**Legacy 13.1**

**Legacy of War**

"*All your promises of a new 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 on!*" Words attributed to Larxias, self-proclaimed 'Oracle of Fate', executed on 313M35 in the Atlantis Sector for heretical speech and hundreds of other crimes.

"*For the difficult battles, choose a Fay regiment. For the impossible battles, we will take it. For the miracles, we call the Webmistress*!" attributed to an Adjutant-Spider in 312M35, authenticity very much confirmed.

**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 who 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 good 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 that hell pit, but it was still the Calyx Hell Stars. I trust you understand the significance."

"The Archenemy is preparing something. And though unity for them is a thing of the past, they are ready to keep everything dark where we are concerned."

"That's 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 claimed 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 began 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 are correct. 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 can. 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 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 restart 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' perpetual sovereign.

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

"A few scraps," 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 Quadrant Lord would. Her powerbase is concentrated aboard the *Conqueror*. It's used as some sort of military headquarters, royal court, capitol, and for other vital 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 now has an impalement theme, along with the blood pools and arenas."

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

"I think they are heretical indoctrination chambers. They allow them to keep their newborn Traitor Astartes away 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 not have received.

"These were visions sent by the Red Angel's Ruinous Power, I assume."

"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 too used to having proper void docks and infrastructure. They can build Eldar warships there nonetheless, albeit with a very small production capacity for capital ships above Cruiser tonnage."

"Why these 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 pitiful way of taunting me? Yes." The golden-winged Angel rolled her eyes. "I failed to see 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 Gore Queen."

The Living Saint was right; it was far more concerning. Khorne-worshipping Eldar were in short supply 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 noticed 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 will be a problem for more than a few decades. The green WAAGHs 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 Ruinous Power of Blood didn't include the entire region, and the Inquisition had been able to contain the problem with Guard and ex-Frateris Templar 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 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 that meant 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 soothing about contemplating Blue Anchorage for several minutes.

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

Taylor sighed when Kratos loudly cleared his throat, partially ruining the moment. It was only when Gamaliel sighed that she reacted.

"Yes, Gamaliel?"

"My Lady, I believe Kratos has something to say."

"I know," the insect-mistress grinned. "That's why he's going to wait for a bit longer. Has every ship of the fleet 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."

"There 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 in enemy territory, the Imperium had kept losing warships to the malevolence of the Warp. Sometimes it was one or two ships per year on a specific front. In darker times, two or three flotillas disappeared and were never seen again.

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

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 had very much been 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 wants to volunteer for those really fun 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 attest, my Lady," Gamaliel added 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, believe 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 sounded 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 this 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 severe punishment for his effrontery.

"Now that we've established you all can't be serious for one minute, how about contacting the kitchens and checking what's 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."

"Perhaps performing 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 truth to that.

That said, everyone needed to sleep. And in the middle of the week, the majority of the citizens were peacefully 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 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 above his head, but it was a slow trickle at best.

Naxos gritted his teeth. One more day when his job-hunting had achieved nothing but failure.

And it was way too late – or too early – to go to Grand Central and catch 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 place young men like him frequented in the middle of the day. There were some decorations 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 looked for an 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 seated at a table!

"Don't just stand there 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 just finishing my shift and am in need of company!"

Naxos had heard of the great 'Adjutant-Spiders', of course. They were certainly the second holiest non-human beings of Nyx, since Lisa and all the Titan-Moths stood 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 what it will cost!"

"You realise," the insect servant of the Basileia replied, "that this is the second 'Super-Gourmet Menu' that I am enjoying tonight? 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 sure we were supposed to listen to her subjects, and my investigations ate up a lot of my free time recently!"

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

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

"Praise the Webmistress for giving me permission to taste these marvellous sweets once every two weeks!" Epona voiced before focusing several eyes in his direction. "What kept you so long at night, if it is not too bothersome to indulge my curiosity, Naxos?"

"Job-hunting," he answered honestly, now that his belly was beginning to feel satisfyingly stuffed.

"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 are 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 allows every student 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 it was taken for granted we already knew 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 it was the turn of the fruit. "This is a problem which pops up 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 Segmentum Adeptus Administratum, swimming in its usual incompetence, decided to block the efforts. But now that we don't care about the grox's opinion anymore, we may soon be able to open preparation schools to ensure coming generations aren't unprepared 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 that before it began."

"I am glad to hear that," Naxos answered after wondering for a second what in the name of the Golden Throne was a Carnifex. "But I suppose reforms are going to take years."

"Most likely," 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 training sessions at 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 demand *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.

"It's 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 by dawn. And we Adjutants are going to be so busy organising the parades and 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 suitable 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 permitted everyone who wanted to come pay their respects to their Lady, they would not arrive at 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 as a threat came out.

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

There was no doubt 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 not resolve.

"I'm sorry, Webmistress! I did everything I could, but 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 another destructive visit. It'll be expensive in terms of engineering, but we'll 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 so many others of the Dawnbreaker Guard, who were coughing or trying to be as silent as possible with their reactions of amusement...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 to be 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 by my side for now. Is there something my Adjutant didn't notice or wasn't made aware of?"

"One thing," the long-ear female replied. "I can't ascertain it with great confidence, but I think the reason the Lord of Skulls let me go so easily was because my enslavement allowed its essence to copy my Haemokinesis skills and 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, that 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 in which 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 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 their next campaigns in the stars, and the population had greeted them like heroes.

"By the Lotus and the Angel! 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 thoroughly dead one. Even dead and turned into a partial skeleton, the monster seemed to generate its own atmosphere of terror. "From what I read in 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 give anyone the choice."

Missy wouldn't admit it, but she had had some bad nights after this dark threat was described 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 attention had to be refocused on someone else, Lisa began to sing 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 when we installed our podium there, halfway 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 permitted 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 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 excitement had been present before, it was nothing compared to what existed now. Hundreds of thousands of voices rose, for the Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard were at last coming into sight, and behind them came Weaver, a large number of Adjutant-Spiders, Scorpiads, and other massive armoured insects at her back to close out 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 plushies were distributed, or anything like that.

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

And each time she waved, 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 on walking 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 getting used to.

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 wish 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 fund myself a vacation."

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

"And where would this vacation 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 several 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' trills.

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

"But you can't take your Rashan sidekick with you."

"Teddy intends to go back to Lotus Haven after the next Sanguinala anyway."

Ah, yes, that explained a few things.

"And I'm guessing 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 incredibly 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 for 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 tends 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 far 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 drew a chuckle from 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 anything, Missy. I am the Basileia of Nyx. I have a responsibility to rule them and make their lives happy."

"We told you a thousand times already, you set 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 swell in the near future."

Missy gasped mockingly.

"We said no official business today!"

"My apologies, oh tyrannical ex-Regent!"

The two women laughed, giving amused glances to Artemis, who was busy pretending 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 reclaim your position once you return, or permanently if you find something new to enjoy while you're on vacation."

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 extremely unlikely 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 fact I am not able to predict the future very well."

"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 offer. It looks like a very nice fusion of Greek and Roman architecture, and many of your soldiers who returned ahead of you had only 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."

That 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 write 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 delivering the final blow.

"And for the record, you're absolutely forbidden from taking a Fenrisian as your boyfriend."

"Taylor!"

**Hagia Sanguinala - under 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 dry retort came immediately.

"I am so reassured you didn't insult my pride and honour as an Imperial Architect."

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

"You've changed, Lady Hebert."

"Really?"

"Yes," Cyrene affirmed 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 through 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 a 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 that 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 brought a copy of a certain book 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 that sort of 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, obviously, but I think the Primarch of the Ultramarines hates destroying books. He doesn't particularly like the fact that his personal library must be only opened to certain carefully selected visitors either."

"You were the one 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 it clear he would burn all the proscribed heretical texts to fall into his hands, along with anything 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 his demise had been only the beginning of his torment.

Emperor knew that the bastard deserved every second of it.

"Since we're on the subject of very good news," the Architect-Primus completely changed 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 wide smile clearly gave away how insincere she was for once. "I only played 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 off!"

"Dragon? I think Missy is way too smug for this early in the morning."

The Tinker considered this 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 turning into the very tyrant we feared all along! Warlord Skitter is back!"

In case anyone had any doubts, 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 ceremonial drums, and the true business began.

"The support of every important faction for the Great Infrastructure Plan is now assured. The Mechanicus has confirmed we have the resources to commit to it, and the Banking Houses, now that they have agreed on the size of their slice of the 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 advocated 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 about this, "my advice is to begin the construction of two new Agri-Hives before the end of the year. We've secured the funding for eleven in total, but building all of 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 completed. By building 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 confirmed.

Each Agri-Hive, once all it had a proper work force and the maintenance needs established by the STC were properly met, could consistently and without problem feed 1.2 billion people.

Obviously, twelve of them weren't sufficient for the needs of two hundred-plus billion people, but a mountain 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. "Those are more complicated to build than an Agri-Hive, in addition to of course the infrastructure project required each time to build a new Spaceport, namely the railway lines connecting it to the rest of the transport network. Yes, there are only five of them planned, 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'll build as quickly 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 worried Dragon had been replaced by a conservative Tech-Priest willing to delay all reforms."

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

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

"And evidently, that is just the infrastructure you intend to build on Nyx itself." Missy commented idly.

"Yes." It was the short answer, of course. "Nyx's 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 begins to look like a proper orbital ring, if one with a lot of gaps, 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 gathering of hydrogen, promethium, and the other things we really can't live without."

"Those parts should not meet too many hurdles," Dragon assured her. "In many ways, the expansion merely slowed down in the last three years. One can truthfully claim we have continuously expanded it in the last decades, and it never really stopped. Besides, I don't think the Imperial Navy is going to stop using our local facilities in the immediate future, no?"

"Considering we noted an increase of non-Samarkand Navy squadrons using our infrastructure to refuel and request minor things on their way to their deployment zones of almost four hundred percent, I think not," the insect-mistress noted drily. "Any other outstanding points which for one reason or another were added too late to make their way into 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-slates 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 once or 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 at. "I found the idea interesting, to be honest. We improve the hygiene and 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 more pleasant place to live in. Wei just didn't mention where she got the idea."

"Certainly from Samarkand," Missy replied. "They have a lot of public bath houses, with different standards 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 cleaning facilities."

"The influence from the Japanese bath houses I was familiar with is strong," Dragon smiled. "Though since time waits 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 purpose remain the same."

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

"The funding and 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 already had 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, obviously. It's out of the question for some Hives to have public bath houses and 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 sounds 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, in addition to other major investments in farm machinery and crop improvements. 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 something to do 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 in her expression. Though 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 reduced 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 ignore on a whim."

Nobody would 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 forward to the debates which will come after the next Sanguinala."

