session after the one of tomorrow sound fine. Now what was it I heard about the shenanigans some Barons tried to pull so they could own flamboyant and always-late train companies?”

**The Carmine Palace**

**2.527.312M35**

**Minister of Industry Dragon Richter**

As could be expected, Minister of Agriculture Serge Halieus was very satisfied. There were a lot of reasons for him to be, to be honest. In the next three decades, six Agri-Hives would be built, and there other major investments in farm machinery and crop improvements alongside everything. And to be fully accurate, the Infrastructure Plan would also allow for a greater amount of edible supplies to be transferred from Spaceport to Hive in record time.

On the other hand, Controller General of Finances Valentin Seignelas was looking more concerned under his nice wig. It might have to do something with the reality of the sums involved.

“The numbers work,” the green-clad Nyxian conceded after a few seconds. “I must however point out, Lady Basileia, that the margin for this budget is far smaller than the previous ones of the last years.”

Taylor acknowledged the issue; you could see it on her facial expression. It was way more difficult to read her eyes now that they had changed.

“I know. But creating the same budget margin we were used to before Operation Stalingrad was launched would force us to do things we might regret sooner or later.”

Intendant of Economic Affairs Theodora Kaplan cleared her throat.

“Maybe if we stabilised the military budget?”

“I don’t think we can afford to.” Dragon was the first to reply. “In many ways, both the civilian programs and the expansion of the manufactorums are the foundations for the armies and fleets which will be equipped by the Nyxian industry. Limit something now, and we are going to realise one fine morning that certain sectors will be unable to meet their deadlines, and that correcting it will mean years of delays. Chokepoints in several critical resources or finished products are not something I dare discarding on a whim.”

One would never have called Valentin Seignelas happy, but at least he didn’t argue further.

“The budgets are going to be assiduously debated in the Assembly Palace, and I am not looking forwards to the debate which will come after the next Sanguinala.”

“Think of it as an oratory contest,” Taylor suggested. “I did the same when I had to speak with my most senior PDF officers yesterday.”

“Some rumble in the military?”

“I would rather describe it as a desire to grab some of the wealth flow cascading all its way down to the lower levels of the Hive.” The Basileia explained calmly. “After all, it is not like the PDF was forgotten. Many structures to be built anew in the Great Infrastructure Plan are PDF barracks, training facilities, and other things the Planetary Defence Force sorely needed to replace. Renovating the infrastructure we had from the Menelaus era worked fine as an emergency-cost measure, but there’s a fine limit to it.”

And not just because the Menelaus had built things that were of extremely low quality and the contracts sold to very corrupt Cartels.

“But what about these...these Xenos Protectorates?”

For the first time of the meeting, it was the Minister of Foreign Affairs’ choice to intervene.

“I didn’t have time to check with anyone outside the Quadrant,” Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica began, “but so far, there’s little hostility to it. We had the Rashan precedent before Stalingrad. It worked. And both the Nyxians and our neighbours are convinced the Lady Basileia terrifies way too much the xenos in question for them to take the risk to rebel.”

“Some indeed would rather flee to the most distant regions of the Ghoul Stars rather than face me on a battlefield again.” The golden-winged insect-mistress replied with a small dose of irony. “As for the risk of rebellion, several other measures are in the process of being debated with my Generals. While it is true I can crush a rebellion by myself, there are many historical precedents which are cautionary tales upon relying on a single person. And in many aspects, an uprising of a Xenos Protectorate would be far more damaging diplomatically and politically than a secession attempt from one of the planets of the Nyx Sector.”

Taylor didn’t add that a non-insignificant number of Planetary Governors were watched like hawks. Unlike the Rashan and the Sirens, several planets had an industry to build weapons in large numbers, and their loyalty to Nyx was never that great in the first place.

“I have an important meeting with the representatives of one of those aforementioned Xenos Protectorate.” The black-haired ruler of Nyx informed her Ministers. “The content of the negotiations will be relayed to you at the next Council of Ministers. The next order?”

“Once again the subject of the pilgrims, your Celestial Highness. It seems that several congregations chose to disregard your commands regarding the forbidden ‘penitent technology’. They were of course arrested, but the Ecclesiarchy wanted to know your desires on the matter...”