"Think of it as an oratory competition," 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 its way down to the lower levels of the Hive." The Basileia explained calmly. "After all, it's not like the PDF was forgotten. Many structures to be newly built 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-saving measure, but there's a finite limit to that."

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

"But what about these...these Xenos Protectorates?"

For the first time in the meeting, it was the Minister of Foreign Affairs' choice to speak up.

"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 towards them. We had the Rashan precedent before Stalingrad. It worked. And both the Nyxians and our neighbours are convinced the Lady Basileia terrifies the xenos in question way too much for them to take the risk of rebelling."

"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 humour. "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 against relying on a single person. And in many regards, 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 not-insignificant number of *human* 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 Protectorates." 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 opinions 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 more advanced medical equipment.

Sadly, she was also one of this hospital's patients, and it was hardly something the Tau warrior relished.

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

The second was, if anything, worse. It was as if they had poured living flame into her veins.

For several heartbeats, everything was pain.

And then it ended.

"The procedure is successful," one of the female red-armoured humans informed her. "Please rest 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 – really had 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 not have justified the risks, Shadowsun wouldn't have accepted.

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

Then the noise of footsteps reached her senses.

The large door opened, and there was Light.

"Commander Shadowsun, may I come in?"

"You may," the T'au supreme military 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 ones 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 have now passed."

"That is good to hear," Weaver held out a hand, and Shadowsun took it. The strength was closer to that of 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 again. "The rejuvenation specialists were certain of their work, but there are still some aftereffects they're trying to correct."

"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 for life-extension 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. 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 indicated so far, the life-extension medicine could be given twice while avoiding major medical complications.

"I don't suppose you might be willing to transfer the formula to the hospitals of the Tau, however," Shadowsun didn't flinch when they left the hospital room, but she was all the more vigilant; the corridor had Space Marines stationed everywhere.

"On the contrary," the black-haired warlord replied immediately, "the moment my Hospitallers and Genetors confirm that they've 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.

"That 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 problems, as humans would complain about the Tau taking their spots 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's armed forces." Weaver admitted 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 already 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 this decline."

"I completely disagree regarding the quality." The eyes filled with stars 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 revoking of the Caste System."

"Indeed. But in many ways, has this system not already collapsed? The former Engineers of the Earth Caste have formed a 'Technocratic Council' my overseers are watching assiduously. Many of the surviving Ethereals are true Tau now, but it would be a lie to claim they retain the authority they once had."

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

"I will have to return to T'au to forge my own opinion 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 a hundred to one, it is akin to fighting a firestorm with our bare hands."

"Before Macragge, it was far more than anything the Imperium had, 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 the Warp and A.I.-based technology. For the rest, I will let my Adjutants and the Tech-Priests overseeing things 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 loyal subordinates happy."

**Fafnir Forge-Temple**

**2.536.312M35**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

"This is very 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 that the words didn't do it justice.

Viewed from above, the new prototype of Astartes Power Armour 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 a sense of...indomitability with this armour.

That the Salamanders had painted it with their Chapter's colours only increased the aura of resilience 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, as you can see. Cawl's solution of an enlarged backpack to power the armour gave us a few ideas, 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 replied honestly. "Reloading it takes two full minutes, provided of course the reinforced backpack has not been severely damaged in the meantime."

That was...not ideal. 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 the Tyranids.

"Any major problems so far?"

"For the equipment itself? Only the usual growing pains 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'm sensing 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, it 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 about it for several seconds. "I prefer changing the doctrine to watching my allies get slaughtered by some horror which will rip apart the Mark VII like wet tissue paper."

"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, to it.

It did not take an Eldar Farseer to guess that the Magma Spiders were going to call the Mark X by 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 indicator, 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 her and Dragon's side.

And then hell was unleashed.

Lascannons, Bolters, and quantities of weapons that were part of the Imperial arsenal opened fire.

They were fired from turrets or via Mechanicus-type launchers. There were new anti-tank 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 last 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 said, she usually had good 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 are no jump packs for them to use with their favourite strategies."

"I live to please, and the sons of Vulkan love a challenge." 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."

**Dominus Citadel**

**2.545.312M35**

**General** **Werner Groener**

The obvious drawback of having Adjutant-Spiders to read your reports, Werner had discovered, was that it considerably decreased the time you had to enjoy your hot chocolate.

And the Cadian General had really come to enjoy this sugary beverage very much.

"That's a lot of officers." Lady Taylor Hebert, Living Saint and Lady General Militant, noted noncommittally.

"It's a lot of plans you want us to prepare, my Lady."

He received a chuckle for his efforts. Emperor be praised, even the great victories won during Operation Stalingrad had not caused His Living Saint to suffer from a colossal ego. And the Basileia had resumed her visits to the streets and barracks of Nyx since her return, proving her care for the average citizen and guardsman.

"I suppose General Rokossovsky agrees with your recommendations."

"He does. Especially when it comes to War Plan 38."

It was not the thirty-eighth plan in the drawers of the Imperial Guard, of course. It was just an ironic reference to the thirty-eight years of delay Lady Taylor Hebert had been given to wait before enjoying her Terran Triumph.

Behind the seemingly ironic and bland designation, however, was a concentration of man- and firepower such that it would likely surpass the forces assembled for Operation Stalingrad.

It was the main offensive plan Lady Weaver intended to muster and lead into the fires of war once the Triumph and its aftershocks were over, and the heretics and other eldritch monsters were not going to like it at all.

"My main concern is that if I assign you all these officers to be part of a General Planning Staff, they will become entrenched in their headquarters, and progressively lose their tactical skills and all their hard-won war experience."

"We have rotations to avoid exactly that sort of problem from appearing."

Judging by the disabused glance the star-filled eyes gave him, they didn't do a good enough job with them, in the Basileia's opinion.

"I will study your proposals," the Living Saint announced at last, which was better than he'd hoped. "Other concerns?"

"Not for War Plan 38," Werner shook his head. "I'm more worried about War Plan 30 and the logistical headaches that could explode in our faces if we are forced to go through with it."

And no, there were not in fact twenty-nine other plans before it. The reference...bah, it would go over the head of most officers. War Plan 30 was just the basic designation for a defensive military operation. In many ways, it was similar to Operation Stalingrad; the order of battle from Nyx and many other Sectors was given a few years to prepare for an enemy that had revealed itself to be too strong for the closest Imperial Battlefleets and Army Groups to deal with.

Unfortunately, unlike War Plan 38, which only envisioned a serious campaign against a specific target, the defensive nature of War Plan 30 meant that there were a multitude of sources the threat could possibly come from.

And the most likely threats these days were in general found within the Warp Storms at the limit of the Holy Astronomican.

"We managed to make it work during Operation Stalingrad."

"With all due respect, my Lady, for that campaign we had Tigrus, in addition to all our Supply Fleets. If we had to stop all offensive actions and rush to the rescue of the planets bordering the Somnium Stars, that would already be far more complicated logistically. And I must point out that this is with the Forge World of Triplex Phall helping us, which represents a tremendous production and logistical hub. If another threat storms out of the Calamity's Maw outside the Ghoul Stars, it will be even worse. Triplex Phall is still the best option, but with even worse supply lines. And I won't comment upon the terrible danger of waging war in a region of space where the Astronomican doesn't shine."

The Imperium could in general count on the Warp Drives providing it considerable tactical and strategic flexibility against its enemies. When the Navigators couldn't rely on it, this massive advantage vanished like it had never existed, and had been known in the past to result in some impressive disasters.

"That's certainly something to keep in mind," Lady Weaver answered after long seconds. "Without proper logistical hubs, we definitely won't be able to do more than amuse ourselves with data-slates and trace arrows on hololithic maps. Lack of supplies and resources will doom a military operation as surely as the actions of the Archenemy. Unfortunately, this is something I am only partially able to act upon. I am a Lady General Militant, yes, but my area of responsibility is Ultima Segmentum. If I try to build logistical hubs as contingencies in other Segmentums, many High Lords are going to scream bloody murder."

This was the big problem with some of War Plan 30's underlying assumptions, yes.

"In that case, it might be worth decreasing the extent of the contingencies for War Plan 30," Werner declared slowly.

"You realise, General, that you're confirming my initial argument to not give you too many officers for this planning stage?"

"Not at all, my Lady," the Cadian officer replied politely, "for I would like for some young and bright-eyed officers to study a new Plan...let's call it War Plan 20, for the conversation at hand."

"And what would this plan...what would War Plan 20 entail? The thirty-eighth takes care of the offensive, and the thirtieth of the defensive."

"The possibility of a major war on two fronts, against two different major enemies." Werner spoke aloud the dark thought he had for a few seconds. "I realise it is unlikely. The Word Bearers were annihilated and everything, but..."

"No, you are completely right." The golden wings' radiance increased, but the expression of the Lady General Militant if anything, grew even more sombre. "It is our duty to the Emperor and Mankind to defend the Imperium. The threats may be unlikely at this very moment, but right after Commorragh, the Ymga Monolith was near-impossible to predict as the next major enemy."

And the Black Crusade had hurled itself against the defences of Cadia at the same time the battle began in the Volga System.

"I hope it won't happen, but you're right, we can't neglect the possibility of the worst-case scenario. Add this War Plan to the list, and adjust your officer requests in consequence."

**Hive Athena**

**The Embassy Floor**

**2.551.312M35**

**Regina Wei Cao**

"It's difficult to believe that just a few decades ago, there was a Gladiator Arena here."

"We razed it years ago." Her wife reminded her.

"And by 'we', I mean a certain Basileia was certainly over-enthusiastic about the idea."

"Guilty as charged." Taylor nodded with a grin. "But as you can clearly see, we found a use for this floor, eventually."

"Yes. Everyone for the last week has taken to calling it the Embassy Floor...which is a bit remarkable, given that there are only two Embassies."

"The blocks where the other xenos protectorates' representatives will spend their time are one floor below."

"Certain parties want to preserve their feelings of superiority compared to other species? It clearly isn't a lack of space which is forcing to you to adopt this disposition, at any rate."

"Certain parties are proud," the Basileia conceded with an innocent expression. "But don't forget that what we see right now is just part of what will be the completed Embassies. Cyrene's architect subordinates and other workers did a great job, but it was only part of the agreed plans. The rest is going to be built next year."

"And?"

"And the Necrons more or less imperiously declared that their Embassy had to be at least fifty square metres bigger than the Eldar one."

This time they both giggled.

"The rivalry of ancient times is continuing like in the good old days, I see." Wei blinked. "And if these weren't Embassies we were talking about, I would be pestering you about demolishing the whole thing for a prodigious lack of taste."

Seriously, the Regina doubted it was possible to build two separate pieces of infrastructure which were more different. And the entire thing was made worse by the fact the two xenos Embassies were facing each other on each side of the large paved avenue at the summit of the Upper Spire levels.

On one side, the monument the Necrons had manifested the desire to have. It was a huge, intimidating pyramid, and despite all the efforts the Nyxians had made for it to look less sinister, it was still a very grim and overwhelming presence. Taylor had called the style 'Egyptian Necropolis', and it was indeed accurate. Everything hinted at marvels of engineering, from the creative Monolith reproductions to the intricate green glyphs carved into the pyramid...but it was the kind of marvel you wanted to admire from a distance. In many ways, it was unsurprising, because the Necrons were the species present which had the least urgent need to be recognised as a Protectorate.

On the other side, everything was reversed. Through the opening in the gate, you could see trees and grass. Everything was radiant and filled with colours. You could hear birds singing from here. In the distance, an Eldar singer accompanied them. Obviously, the work had been done by very human workers, several dozens of them specialised in palace decoration, but it seemed their work had been magnified since.

And it was towards this little paradise their feet moved.

"Ready?"

"Not really, but we have an appointment, don't we?"

Three Adjutant-Spiders following on their heels, they entered the Eldar Embassy.

The rumours of its beauty really hadn't done the place justice, Wei realised. After the first steps, you wondered where the Palace was in the middle of this verdant immensity. Then after a few more seconds, the Regina realised part of the green was the Palace-Embassy; many buildings had merged with the trees, or were half-hidden by them. There were some specific stones and what looked like human-made materials, but all looked like they had been transformed to reflect the influence of forests and nature in general.

And while Wei had been gaping, there had been changes by her side.

"I love the ears," the ruler of Wuhan wasn't even joking that much. "And the rest of your appearance is also splendid."

It was not the first time Taylor transformed before her, of course. And there was something truly fascinating about these new looks.

As always, Taylor relaxed when she placed her hands on her shoulders.

It was a moment of calm and eternity.

"Webmistress, look! They have brought the furball of Iyanden here!"

Wei raised an eyebrow, and Taylor huffed.

"Come on, Artemis, it's just a coincidence-"

There was an outraged series of meowing, and the ginger-furred feline which had showed itself on a branch several metres above ground ran away in a hurry.

"In fact, now that I think about it, that may indeed have been the same Gyrinx you threw into the lake." The Lady of Nyx remarked drily. "Garfield is keen to avoid a repetition of the incident, at any rate."

"You didn't mention the Gyrinx."

"A species of psychic cats, Wei."

"They belong to an Eldar in particular?"

"From what I understand, the Gyrinx think the Eldar exist to serve them, not the other way around. They have that much in common with all felines."

"Interesting," she mused, "and the name Garfield?"

"A very old cultural reference of Old Earth, and I will refuse all responsibility if I find the Gyrinx eating lasagne in the middle of a banquet one day."

Wei gave a humorous expression. Now she wanted more explanations, not less. Fortunately, they had several hours of free time after this meeting.

There was a breeze caressing her skin, and suddenly, Aurelia Malys was here.

Wei had never met her before, but based on the detailed descriptions Taylor had given her, there was no one else it could be. Much like Taylor's eyes, there was no way to forget them once you had seen them once, and the Regina didn't even know if there was a way to imitate these jewels made flesh.

As for the rest of her body, Wei was very glad she had excellent self-control. The High Priestess had pledged herself to a Power of Carnality, and nobody could doubt it after seeing her.

"Empress, Empress-Consort, welcome to the Eldaneshi Embassy of Nyx."

Taylor laughed loudly, and in her new body, it was refreshing and beautiful.

"Eldaneshi?" She managed to say between two chuckles.

"We needed a new name to describe what we hope to build with you as Empress. The Aeldari word was tainted forever by the First Fall. Asuryani was judged more promising, but many of us aren't living in Craftworlds anymore. And even for those who are, the connection with Asuryan is tenuous. Asurmen earned great renown with his heroic efforts, but the God himself is dead and rarely mourned in this cycle and age."

"Still, the Queen of Blades is going to die with laughter once she learns about that." The large smile Taylor wore showed she had no problem with it, clearly. "But I suppose you named yourselves for the hero who stood against Khaine, not her."

"We intend to leave a certain amount of ambiguity," Aurelia Malys admitted cheerfully.

"And the Embassy? Does it conform to your wishes?"

"Oh, yes," the smile was so radiant there was no way it could be a fake one. "I must mention that some Saim-Hann Wild Riders were a bit disappointed there wasn't the space to do a proper race inside the compound."

Taylor snorted.

"Nice try. From what I know from Ynesth's memories, Saim-Hann pilots are the descendants of those speed fanatics which raced across whole planets without ever pausing. I'm not sure that the entire Nyx Sector as a racetrack would be satisfying for them."

"It's true that they have transformed their Craftworld into something...unique." Aurelia Malys conceded. "Sometimes we of other beautiful Craftworlds think that they fled ahead of the Fall because they wanted to continue their races where the hedonism and decadence couldn't disturb them."

"There may be a flower of truth to it, High Priestess."

"As you say, my Empress."

The next minutes were spent in silence, and with it came the tour of the Embassy. It was certainly sublime...and with the minutes which passed, more and more 'Eldaneshi' showed themselves. As Taylor had warned her, the adults came in blue, green, and red shades of skin, unlike the High Priestess and herself. But Wei had seen the long-ears in real-life before. It wasn't that surprising. The presence of the little ones with their golden skin, however...even warned of this 'detail', it was really a shock. And they looked so happy to be here...

"Have you considered my proposal, my Empress?"

"I have not made my decision yet, High Priestess."

"It would benefit you in many ways. And with what you intend-"

Taylor sighed.

"Of course. Of course your Seers saw it."

"*I* was able to perceive it." Aurelia Malys corrected while showing utmost deference. "And it was possible because you and I have tied our destinies recently. Anyone else would find it impossible."

"Err..." Wei cleared her throat. "What are you talking about?"

"Tell her, Aurelia."

"By your will, my Empress. My proposal was simple. With Atharti's blessing, I made the proposal to awaken the Spirit of this planet."

Wei Cao, Regina of Wuhan, Basileia-Consort of Nyx, couldn't believe her ears, and stood absolutely speechless.

"I'm sorry, what?"

**Hive Aquila**

**Dawn's Convent**

**2.560.312M35**

**Battle-Sister** **Alice Gaius**

Alice had never been to Hive Aquila before today, but the sisters who were born there had spoken well of their time at home.

Unlike too many Hives where the Cult of the Saviour Emperor had built ridiculous and awful-looking cathedrals, Hive Aquila had managed to for the most part keep the balance between splendour on the outside and humility on the inside.

Of course, these were the rumours, but given that the Basileia had visited numerous times and many Priests and Abbesses were still there, it certainly had some kernel of truth.

Many things had changed, obviously. Alice was too young to have lived through it, but there were Guard veterans of Fay who remembered how the churches had been dark, since they couldn't rely on anything more than candles – the less said about the amount of wax which had been left to accumulate everywhere, the better.

There was no trace of it today. Dawn's Convent was a rather austere place, but it was a well-lit one. You could tell a lot of walls had been painted white about a decade ago. Golden paint had been used to highlight the images of Sanguinius and the Living Saints. The Library of Dawn – yes, that was its proper name – had clearly been expanded recently, and could boast about twenty thousand books, half of them which could be consulted by data-slate.

All of it generated an atmosphere of studiousness and diligence.

This was an atmosphere that the hundreds of teenage girls standing in neat lines drew strength from for the tests at every Sanguinala. Alice had not seen any gymnasiums during the offered tour so far, but there had to be one; the athletic bodies the girls could take pride in were not forged by accident.

"Your name?"

"Taylor."

There were a few chuckles in the distance.

"Age?"

"Fourteen."

"You could have had a place at the Schola Progenium." It was not a question.

"My father fought in the Battle of Commorragh. I want to become a Templar Sororitas to honour his legacy."

"And what is the most important quality you learned in Dawn's Convent?"

"Unity," the young black-haired girl answered with awe on her face, no matter how hard she tried to disguise it. "It's together we will win under your banner."

The Basileia smiled.

"Good answer, Taylor. I look forwards to seeing what you and your group will accomplish in the years to come."

Many conversations like this one had happened since this morning; Alice knew it wouldn't be the last.

"Do you wish to speak with older girls again, your Celestial Highness?" the Abbess asked. The formidable grey-haired woman was a former guardswoman, it was said, and given the aura of command she seemed to be infused with, Alicia was ready to believe it.

"One year older, I think," there was a few seconds of silence. "You taught these young girls well."

"We are honoured you think so, your Celestial Highness."

"It's nothing but the truth. Last year, Dawn's Convent alone accounted for two hundred new recruits of the Templar Sororitas. And so far, I have every reason to expect they will become extremely loyal and skilled standard-bearers for the new generations of Sororitas."

"When you told the Cardinal how you wanted to proceed, my predecessor knew that educating promising orphans and motivated young girls was the right decision. We would teach them why Unity, Loyalty, Piety, and Humility are vital qualities."

"Once again good answer, you have prepared this not-so-surprise inspection well."

"Thank you, your Celestial Highness."

"I was witness to how skilled with a blade your girls are at sixteen, obviously. I would be interested in seeing the fencing facilities."

"Of course, it would be our pleasure to show them to you, though the girls practising there are a bit older..."

"It will be fine. I promise that I won't ask my Dawnbreaker Guard to criticise their performance, Abbess. Now please tell me how you were able to teach these young girls to control their impatience and replace it with the self-control I was pleased to see here..."

**Nyx System**

**Space Macro-Forge *Terra Cimmeria***

**2.567.312M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Saying the Tech-Priests present were a bit excited was like saying water was a bit wet.

Even Dragon had succumbed to the excited atmosphere, and the Tinker was often left imperturbable by the eccentricities of her fellow Tech-Priests.

"So what do we know for now?" the golden-winged parahuman inquired as over a dozen Magi worked under the supervision of Archmagos Concillium-Hesphestari Marius Gamma-Arx to unlock the secrets of the STC placed in the ultra-secure room of *Terra Cimmeria*. This time, the owners of the object had been far more paranoid. A simple 'Hello World!' wasn't enough to be given access to the secrets of the ancient Federation.

"It was called the Fenghuang STC." Dragon dutifully answered. "It was classified as a 'Colonial Printer-Manager', whatever that means. According to your Custodes-"

"They aren't *my* Custodes, Dragon."

"According to the Custodes, this was built on the moons of Jupiter, in a place called the Zong Ghuo Concession, likely in the late twenty-second millennium. Is it too much to hope to learn how they got that information? Or who the STC was intended for?"

"I think the answers to those questions are 'yes' and 'yes', Dragon. The Watchers aren't great conversationalists." Taylor frowned. "Now that I know Trazyn's thieving habits better, I believe we can guess with reasonable certainty that this STC and everything near it was threatened by something that would have resulted in its complete destruction."