**Hospital of the Great Angel**

**2.534.312M35**

**Commander Shadowsun**

Shadowsun had never liked the hospitals of the Imperium she visited on recently conquered worlds, and this belief was going to continue, though at least this one was far nicer and had far better advanced medical equipment.

Sadly, she was also one of this hospital’s patients, and it was hardly something the T’au warrior relished.

The first injection has been particularly bad. It was as if the substances just integrated to her body were trying to freeze her blood.

The second, was if anything, worse. It was as if they had added a living flame in her veins.

For several heartbeats, everything was pain.

And then it ended.

“The procedure is successful,” one of the red-armoured female humans informed her. “Please wait for a few minutes on the bed before trying to move. The process was particularly taxing on your body.”

The Gue’la – though Shadowsun knew she should call them humans at all times, since it would make things far simpler – had really a gift for their ‘understatements’ that the T’au didn’t possess.

Yes, the entire thing had been extremely taxing and difficult.

If the promised result would have not justified the risks, Shadowsun wouldn’t have accepted.

The next Microdec were spent with only the faint noises of various devices functioning in the background.

Then the noise of footsteps arrived to her senses.

The large door opened, and there was Light.

“Commander Shadowsun, may I come in?”

“You can,” the T’au supreme commander answered. “It is *your* hospital, after all.”

“That’s certainly true,” the human warlord stepped forwards, and the light decreased. Shadowsun could see that while Weaver had decided to come clad in red armour similar to the one equipping her followers, it was clearly not one she donned for war. Shadowsun had seen how warriors behaved once they were in their element, and this wasn’t it. “Is the pain gone?”

“The pain is gone.” She confirmed. “The effects were dolorous, but they are now gone.”

“This is good to hear,” Weaver held up a hand, and Shadowsun took it. The strength was largely one of the Gue’ron’sha, the Space Marines, but it was for the better: the Fire Caste officer needed some time of adjustment before standing solidly on her legs without assistance. “The rejuvenation specialists were certain of their work, but there are still some aftereffects they’re trying to neutralise.”

“For twenty-five additional ‘standard years’ of life, some pain is not enough to discourage a warrior.”

The humans had been rather surprised, Shadowsun remembered, that the Tau didn’t seem to have the tolerance their own race did. What they called ‘rejuvenation’ often increased the humans’ lives by three or four times that amount of time.

But there was some problem with the bodies of the Tau’va. Pushing too many life-giving injections into one body had problematic effects. So in the end, the ‘rejuvenation specialists’ had to settle for the ’25-years-long rejuvenation’. As far as the human research had proven so far, the life-extension medicine could be given twice while avoiding major medical complications.

“I don’t suppose you are going to be willing to transfer the formula to the hospitals of the Tau’va, however,” Shadowsun didn’t flinch when they left the hospital room, but she was all the more vigilant; the corridor had Space Marines stationing everywhere.

“On the contrary,” the black-haired warlord replied immediately, “the moment my Hospitallers and Genetors will be sure to have trained enough of your medical practitioners, the devices and the rest of the infrastructure will be transferred to your homeworld.”

The announcement left Shadowsun speechless for a good amount of time.

“This is...very generous of you, Lady Weaver.”

“I was told that in every good compromise, one must be willing to give, even if one belongs to the most powerful military. And from a practical and strategic perspective, the logistics of rejuvenating your entire population on Nyx itself won’t work. It may even cause some problems, as humans would complain the Tau would replace them in the rejuvenation clinics. I think it is best to avoid that issue entirely. The Tau specialists will extend the life of the Tau.”

This was certainly some rationality worthy of...Shadowsun had almost thought ‘the Greater Good’, something that happened less and less these last days since they had extracted her from stasis.

“The act of giving implies you are going to take in return.”

“I am going to limit the size of your military armed forces.” Weaver said frankly. “You are one of my Protectorates, and it is out of the question I leave you with the considerable battle-ready assets you have.”

Shadow sun didn’t grimace, for she had easily anticipated these news. This didn’t mean the Fire Caste Commander didn’t have arguments to counter it.

“You know as well as I do that the military forces currently deployed are going to decrease both in numbers and quality. The Fire Caste Veterans won’t be replaced once they retire, though your ‘rejuvenation’ will slow down this decline.”