"What led you to that conclusion?"

"The Salamanders and Ultramarines we were given back, of course. Each time those Astartes were lost in disasters where their deaths would have left little or no evidence of their demises. The Emperor's Children gene-seed applies too, now that I think about it."

"That's a good theory," her Tinker friend agreed. "But I suppose there are exceptions."

"For the moment, the only one I am completely sure is Trazyn's near-suicidal habit of stealing gemstones and priceless possessions having sentimental value to the Queen of Blades. Where human artefacts, Space Marines, or other assets are concerned, the most famous Necron thief in general leaves little evidence of his robberies. Though it might be that he's simply been lucky and there are thousands of planets we are about to hear complaints from in the next decades."

"Let's hope we won't be that unlucky."

Loud cants praising the Omnissiah interrupted this low-level conversation. The excitation levels were soaring once again. The multitude of red lights flickering on the devices installed by Mars above the STC artefact that were now switched on were certainly no stranger to the agitation.

The arrival of Gastaph Hediatrix before her was just the last confirmation the good news had arrived.

"Chosen of the Omnissiah, everything is ready."

The uncommon hesitation in the next second was not due to any failing from the Voice of Mars', but by the sudden arrival of a black-armoured Custodes by her side.

As always, the servant of the Emperor answered none of the queries. He only handed her a small roll of vellum which, while preserved, looked it had been prepared several centuries ago.

"Shall we, Dragon?"

"With great pleasure, *Chosen of the Omnissiah*."

It should be noted that an abundance of titles was not always a good thing when you had cheeky friends.

But seriousness returned quite quickly.

Taylor unrolled the vellum, and presented it to the Tech-Priests who had worked on the STC so far. The Nyxian elites bowed, and though there was no exciting series of talks, Taylor could almost taste the powerful emotions burning in the artificial organs of her subordinates.

"Preliminary assessment...the library of templates appears to be in intact condition." If ten thousand souls breathed sighs of relief, it was certainly her imagination, right? "The Ancients' system of listing, on the other hand, is poor. The theoretical analysis would be that the method of copying used for the templates was operating under a significant deadline." And it would fit perfectly with Trazyn stealing it in the end. Someone had tried very hard to destroy this database. "Confirmation, Chosen of the Omnissiah: the templates do not look to be organised at all."

"And the information generously revealed by the Custodes in the name of His Majesty?"

Several parts of the Mechanicus console functioned in overdrive, and some screens flicked with what had to be passwords being typed at record speed.

"Some of the information is about the twelfth template in the first tier of the list, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

"First tier?" Dragon wondered by her side. "How many templates are we talking about, Magos?"

"Assuming none of our instruments are suffering from malfunctions and that each access represents an intact STC template...between nine hundred and one thousand, Archmagos."

It went without saying that the binary canting and the buzzing behind them were easily multiplied by ten in the next seconds. Many Adepts of the Mechanicus in this room were not exactly prone to tears of joy or showing human emotions when you could hear them. But this time, Council members of the Nyxian Mechanicus, envoys of diverse Forge Worlds, and other great figures of diverse factions were ready to discard all the principles they had lived by and jump in joy.

"Open the template we have the password codes for, please, Magos." They had the means to open it, they might as well use them; the others were likely going to take days or months to open, judging by how efficient the securities for each template were.

"By your will, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

A rather pleasant music began to play, one Taylor didn't recognise...which wasn't that surprising, given that this was an artefact of the twenty-second millennium.

Then on the hololithic devices, a flow of extremely complicated schematics began to be projected.

At first, Taylor wasn't able to tell what she was looking at. But only at first. Many parts looked strange, but the overall vids shown were familiar. There were walls of texts, what looked to be entire manufactorums dedicated to the production of spare parts, and then a whole spire-like structure appeared.

The title, when it appeared ten seconds later, was just the confirmation Taylor didn't really need anymore.

"Of the priority construction, maintenance, and repair methods of the Quantum Entanglement Communicator," Dragon spoke aloud for the benefit of the audience which was not in good position to read the text translated at a frenetic pace by the Mechanicus machines. "Of the underlying principles which led to the discovery of Professor Iskander..."

Then Dragon realised what she was saying.

"Oh dear."

"Yes, 'oh dear'."

The 'Quantum Entanglement Communicator' was the one and only example of mechanical FTL communication devices left to Mankind after the Old Night, and the few which still existed were on the Sol System. It went without saying that no one knew how to build more of them anymore. They were priceless relics, for all the fact they were limited to use inside the boundaries of Sol. And it was common knowledge among the Martian Parliament that within a few millennia, all would eventually break down. There were actually many ancient QEC kept in the stasis-vaults of Olympus Mount in the hope some miracle would make their use possible again.

Everyone in Sol called them the Ansibles, of course. The Mechanicus alone called them 'Quantum Entanglement Communicators'.

And now they had recovered the Template for them.

"You know what this means, right Taylor?"

"Oh yes." It meant the beginning of a new war against Chaos. But this time, one where they had the best cards in their hands. "It means a new beacon of light chasing the darkness away."

**Orbital Shipyard *Ferrus' Revenge***

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

The Basileia was in an excellent mood, Neidhart noticed as she entered the strategium who was going to serve as conference room today.

So was Arithmancia Sultan, Mistress of Shipyards and Ships, for that matter.

The command to begin the presentation was given in a voice filled with happiness and vitality for sure.

Unfortunately, the Lord Admiral couldn't say the same smiles were still present thirty minutes later. That wasn't to say the Basileia was angry, because that wasn't the case. The star-filled eyes looked thoughtful, in his opinion. And the rest of face was emotionless, which was not really encouraging.

"With such a list of presents, Lord Admiral, you really don't need the Sanguinala anymore."

Neidhart prudently decided not responding was the best course of action in this case.

"We have the shipbuilding capacity." Arithmancia Sultan pointed out.

The expression the Living Saint gave the Mistress of Shipyards wasn't supportive.

"You somehow found the funds, resources, and political support to build *ten* Battleships here, Archmagos. That colossal task alone is going to mobilise millions of our workers. And yes, I know you built several while you were in the service of Ryza. It remains a titanic industrial project."

"We will able to request more Tech-Priests if we have to," the answer, surprisingly, was rather stubborn for someone as loyal as Arithmancia Sultan. "Surely-"

It wasn't a glare, but the eyes flashed with something that in plain terms was not an indication to continue the conversation in that direction.

The Basileia began to read the data-slate in front of her silently, and next to the door, an Adjutant-Spider did the same.

"I suppose the majority of the Admirals gave their support for this construction plan," Lady Weaver raised her eyes again to meet his after ten more minutes.

"They did."

Neidhart waited patiently.

"The numbers for the Hoplite and Warrior classes of Destroyers sound reasonable." The Basileia said at last. "We can build them in large numbers, and we would be idiots to not exploit that strategic opportunity. Moreover, we have received plenty of requests from other Sectors, in addition to the big order from Kar Duniash. Under these circumstances, building one hundred Hoplites and one hundred Warriors in the next ten years is a sound military investment."

No mention of the upgrades for the old Warrior class which had fought during Operation Stalingrad were brought up, but given how small the sums were in comparison to the brand-new ships, Neidhart was optimistic they would pass without trouble.

Unlike other things.

"The number of Heavy Cruisers you want to build, however, concerns me. I know the first tests and prototypes are promising, but your presentation called for *ninety* of them to be built! And please let's not insult everyone's intelligence. It may be called the Hecate class, but no one who studied void construction is going to be fooled for a second when these vessels leave the dry docks."

"It is a new class," the Lord Admiral admitted quickly. It was the truth, so why bother denying it? "And the principle is simple. We can build new models of Fusion Reactors to properly meet the energy requirements of the Heavy Cruiser tonnage. Why should we give it a multi-purpose armament? It is better to give it the kind of weapons something like the Hecate really needed all along. It needs a lot of Railguns."

"A lot is indeed accurate," the Living Saint commented acidly, "these 'Hecate-R Heavy Cruisers' are going to carry *fifty* Medium Railguns when a Warrior has only a Light one as prow armament."

"It might sound a lot, Chosen of the Omnissiah," Arithmancia Sultan intervened, "but I assure you the fiends which will dare face these Heavy Cruisers will say the same thing in terror when they realise how foolish it was to confront their firepower!"

The expression of Lady Taylor Hebert softened a bit.

"This is still extremely expensive."

"Several warships we used to prove the concept are Hecate straight out of the Samarkand mothballs." Neidhart argued. "I'm sure that if you want to cut down costs, the Admiralty will be willing to completely overhaul them."

This time, he received a genuine grimace in return.

"A lot of the Samarkand-built Hecate Heavy Cruisers were built for the Third Succession War of M34. The hulls are there, yes, but the internal arrangements will need to be completely overhauled." His surprise must have showed, because the Basileia raised an ironic eyebrow. "My wife brought me the books before I left for the campaign, and I took some time reading them after Macragge. It made for interesting study, to be sure."

The Mistress of Spiders cleared her throat.

"All of that to say that in many ways, I prefer a brand-new ship. It is more expensive, yes, but the skill of our Tech-Priests, Navy workers, and other personnel mean I can trust the quality of the warship construction. There always are problems when we de-mothball a ship, and that we weren't the Sector to build them in the first place is going to lead to trouble. I have no problem when you use them as test-bed for your prototypes. I am far less eager to test their performances in a trial by fire."

"Chosen of the Omnissiah, I understand your reluctance. Yet the Lord Admiral made plenty of good points in his presentation! We are not going to build Battlecruisers in the next couple of years. The 'Hecate-R' is a new answer to the challenges the Imperial Navy will face. The Railguns have proven their worth, and the technology combination of the electromagnetic rails and the gravity impellers is now fully mature. Moreover, the safety measures and some technology transfers from various sources guarantee a reduction of accidents while maintaining a high rate of fire."

"Lord Admiral?"

"The Traitor fleets have integrated the Heavy Cruisers to serve in massive numbers among their damned Armada. It is fair to assume we will face more in decades to come. Since our Battleships will be busy killing other Battleships, the 'Hecate-R' will be the sword which can and will kill Traitor capital ships in large numbers."

The star-filled eyes were turned towards the data-slate for the third time. This time, however, Neidhart knew it was a stalling tactic, because the Living Saint already knew the entire content by heart.

"The arguments are logical, but we are still talking about a new class and an entirely new doctrine for Heavy Cruisers. I am willing to pay for a batch of ten Hecate-R Heavy Cruisers to see if you're right. If Arithmancia Sultan is willing, she can add two or three coming from the Samarkand mothballs to fund the live-fire tests. But that's her decision, and I am unwilling to pay more. Once those are produced and their performances properly observed in real-life void operations, I may authorise more, but not now."