“I completely disagree regarding the quality.” The eyes filled with star were serene, yet dangerous. “Many youngsters of your Earth Caste were rather eager to join the military, according to my Adjutant-Spiders.”

“That would mean the total removal of the Caste System.”

“Indeed. But in many ways, has this system not already collapsed? The former Engineers of the Earth have formed a ‘Technocratic Council’ overseen by my overseers. Many of the surviving Ethereals are true Tau, but it would be a lie they retain the authority they did.”

Shadowsun had read the reports, yes. But she had not yet returned to T’au. The Commander knew this was both going to be exhilarating and terrifying in terms of experience.

“I will have to return to T’au to forge my own mind on this.”

“By all means do so.”

It was not speaking like with a Water Caste diplomat, but it wasn’t like a meeting with another high-ranked member of the Fire Caste either.

“What do you want of us, Lady Weaver?”

“If by ‘us’, you mean the Tau military forces, I want you to serve as a deterrent for hostile non-Imperial forces, and a small army that can participate in the War Games against the regiments which prepare themselves before being sent on the various frontlines. Your veterans, I was given to understand, have kept an excellent institutional knowledge of the threats you faced...like the Tyranids.”

“I don’t think we can describe our knowledge of the ‘Tyranids’ as ‘good’,” Shadowsun replied bitterly. “When they come in numbers that outnumber one of our entire Sept population by one hundred to one, it is as if fighting a fire storm with our bare hands.”

“Before Macragge, it was far more than anything of the Imperium, and even after it, you retain a lot of tactics my soldiers can use to devastating effect. Besides, you faced an entirely different Hive Fleet than Behemoth. Adapting to different opponents can’t hurt.”

That was certainly true, and proof Weaver had not vanquished a Tyranid onslaught by mere luck.

“Tyranids aside, having you to propose new ideas and play a different doctrine in the War Games will be good for all of us.” The golden-winged human continued. “Space Marines, for all their superior physical abilities, are still human. And their Codex has flaws that based on the information you delivered, many of your Commanders managed to discover and exploit. We need that badly. It is highly likely the next campaign will not be against the Tyranids.”

“And the population of T’au?”

“They can continue studying and advancing their technology, as long as they stay reasonable. They have to be protected against the corruptive power of Warp and IA-based technology. For the rest, I will let my Adjutants and the Tech-Priests overseeing things to decide on a case-by-case basis.”

“And your ‘Adjutant-not-Arachens’ will have their armours.”

“And my Adjutants will have their armours. It always pays to keep many of your most subordinate happy.”

**Fafnir Forge-Temple**

**2.536.312M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“It is extremely impressive, Dragon.”

As Basileia, Taylor had often had to give compliments to people she didn’t like, but for Dragon and the program the Tinker had supervised, it was very well-deserved.

In fact, it may be the words didn’t do it justice.

Seen from above, the new prototype of Astartes Powers was like one of those enchanted armours that seemed taller than legends.

The appearances were a bit misleading, it had to be said.

This prototype was only slightly bigger than the Mark IX which had been deployed on the various battlefields of Operation Stalingrad.

But there was some sense of...indomitability with this armour.

That the Salamanders had painted it with their Chapter’s colours only increased the aura of resistance and sheer robustness.

“The prototype has a more modular look.” The Basileia noted. “Cawl’s influence?”

“Yes.” Dragon admitted shamelessly. “Thanks to your fruitful negotiations, we got two extensive data-repositories, one per pattern of power armour. The first had the same ‘modular’ inspiration, but in many ways, was just an answer to the Mark IX, and lacking the Ion Shielding to boot. We were far more impressed with the second one. Cawl called it ‘Gravis’.”

“I can imagine why. Extra layers of armour on the chest, greaves, and ankle joints definitely make it a very heavy Astartes Power Armour.”

It was still lighter than all Terminator patterns, and far more agile and mobile.

“From all the data and reports we received back from Operation Stalingrad, this is going to be very much needed in the future.” Her Ministry of Industry and friend told her.

“Well, I won’t argue against that. The thigh plates and the mag-boots were already reinforced, so no surprise there. The back?”

“This is where we were the most inventive, clearly. Cawl’s solution of an enlarge backpack to power the armour gave us a few solutions, but it was the combination of the Iridium alloy and the STC recovered from Sota-Nul which gave us the best solution. We needed it very badly, because the Ion Shield is a glutton when it comes to energy.”