Neidhart knew the Living Saint well enough to know that she wouldn't change her opinion on the subject. It was not good news, but ten Heavy Cruisers were better than none.

"It will be done as you said, your Celestial Highness. Now speaking of the Light Cruisers..."

**Admiral** **Oskar von Reuenthal**

The Lord Admiral looked neither happy nor displeased when he came out of the strategium with the rest of his staff. If Oskar had to guess, it meant that the Navy had obtained some guarantees, but far from everything they wanted.

"Well?" He asked.

"There will be other meetings like this one," his superior answered, showing a faint amount of amusement that didn't reach his eyes. "Her Celestial Highness will be ready to receive you in five minutes."

There was nothing to do but to nod, get out of the way so that the Tech-Priest column could move out without trampling you, and then it was waiting time again.

Fortunately, unlike many other Planetary Governors eager to show they held the upper hand over mere Navy officers, Lady Weaver was as good as her word. He only had to wait for five minutes before an Adjutant-Spider loudly requested his presence.

The first thing which overwhelmed everything in the de facto conference room was not the Living Saint, it had to be said. It was the massive amount of data-slates and other data-repository systems piling up on the tables and in many other places.

The chair he was invited to sit in was among the rare ones to be left empty by these mountains of documentation.

"Admiral."

"Your Celestial Highness."

"I have an interesting mission which requires the services of a skilled Admiral." The golden-winged Angel of the God-Emperor began after the formal courtesies were expedited in record time. "The official recommendation will be sent to the Lord Admiral tomorrow, of course. And I want to make clear that you are free to not volunteer."

"I am listening." The warning strongly implied there was a factor which would make this mission unpalatable for certain officers of high rank, and Reuenthal was curious why Lady Weaver had considered him for it.

"As I am sure you are aware by now," the star-filled eyes flashed with something that really looked like displeasure, "a considerable number of the hulls the Imperium faced during the last Black Crusade came from our very own shipyards. Specifically, there were hundreds of capital warships which were pilfered from the mothballs of the Imperial Navy."

Ah, this was going to be one of *those* conversations, wasn't it?

"I have already spoken about the matter with Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm," the Basileia continued, surprising him. "But he wasn't terribly optimistic about the matter, and since we respectfully exchanged our points of view, his hands have been tied. Terra is not interested in digging too deeply. Nothing must lessen the prestige the Navy won in that glorious series of engagements."

There was no anger in the imperious voice, but there was certainly a great deal of frustration.

"I understand the problem, your Celestial Highness. I admit this is a very short-sighted approach." The Chaos Marines of the Word Bearers' Legion were hardly the most rational of the Traitor Legions before their extermination. If these heretics had been able to steal so many capital ships across the millennia, it stood to reason the other Traitor Legions hadn't exactly stayed idle either. "But I don't know what I can do to solve the problem."

Lady Weaver's use of 'Terra' hinted that clearly that the entire problem was way above the rank of an Admiral.

"At first I thought the problem was insurmountable, like you currently do," the expression he received was slightly...ironic? "And since Terra is busy trying to ignore the problem in the hope it won't blow up in their faces like it did the last time, there is certainly no grand edict we must give. But at the level of the Quadrant, it is very different."

Yes, it was. Admittedly, Lady Weaver was not the Quadrant Lady, but her influence was ever on the rise, and in the last days, many Samarkand Planetary Governors had visited the place. Yes, some had undoubtedly been there to enjoy the benefits of a rejuvenation clinic and a high-end luxury palace, but certainly not all.

"And it was then I had this idea, Admiral. It is difficult to steal ships from a mothballed fleet, if there are no mothballed fleets to steal from."

Sometimes, you tended to forget at your own peril that the God-Emperor had ordered Lady Weaver to destroy Commorragh for a reason. This was one of those times.

"This...has the merit of a certain simplicity, yes, your Celestial Highness. But I am forced to point out in the defence of the Navy that too often, the Sector's Battlefleet doesn't have the resources or personnel to keep all its warships in active service when the area of space enjoys de facto peace-time conditions. In war-time conditions, obviously, resources are less of a concern, but time definitely is the greatest limiting factor. Admirals need all the hulls they can find, and upgrading mothballed ships is faster than building a brand-new one."

"This is a good point." The golden-winged angelic woman nodded, before striking again. "And that also explains why I was still receiving complaints as far back as a decade ago that a fifth of Battlefleet Nyx's order of battle was obsolete."

Oskar von Reuenthal grimaced deep inside. While few officers wanted to discuss it in public these days, it was a sad reality that in the war against the Orks before Lady Weaver's rise, the Imperial Navy had emptied the mothballs of the Nyx Sector. And too often, the results had been beyond disastrous.

"I am not going to say the Navy doesn't need ships in times of war, Admiral. But I find the argument of 'we need every ship no matter how long it stayed in mothball' very unconvincing when most of the time, refurbishing an ancient Lunar-class Cruiser of M33 to be the equal of a Venus-class would require at least five years of work."

With another Planetary Governor, arguments of different aspects could have been made. But Oskar von Reuenthal was sure all the data had been studied and carefully analysed before this meeting was even scheduled. And there was no use denying that many old de-mothballed ships were not properly upgraded in times of war. Sometimes that was because there wasn't enough time. Most often alas, it was because several Cartels and Planetary Governors were busy filling their pockets with the Throne Gelts earmarked for such maintenance.

"You intend to dismantle several mothballed fleets of the Samarkand Quadrant."

"The five oldest ones, to begin with," the Lady of Nyx spoke in a voice of iron. "All of them have ships which were built before M34; just in terms of Destroyers alone, that's around ten thousand hulls. All of them are completely obsolete against a Warrior-class built in the Nyx shipyards, and I think that if they go against a Necron Battlefleet, it would be less painful to scuttle them in high orbit of a stellar graveyard. The Quadrant's foundries can use the metal for something productive. But that's not something that Battlefleet Nyx needs to be too concerned about for the next years."

True. The price of plasteel, ceramic, and some other things was in all likelihood going to decrease a bit, but the mothballed hulls weren't going to be dismantled with a click of the fingers and a few prayers.

"I was dealing with the political implications of that idea when my Adjutants and several other advisors brought a more interesting idea to my attention, Admiral. Since we know for sure now that the Archenemy and other enemies try to steal our mothballed ships, why don't we use said knowledge to our advantage?"

Oskar von Reuenthal initially felt the urge to say that with the number of mothballed fleets in existence, there was no way they could predict the one the Traitors would strike at.

The urge was very short-lived, it had to be said. After longer consideration, Reuenthal had to admit that even if they managed to trap one of those 'Thieving Forces', the strategic effect could be extremely beneficial for the Navy and the Imperium.

"I see the advantages, yes." He replied in an assured voice. "But there are no mothballed fleets in the Nyx Sector. And with due respect, your Celestial Highness, I don't see the Archenemy trying that sort of exploit here. We have doubled up the patrols, eliminated the most glaring flaws of the defensive strategic system, and are regularly commissioning better and better warships."

"I was thinking more about the Atlantis Sector."

If it had not been a meeting with a Living Saint, there would have been an expression of consternation on his face. The Atlantis Sector had been a problem for years, and Oskar didn't think it was going to get better. The Ecclesiarchy had ruled this Sector in an extremely corrupt and incompetent way, and removing the religious imbecile which had been the Sector Lord had been too little, too late.

"They have a mothballed fleet there, yes. It's not in the Atlantis System, if I remember correctly."

"It is not. And the Inquisition has been given hints that several local Planetary Governors are frequenting with less than reputable people in their ambitions to become 'Lord of Atlantis'."

"Catching them while perpetrating the crime would be militarily and politically significant," he recognised. Of course, it wasn't terribly likely he was going to face Traitor Astartes or something equally bad. But there would likely be pirates and other senior criminal figures involved. Stealing a warship, even a de-mothballed one, wasn't like stealing an air-car. It took significant amount of resources, technological capacity, and the risks you took robbing the Imperial Navy.

"I accept the mission, your Celestial Highness."

**The Grand Dome – adjacent to Lisa's Dome**

**2.581.312M35**

**Rogue** **Trader Dennis Peters**

There were people who on a good day decided to adopt a litter of kittens, Dennis thought. On the other side of the debate, there were citizens of the Imperium who, thousands of years after leaving the homeworld, still preferred puppies. Unlike felines, you could tell they would be loyal to you to your dying breath.

For those who were wondering, no, Mankind had still not stopped trying to find exotic pets to add to the list of the species it had already sailed the stars with.

But Taylor was in a class of her own.

Dennis had asked, but he didn't believe there was someone else in the galaxy who had ever adopted Titan-sized Moths. And today, Taylor hadn't added one of the great flyers to the ranks of her Swarm.

She had added three.

"What do you think, Dennis?" the aforementioned Angel of Moths asked him once she landed.

"I think naming one of the three Aisha is just asking for trouble." There was a loud sound in the not-so-far distance. "See? She's already trying to imitate the same innocent expression Lisa does, and she's lived only for a few hours! This one is going to be a mischievous trickster for sure."

"It's just your imagination." Somehow, the fact that this was said with a big smile didn't reassure Dennis at all. "Aisha here can't turn invisible."

"Let thank the Emperor for small favours," the male parahuman snarked. "And what led you to starting a process which results in several births at the same time? All the previous Titan-Moths were born alone."

"Well, the Genetors and everyone involved in the process have made excellent progress in this field, and we can build Domes far bigger now. There is a dedicated workforce, assiduous protectors, and I have way more money and resources to dedicate to it. And of course, I wanted to see if raising a generation of Moths together would make them far more social insects than the first generation."

"You want them more obedient?"

The winged parahuman snorted.

"I don't really need their obedience, when I can control them when and where I want. And if I had aspirations in that direction, I wouldn't have named one Aisha."

Yeah, she definitely had a point there.

"And their colours? They seem quite different than Lisa, though these three are females."

Anyone who could see these Titan-Moths at first was facing a spectacle of radiance, but with some major alterations compared to the oldest ones parading on regular and irregular events. Their great wings were for the most part gold, and the body they were attached to was red with large golden stripes.

Whatever the reason, it seemed the purpose had not been to convert Noctilith into Aethergold faster: when blocks of the onyx-coloured stone had been placed before the young insects, they had transformed it, but slowly, about the same pace Lisa had been known for in her early years – the diva-moth was doing it way more easily now.

"But enough of this. I didn't just invite you here Dennis to introduce you to Aisha, Isidra, and Camellia."

"This is about the future operations of the Rogue Traders in your service, isn't it?" Dennis didn't think he was a genius, but he had known of the rumours surrounding Magdalena Orpheus for many weeks now.

"It is. The *Arica Orpheus* is going to be the spearhead of a particularly dangerous expedition to the Galactic Core." Ha! Called it. "And Wolfgang will leave for the Terrathens Quest with his wives once his Expeditionary Force will be ready."

"His wives? But he is not- Oh."

Suddenly he was facing a Basileia mercilessly glaring at him. "Forget I said anything."

Dennis smirked.

"Not a chance."

"I am the Lady of Nyx. My word is law."

"I am sure rumours can spread faster than your *Enterprise* can fire its Nemesis-Hunter Cannon."

He was rewarded with a loud sigh.

"You're incorrigible."

"Don't worry. I won't warn him. Well, I won't warn him as long as it's suitably entertaining."

"I suppose I will have to be satisfied with that."

For what felt like an eternity, they watched as the three Titan-Moths played with each other on the ground. You could almost believe they were adorable parrots or something else incredibly colourful...until you remembered that the tiny dots of red were armoured humans just like him. Yes, these young moths were innocent and adorable...but they were also bloodily *gigantic*.

It also went without saying that the new 'Aisha' was already a troublemaker, whatever her mistress claimed. Dennis had been a prankster; he could recognise a natural-born one when he saw them.

"Do you intend to continue your association with the sons of Vulkan?" Taylor asked. "I know they've involved you into dangerous adventures."

"Not as dangerous as yours."

"I am a Lady General Militant of the Imperial Guard."

"Funny that...when one thinks about the treasures you win every time you go to war, one would almost believe you were a Rogue Trader."

"You're incorrigible," the Basileia repeated.

"And proud of it." Dennis added. "But sure, let's avoid jokes for a few seconds. The adventures with the Salamanders were dangerous, but very profitable for me. Besides, I like working with the sons of Nocturne. It's true that their homeworld is something you have to be three-quarters insane to live upon, but I like them."

"I like them too." The stars-filled eyes stay focused on the three Titan-Moths, but the smile was genuine. "Their joy of life is contagious."

"They hugged you again recently, did they?"

"They did. I gave them resources to play with for certain projects." The black-haired parahuman huffed. "But enough about me."

"Right..." he really wished he could add more jokes, but there was alas duty to take care of before the fun. "In our previous adventure, several old archives were recovered. A lot of it wasn't worth its weight in scrap-metal, but the sons of Vulkan managed to decipher some of the intact portions. Once they dug into the data-vaults of their Fortress-Monastery, the accuracy of the information was confirmed. It seems that before the Heresy, the Eighteenth Legion had built a series of weapon depots for supply emergencies. One of them was called the 'Wrought', for some reason. And now we know that it is somewhere in the Boron Cluster."

"And how big is this Cluster, to sate my curiosity?"

"Oh, about twice the size of your Nyx Sector."

There was no answer to that, but Dennis could tell from the Basileia's expression that that was a lot of empty space to try to find something in...assuming there still was anything to find.

"And if you don't find anything worth the travel?"

"Then we will go to the second depot."

"Let me guess, this one is called the 'Gear' or something like that?"

"Nice try, but no. It's called the 'Scale'..."

They chuckled...and obviously, this was the moment Aisha thought she had a chance to sneak upon him.

**Dolos Continent**

**Cygnus Spaceport**

**2.590.312M35**

**Captain** **Kaidan Xia**

"So Captain, what do you think of my surprises?"

The voice was light and filled with good humour. The Captain of the 2nd Company of the Storm Lords completely understood why.

"I think I am extremely impressed, my Lady." Kaidan Xia grinned. "And I understand why my father the Khan suggested I make a detour before returning to join my brothers on the frontlines."

To be sure, the sight of a Spaceport filled with war machines was nothing out of the ordinary for a Space Marine of his rank.

But having everything on this part of the Spaceport turn out to be *Space Marine* equipment, armour and vehicles? That you didn't see for every visit on a planet.

"Be sure to thank Chapter Master Hibou Khan. He started the orders which made it possible in the first place."

"I will not forget it for all the treasures of the steppe." The red-white-clad Astartes promised. "Jetbikes. You have Jetbikes. My brothers tried to negotiate for the production of some with a Mechanicus Forge World of Solar three centuries ago, and all we got were spare parts in the end."

And those had been old spare parts at that.

In comparison, there were fifty Shamshir-pattern Jetbikes neatly lined up for inspection here.

"It wasn't easy to build them to the high standards of the Adeptus Astartes. There were a lot of setbacks with the anti-grav technology." The golden-winged Angel smiled. "But I'm proud to say the challenges were overcome."

"And all sons of the Khan thank you for it, my Lady." He declared sincerely.

His eyes turned away from the Jetbikes with regret. For as much as he would like singing and reciting poetry about the recovery of the Khan's wings, there were many other prizes of interest to study. Some of them remained 'classical', but no less important. These were the Mark VII and Mark IX Power Armours, without which no Chapter could afford to go to war. Over thirty Rhinos and twenty Predators waited behind them.

All were a dull grey...for now.

"As is the custom began by the Brothers of the Red, my Artisans deliberately abstain from painting the brand-new vehicles and other pieces of Astartes equipment. We sell you the paint, of course, but the final touches are your responsibility."

"The sons of Sanguinius wanted to let their artistic talents speak, I assume."

"And many Honour Duels would have been fought if someone else dared give a name to the brand-new machines straight from the production lines." His host added before walking towards more machines. "I suppose you are by now familiar with the Einherjar Dragon Armours."

"I am." Kaidan answered honestly. He regretted there weren't that many of them, to be honest. Three wasn't a significant number. But since on the right side there were many Land Speeders, it would be very rude to complain.

"I wish I could have prepared more equipment, but the sons of Chogoris had a lot of equipment transferred to their ships before and during Operation Stalingrad. And we're trying to expand the production lines in high orbit as much as we can. The issues should be dealt with within two or three years."

This should have sounded pessimistic, but at the moment, their walk was leading them in front of two hundred Attack Bikes, and half had a Multi-Melta while the rest had a Heavy Bolter mounted on the sidecar.

"And if everything in your industrial production plans proceeds according to your subordinates' satisfaction, how many Jetbikes will that represent?"

"In a decade, we will reach five hundred Jetbikes per year." The Saviour of Dorn – and thus indirectly, the Khan – answered neutrally. "And since they not only gave us the tools to resume production, but also are our principal benefactors for this specific war equipment, it goes without saying that the Successors of the Fifth Legion will get utmost priority for them."

Kaidan Xia laughed, and he meant for the whole world to hear him.

"You can expect a lot of celebrations on Chogoris and across the galaxy to be organised in your name, my Lady."

"I am not going to say I am unhappy to hear it, Captain."

The presentation officially ended with the three enormous Thunderhawk Transports. Next to them in secured modular containers, the Hellstrike missiles for the wing hardpoints were waiting.

"I suppose that due to the...unexpected arrival of my command, no great decisions have been made on a certain matter?"

"We might make a diplomat of the Imperium out of you yet, Captain."

"What a horrible idea!" Kaidan Xia of the Storm Lords replied honestly, receiving a chuckle for it.

"Yes, best to avoid that." The expression of the Shield of Angels and Protector of Sanguinius gene-line shifted to one of deadly seriousness. "The compatibility of your gene-line with the different Nyxian worlds isn't a problem. In this very system, it is quite low, but even then you could have had millions of aspirants if the Brothers of the Red hadn't arrived first."

The Storm Lord Captain wasn't astonished at all. There was a reason why plenty of Space Marine Chapters recruited from Hive Worlds. Yes, there were billions which were unsuitable for passing the first basic tests, and billions which would fail at the gene-screening stage. So what? There were always billions more.

"The growing problem," Lady Weaver continued, "and the one in many ways I think I felt coming before I went to fight the Necrons, is that each Chapter takes his patrolling and other duties very seriously. It would be quite an insult for me, for you, and for the other Chapters involved, to change the area of responsibilities formerly given by oath. Add the reality I don't want to give recruitment rights on worlds which have done very little to deserve it."

"This must have indeed removed quite a few worlds."

"It removed entire sub-Sectors." The golden-winged Lady corrected bluntly. "Atlas for example is out of the question, since we have the Heracles Wardens and the Magma Spiders there. That is not to say there aren't openings. The Moros Sub-Sector is, for now, not claimed by any Space Marine Chapter. It wasn't on the frontier before the Sector increased in size, and the gene-compatibility for the first Space Marine Chapters wasn't sufficiently high. The Heracles Wardens sometimes launch small-scale training operations, like they do everywhere in the Sector, but that is all."

A first data-slate was handed to him. Kaidan Xia took it respectfully.

"Another alternative is what my Admirals call the 'Northern Suebi Trench'." A second data-slate followed the first. "Here however, it is on the frontier. Gene-compatibility is average, mostly. But the number of inhabitable worlds to settle is extremely reduced."

"You are aware, my Lady, that sometimes, we Space Marines settle on very sparsely populated Death Worlds, I presume?"

"I am aware, yes." The smile was polite, but it was one which no predator would have denounced. "Alas, I'm afraid I have spent too long with the sons of Vulkan. Given the results obtained so far, I am forced to insist that the Space Marines willing to be part of the Nyx Sector be a visible part of it. I am not going to force anyone to do the monthly celebrations the Magma Spiders have made popular at Bahamut, no other Chapter does that. But if the Storm Lords intend to base a Fortress-Monastery, they have to *care* about the people they protect. I don't want to be informed that at the first crisis the inhabitants call the Brothers of the Red for help because the Chapter in their part of the Sector is, for all intents and purposes, a complete mystery to them."

That was...a point that Kaidan Xia hadn't heard before. But it made sense.

It didn't stop him from raising both eyebrows when a third data-slate found its way into his hands.

"You really intend to give the noble Storm Lords a lot of reading, my Lady."

"The Khan, I believe, gave me an entire chronicle I am still re-reading in an attempt to assimilate all the subtleties of Chogorian poetry and strategy lessons." The retort was immediate. "Think of it as a deeply educational exchange..."

**Hive Athena**

**2.593.312M35**

**Chapter** **Master Jeremiah Isley**

"The Storm Lords Chapter is overaggressive, and its battle-brothers can be quite reckless in their campaigns against the greenskins."

If there was one word to properly describe the expression of the Basileia in the next few seconds, then it would be 'unimpressed'.

"But I suppose you want more details."

"That would be for the best, yes." Lady Taylor Hebert shook her head while throwing several objects to her beetles and her spiders present in the office. "The Storm Lords are the sons of the Khan, and they are going to war with Jetbikes and highly mobile units not exactly known for their ability to stop the firepower of an Ork WAAGH. Obviously, the best way to avoid heavy casualties is to not be there when the Orks hit you."

"I must concede the point, but I insist they are too reckless."

"Reckless in 'a few war games against my Swarm will be sufficient for them to be far more prudent', or reckless in 'I will have to use sterner measures to be heard?'"