Taylor raised an eyebrow.

“And?”

“And it is sufficient to endure five minutes of medium to medium-high enemy bombardment.” The draconic mistress of the Fafnir Forge-Temple said honestly. “Reloading it takes two full minutes, provided of course the reinforced backpack has not been severely damaged in the mean time.”

It was...not optimal. Yes, she was speaking of the reloading time. The ability to endure enemy bombardment was extremely impressive. From what she had seen on the Ymga Monolith and in the fight onboard of Sota-Nul’s Ark Mechanicus, the Ion Shields of the Mark IX had not lasted half that time in the best of cases. The same had happened when facing with the Tyranids.

“Any major problems so far?”

“For the equipment itself? Only the usual youth issues we usually deal with, and even then, there are far fewer of them than we predicted in our simulations. The bolstering of certain capacities will allow each battle-brother to carry heavier weapons to be sure. In that aspect like in many others, the Salamanders and the Magma Spiders have exceeded all our hopes, Taylor.”

The insect-mistress grinned.

“I hear a ‘but’ somewhere.”

“But,” the other parahuman didn’t miss a beat, “doctrinally, it’s quite another thing. We’re still far from the first real battlefield deployments, of course, but the sons of Vulkan already confided in me this is something they would have thought of for Devastator Squads, not so much for Tactical ones.”

Tactical, Assault, Devastator; the three blades of the multi-purpose knife Guilliman had forged for the Codex Astartes.

By the standards of the 33rd and the 34th millennium, this was a good system; one in fact which had so many advantages that several Black Crusade warbands had adopted variants of it to suit their Traitor formations.

But now old and new enemies were evolving.

“If the main power armour we give to our Space Marines is a Devastator-type one, so be it.” Taylor replied after thinking several seconds about it. “I prefer changing the doctrine to watching my allies get slaughtered by some horror which will rip apart the Mark VII like it is a child’s toy.”

“The battle-brothers in charge of the Deathfire Lorica certainly agree with you.”

“Deathfire Lorica?” She whispered.

“You named it the Lorica Program, officially.”

And clearly the Salamanders and other sons of Vulkan had added the name of Mount Deathfire, the largest and deadliest volcano of all Nocturne next to it.

It did not take an Eldar Farseer to guess that the Magma Spiders were going to call the Mark X with the nickname ‘Deathfire’ and the Ultramarines would use ‘Lorica’. Bah, she could live with that, and some challenging comradery never hurt.

“So I did. The test?”

An alarm shrieked, and all the Techmarines slowly stepped back until the Salamander equipped with the prototype was alone.

For several breaths, it was as if a statue of Space Marine had been emplaced, and they were all there to marvel at it.

Then it moved.

There was no preliminary, no warning given.

In less time than it took to say it, the Space Marine went from complete immobility to an urgent sprint.

It was slightly slower than what a Mark VII would achieve, but it was largely enough for the feelings of the transhuman shock to destabilise many people waiting by Dragon and her side.

And then hell was unleashed.

Lascannons, Bolters, and quantity of weapons that were part of the Imperial arsenal were unleashed.

They were fired in turrets or via Mechanicus-type launchers. There were new anti-krag missiles involved.

And the Ion Shielding took the brunt of everything that managed to hit, while modified battle-servitors were disintegrated by Bolter and Power Katana.

It couldn’t stand forever.

But it still took over seven minutes for the attackers to disable the energy protection of the prototype, and in a vast ‘avenue’ which offered almost no cover to someone clad in a heavy Power Armour.

The turrets and all guns instantly stopped firing, leaving only silence.

“Well?”

Dragon was very often smug these days. That say, she had a lot of reasons to be.

“We are going to need more tests, of course.” Taylor sighed internally. “But you will get the resources for nine more prototypes of the Mark X.”

The Tinker chuckled.

“Don’t rejoice too quickly. The Chapters of the Blood want an Assault-type Power Armour. I won’t be the one to explain to them there is no jump packs for them to use their favourite strategies.”

“You live to please, and the sons of Vulkan love challenges.” If Dragon had stuck her out her tongue at that moment, the insect-mistress wouldn’t have been exactly surprised.

“Let’s go to the Artificer Ateliers, I want to congratulate all of them for the incredible performance of the prototype.”