"I don't believe they are so arrogant as to not learn the lessons needed after the former, my Lady. But I can't deny the possibility of the latter."

"Great," the insect-mistress commented with the tone of someone who hadn't liked at all what she heard. "But I suppose every Chapter has to re-learn some lessons from time to time. And the Storm Lords can teach us lessons too. When it comes to mobile warfare, over-aggressive tactics or not, it is clear the sons of the Khan are far superior to any Chapter currently present in the Nyx Sector. The Brothers of the Red are the best we have, and even they can't do the kind of manoeuvres the Chogorian-descended Chapters take for granted. The Companies of the Blood are oriented towards airborne shock assaults and finishing the job at close-quarters. The Storm Lords, if the little demonstrations they were happy to give us are any indication, will savage half of an armoured column before an officer manages to react with the correct measures."

"It is true the White Scars and their Successors are opponents you don't want to face when they have room to manoeuvre," the Chapter Master of the Heracles Warden acknowledged. "May I suggest the gift of a mobile shipyard for them if you intent to invite them into this Sector, my Lady?"

"You may, though I note you will not be the one which will have to conduct the negotiations and divert the resources for it."

That was indeed accurate and horrifyingly fair, Jeremiah admitted in his hearts.

"But let's speak of a more pleasant subject for your Chapter." The Basileia seized a large parchment of vellum – an oddity on her desk, when so much of it was data-slate and digital storage devices – and handed it to him.

"Lifting of the original restrictions for the Chapter?"

"Some will still remain," Weaver warned him in the next second, "but it has been decided you will be allowed to raise the levels of recruitment so that your numbers reach seven hundred once more. You are also authorised to send as many aspirants as you want for Techmarine and Apothecary formation."

"That's...incredibly generous from the Inquisition." Isley answered, and he meant it. "But I suppose, since you didn't mention it, that we are going to stay under their oversight."

"The Conclave's representative said they were considering placing a Junior Inquisitor as Overseer, and there were several Acolytes from different factions which will join you in the next years."

"Both to learn and to monitor our operations, I presume."

"Yes. What else? Ah yes, you will get a few ships. In this case, I think because even the Inquisitors were getting tired of having to use their own fleet or call the Iron Drakes for transport every week."

Now that was promising.

"And when will these ships arrive?" Isley asked, not bothering hiding his eagerness.

"As soon as the Nyxian shipyards will have commissioned and built them." The sarcastic answer arrived promptly. "And there's a lot of Chapters which want ships, these days."

Jeremiah sighed. He really should have expected that.

"I won't deny the other Chapters have their own needs, my Lady, but they already have some hulls to transport them across the stars. We currently have a grand number of zero."

"I'm aware," the next glance of the insect-mistress was directed at one of her spiders, and there was a long telepathic exchange between arachnid and Mistress of Spiders. "For the urgent needs, I can place two Frigates at your disposal by the end of the year. They won't be exactly tailored to your needs, but they have the advantage of being available. The crew will remain Nyxian, however, unless the Inquisition decides to replace it with its own agents."

The silent message, clearly, was 'I will watch you too, and don't get to try stupid ideas with them'.

"I will see what I can do for the Strike Cruisers, but everyone seems to have a desire for more of them these days. And Mars is overwhelmed by the demands too."

Fair was fair, Jeremiah had not thought he would get to see one in Wardens' colour this decade, so the disappointment was largely survivable.

"Frigates will be sufficient for now," Jeremiah assured the Lady of Nyx. "With the notable exception of Stalingrad, most of our operations these days are in the Samarkand Quadrant, and we rarely send more than one Squad to a single planet. The corollary is that we will need more than two, of course."

"I know. Any other problem you want to bring to my attention?"

Jeremiah nodded once, and placed a small hyper-sophisticated chip on the Basileia's desk.

"There is a lot of trouble brewing in the Atlantis Sector." The Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens stated in a voice of granite. "I really think this had gone beyond the level where my battle-brothers can solve it."

**Hagia Sanguinala – under construction**

**2.599.312M35**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me so promptly, your Eminence."

"I could hardly do anything less given the urgency conveyed by your message, your Celestial Highness." Cardinal Prescott Lumen curtsied with his usual serene smile. "Even if the motive which led you to request it was, shall we say, enigmatic?"

Taylor permitted herself a smile.

"An apt choice of words," the Basileia commented drily as they both faced the new fresco which had been completed several days ago. It was a magnificent artwork that looked like the Emperor Himself was going to lead the charge on the battlefield, followed by the entire Blood Angel Legion. "As an enigma, I would explain it like this: in your opinion, what do the protection of a mothballed fleet, the failed assault on a force of Templar Sororitas protecting loyal pilgrims, and sabotages in certain vital parts of a holy city have in common, your Eminence?"

Prescott Lumen was an intelligent man.

The first point was not included anywhere near his long list of duties, but he must have heard of the last two.

"Atlantis," the Cardinal of the Nyx Sector murmured.

"Atlantis," Taylor confirmed. "The agitation has not decreased since the last time we had a discussion about the problem. In fact, one can say it has gotten much worse."

"On that particular issue, you know my thoughts, your Celestial Highness." Lumen answered in all simplicity.

"Yes. Yes, I do. And I haven't changed my opinion on the subject."

Annexing the Atlantis Sector would be a colossal mistake. She could do it. Between the favours the Ministorum owed her and her own authority as a Living Saint, the insect-mistress didn't doubt that if it was brought to a vote on Ophelia VII, it would be close to unanimous to carry the day.

But if she did that, the annexations would never cease, and at some point, the 'Super-Sector' would become completely ungovernable, no matter how many Adjutant-Spiders were thrown at the problem.

"And frankly, based on the reports I received, I have begun to wonder if several problems do not stem from the...extremely religious approach Atlantis was governed by in the last millennia. Since I rule like a secular Governor, with some amendments due to my Living Saint status, I don't think I am the ideal candidate to resolve the problem."

"In that case, maybe it would be...diplomatic to establish significant diplomatic links with one of the most influential Pontifex-Governors, your Celestial Highness."

"Would you trust any of them with the power of a Sector Lord, your Eminence?"

Prescott grimaced. Clearly, he had hoped that particular question wouldn't be asked.

"I don't deny there is a problem. Yet I have come to the conclusion, much as you have, that a round of purges will solve essentially nothing."

"Yes." Taylor acknowledged bluntly. "The problem is not that the majority of the high-ranked clerics in charge are disloyal and incompetent, though a few especially bad apples among them are not going to like the blade which is going to sever their fingers. The big problem is that they are literally feuding with all their neighbours, and in the end, it will lead to a fratricidal war between a hundred factions."

The 'Nyxian approach' wouldn't work there. First, because unlike the Menelaus Dynasty, several Pontifex-Governors remained genuinely popular among the citizenry they governed. On dozens of planets, it wouldn't be dealing with a bunch of inbred idiots which had lost all credibility. It would be fighting a legitimate religious regime that for all the arrogance, nepotism, and financial corruption, remained well-liked and gave its citizens a tolerable living environment.

And that led directly to the second point: removal of one head or one of hundred wouldn't matter, because one or two hundred Pontifexes acting much like their predecessors had would take their place. Atlantis was not going to accept an outsider like she was for the Nyxians years ago. Most of the upper class was studying in the same seminaries and other religious schools. The Angel of Sacrifice, Living Saint and Chosen of the God-Emperor, could rule Nyx...with difficulties. Basileia Taylor Hebert certainly couldn't. Annexing the Suebi Sub-Sector had only worked because it was a disputed area of space, and that the planets had been relatively secular in their traditions.

"I understand." It was a bit funny that for all that she was a very tall woman now, Cardinal Prescott Lumen was still taller than her, though the difference of height had considerably decreased. "Then the rumours you were intending to place a Rogue Trader as the new Sector Lord of Atlantis?"

"Rumours devoid of any substance, I assure you," Taylor refuted truthfully. "I know it has happened in the past; I am not going to try to copy that kind of 'exploit'. Besides, I would need a very religious soul in the body of a Rogue Trader volunteering for it. I don't have one."

Taylor had met some owners of a Warrant of Trade which were very attached to the *Lectitio Divinitatus*. Some of them wore clothes you would be used to seeing on pilgrims. None of them had manifested any desire to rule.

"Perhaps one of two Rogue Traders I would trust with the heavy duty of a Planetary Governorship. A secular one, I mean. For Atlantis? It's out of the question. I want the agitation to decrease to manageable levels, your Eminence. I don't want to set fire to the promethium tanks."

"I am pleased to hear it, your Celestial Highness. Would you like to hear what is in my opinion one of the main problems?"

Taylor raised an eyebrow.

"By all means," she replied, curious.

"The Pontifexes and many of the powerbase who chose to elevate them to their current dignities are afraid, your Celestial Highness."

"Fear," the insect-mistress had a good idea of what the emotion truly meant. She wasn't a Space Marine, so she could feel it no matter how much she had changed. "Fear I will come and annex the Sector?"

"There is fear about that, but reading between the lines of my informants, I was very surprised the fears quickly diverged. There is fear you will topple the Pontifex-Governor and his main advisors for their failings, of course. But there is also fear you would impose upon them a different religious doctrine that would fundamentally transform the Atlantis Diocese until it was unrecognisable to its current system. There is fear the Militia would be completely abolished, and the Templar Sororitas would become the true military fist, answering only to you. There are many types of fear, and I'm afraid many high-ranked servants of the God-Emperor don't see clearly anymore because of it."

The Cardinal, unfortunately, had made a lot of very good points. Ironically, it was something which had long stopped to be a problem in the Nyx Sector. The current Planetary Governors understood well that as long as they did their duties and abandoned all ideas of treason, Taylor wasn't going to come after them, no matter how much she found certain systems of theirs culturally and politically abhorrent.

"I am still going to deal with the traitors and the other imbeciles who think bargaining with pirates and other traitors is a good idea, your Eminence." The Angel of Sacrifice announced after thinking about it for a few minutes. "I am willing to give them assurances there won't be more planets annexed into the Nyx Sector; that doesn't mean tolerating treacherous deeds."

"I can relay this message to the Pontifexes." Prescott Lumen assured her. "And for the rest of the matter?"

"Do you have an upstanding candidate for the next Cardinal-Lord of Atlantis?"

**Somewhere in the south of the Dolos Continent**

**2.607.312M35**

**Major-General** **Tanya Sevrev**

Tanya didn't know what was going be built here, but it was going to be *huge*.

Lisa had been moved from her Dome and told to purify the entire area for several hours, something that on Nyx was more a security formality than something you did because you were worried about a serious threat. That alone would have made it something worthy to be remembered for a few days, but you couldn't miss the big Moth-Dome under construction three kilometres away.

Then there was the minor fact that this land had been chosen in the first place. According to the three Nyxian Colonels who had been her liaisons this morning, this location had endured as one of the many toxic dumps of the Hive World before orders were given to restore the beauty of this planet. Today, you had to pinch yourself to believe it, because there was nothing but hills, grass, and giant cacti. The toxic wastes and the mangled pieces of junk too commonly associated with disastrous industrial accidents were gone as if they'd never existed.

And of course, it was hundreds of kilometres away from the main Hives of the Dolos Continent.

It was far away from anything of importance.

Since the Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard nearby seemed particularly pleased with that, Tanya had to conclude the isolation was kind of the point.

The final purpose completely eluded her, the newly promoted Major-General of the Imperial Guard admitted.

This was why she cleared her throat.

"Not that I am naturally curious, your Celestial Highness, but may we know why we are admiring the restoration of the Nyxian plains and hills?"

"We?" The smirk was definitely shining with amusement. "Do you have Planetary Governor or other royalty ambitions, Major-General Sevrev?"

"Not at all! I would just bribe your Adjutant-Spiders and let them do all the work in my name. That's what the 'we' stands for, by the way."

Her jest was rewarded by a chuckle.

"Beware Artemis, one of my subordinates wants to steal you."

"We will redouble our vigilance, Webmistress!"

Tanya had to say, this would have been intimidating before, given that the words came from a Battle-Tank-sized arachnid. And yes, the cogboys had confirmed that several of the Adjutants had stopped growing and reached their mature body.

Now that Artemis, along with a few others, were protected by massive armours, the intimidating effect had been born anew, even for veterans who had seen what the Adjutant-Spiders could do to Tyranids, Necrons, and Chaos Marines.

You might ask yourself: how could an Adjutant-Spider look more redoubtable?

The answer was simple: marker-lights fixed above the Spider's head. Thanks to those, any arachnid equipped with this system could request an artillery or airstrike on a particular enemy position. It had not yet been tested during the war games, but the rumours already mentioned it had a range of approximately ten kilometres, and the missiles and shells it would unleash could strike mere centimetres away from the target you wanted to be eliminated.

The magnetic grenades and the Bacta pouches were options that were also studied, by the way.

Add of course the armour, and Tanya Sevrev almost pitied the heretics and other enemies which were going to face the enemies of the Living Saint in the decades to come.

"Top secret?" She asked again.

"If it was within my power to tell you, I would, Tanya." Taylor Hebert gave her an apologetic smile. "But it isn't."

"Very secret, then. I suppose this is going to be another nasty surprise for certain enemies we mightily annoyed during Operation Stalingrad?"

"Oh, I think you can safely count on that."

Evidently, the Fay officer still tried to estimate what could be built with the clues that were revealed to her so far. But there were too many holes in the holo-pict. The presence of a Dome meant Titan-Moths, and it of course translated into something very important, but it could be an area where Titan-Moths would be bred in large numbers too.

"You were saying something about other topics of military nature, before the conversation was deflected to subjects of lesser importance?"

"Err...oh, yes! Your Celestial Highness, I would politely request you give your favourite regiment brand-new Power Armours. Just to ensure we can still kill thousands of heretics and other enemies in ever-increasing numbers, of course."

"Of course," The Basileia said drily before sighing. "The prototypes for the Guard are not ready yet, Tanya. All the procedures don't yet meet the Mechanicus standards-"

"With all the respect I have for you, this explanation is a crumbling wall if there ever was one." The Major-General nodded in direction of the armoured Adjutant-Spider. "Your Mechanicus suddenly found a way to approve the Arachnid Power Armours the moment the Tau declared they could build them themselves."

"This explanation ignores some important points," the golden wings, at this hour of the day, seemed to burn like a miniature sun. "We are going to build approximately ten armours per year for my Adjutants. There will some mass-production for parts which will be included in other fields, but the Power Armours by themselves are going to stay a very artisanal work for the foreseeable future. The same can't work for the Guard."

Tanya smiled, but this was her 'stubborn, respectful, but don't you dare serve me more nonsense'. They both knew that the Templar Sororitas were getting more Power Armours.

"There are going to be some limits to what I can do," Lady Weaver told her after several seconds of silence, the wings standing perfectly immobile. "Not what I *want* to do, what I *can* do. My authority is almost dictatorial, I will admit, but there are military and industrial output priorities that I have to respect."

"But the Ministorum and-"

"There are other things you don't have the clearance to know."

This forced Tanya Sevrev to be silent, because the rank of Major-General might not be the highest in the Imperial Guard's hierarchy, but it was still fairly high. To not be anywhere near the clearance...

"I am aware the Imperial Guard would love to have Power Armours. And yes, I am perfectly aware that bringing thousands of them to the battlefield will significantly decrease the fatalities compared to what will happen if they are protected by Carapace Armours, even if they're the improved Mark 3. And I promise I will do my utmost to field them in great numbers come the next campaign. But right now, they simply aren't ready. The best I can promise is when it will be time for your next practical manoeuvres next year, you will get to test the first creations...if they are ready. That's simply the best I can do. And for the record, you will have to earn that in sweat, mud, and sheer-bloody tenacity."

"Have we humble guardswomen of Fay ever disappointed you, your Celestial Highness?"

"Never," the starry eyes became softer for a moment. "And I'm sure you will continue to make me proud in the decades to come."

**Fafnir Forge-Temple**

**2.610.312M35**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

"You don't ask for much, do you, oh Great and Invincible Basileia?"

"I will buy you a few more technological gifts for Sanguinala, Dragon."

"I will hold you to that promise," the Tinker grumbled like an irate draconic being...which she was, in a way.

Taylor took the interlude as an opportunity to study Dragon's office. Compared to hers, it was not a frenetic centre of activity, but then her fellow parahuman did rather use it to enjoy a book or two and as a way to distance herself from the infernal ruckus reigning inside the Forge-Temple. And speaking of books, the library inside the room had grown nicely. Some of them were books the insect-mistress had offered her after return from Macragge, but not all. That said, it wasn't even Dragon's main library, and she had yet to find the time to visit that one since she had landed. Maybe she should...

"There is a limit to how much we can change before the whole system becomes an over-complicated mess."

"Yes. But I don't want to change everything, Dragon. I just wanted to ask: how are we standing when it comes to Power Armour production priorities? We took a bit too much for granted with the Mark X. The Salamanders are busy playing with prototypes we believed wouldn't be ready for decades."

She received a new draconic groan for that.

"Sometimes I wonder if you shouldn't be your own Minister of Industry, in addition to everything else."

"I have the power of **Administration** inside me, Dragon, but I am not going to pretend I could do half of the job you do on a daily basis, between soothing the ruffled feathers of different Tech-Priest Magi and ensuring that the Dominus branch doesn't blow itself up playing with explosives."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome." Taylor raised an eyebrow. "Are things so...interesting when I'm not present to force the Tech-Priests to behave?"

"Yes." The red-robed Minister replied with a disgruntled expression. "There were just production strangleholds, doctrinal quarrels, debates about the automating levels we're ready to accept in the manufactorums, and of course, last but not least, the dangers represented by giving teaching-implants to personnel not trained for them. This would have been interesting enough, but then we had the STC templates of your recent acquisition from Trazyn thrown into the mix. Now I have thousands of my subordinates proclaiming we need to build Ansibles yesterday, and I am not even beginning to rant on that subject, because we'd still be here next century otherwise."

Taylor let Dragon see a genuine grimace she wouldn't have shown other Ministers see in normal circumstances.

"I understand," the insect-mistress answered cautiously, "though the gains are worth it, surely? The knowledge alone it offered for the quantum cogitator technology has improved our position on that front by several decades, from what you told me."

"Between two and four, yes," satisfaction lit up in the draconic eyes, "and yes, it is a gift I appreciate to its correct value, which is considerable. But we still have to pay for the Ansible prototypes, and that wasn't a priority I had calculated for!"

Taylor winced. In theory, the Quantum Entanglement Communicators functioned relatively simply. There were two parts, one communicated with the other, no matter how far apart the two were. And they didn't necessarily have to be that big, honestly.

The huge problem, and something a lot of Tech-Priests hadn't yet realised, was that the Terran Ansibles – it was way simpler to call them that than recite the 'QEC' in every instance – were huge relics because they had to be. If you didn't build your Ansibles big, you weren't going to get the 'bandwidth' to relay a lot of messages. An Ansible the size of Dragon's office could technically be built in due time, assuming they solved the miniaturization problems in the next few decades. But they wouldn't get the ability to transmit more than a dozen messages per hour, which was ridiculously low when you considered the message traffic of an entire star system.

The first Ansibles built in the Nyx System would be very, very big. Triplex Phall had already proposed – with absolutely disinterested glee, of course – to integrate them into a new class of Starforts, so that they received the level of protection they deserved.

"At least we're going to have Mars on our side in that...that particularly vibrant and enthusiastic debate. The fleet is bound to depart any day now with the copy of the Ansible template and all the research which has been done with it so far."

"I still think you conceded defeat a bit too quickly on the subject."

"They allowed me to keep the original STC until the Triumph, Dragon."

And yes, it had been an enormous concession from Mars and the Fabricator-General. Several Magi in the not so distant past had been accused of heresy for daring to hint they may delay the application of the Treaty of Olympus.

Of course, her own status as 'Chosen of the Omnissiah' and the fact she had already sent copies, along with all the STC templates already recovered undoubtedly helped. But it was still a massive concession.

"Yes, yes they did." The Nyxian Minister grunted with ill-grace. "And they're going to have a lot to study. The teams on *Terra Cimmeria* managed to gain access to a second template a few hours ago."

"So that's why you look like someone had tried to pull off your tail, Dragon."

"I will ignore that supreme and ridiculous offense against my draconic greatness." The Tinker huffed.

Taylor chuckled before giving her a serious expression again.

"What does the STC template contain?"

"Knights."

Ah yes, no wonder Dragon had complained about the mess it was going to alter their current plans.

On the bright side, Mars and plenty of other Forge Worlds were going to be very, very pleased.

"By Knights, you mean the schematics and the instructions to build something like a Knight Errant?"

Her choice to speak of this particular pattern was deliberate: it had been the most common Knight they had sent onto the battlefields of Operation Stalingrad.

"I speak of half of a Knight STC library, Taylor. We got a great deal of the 'Questoris' STC library. We got the schematics for Errant, Crusader, Gallant, Paladin, Preceptor, and Warden."

"Oh," the Basileia reacted before narrowing her eyes in deep thought. Well, at least a certain Knight House in the Nyx Sector was going to be very, very happy. So would the Houses which had answered the call for Stalingrad and thus been vital in the process of the 'Trazyn negotiations', of course. "Would the modifications to the plans we agreed before include a Knight-dedicated Forge on Alamo, per chance?"

"I think," Dragon answered while rolling her eyes, "that we have to seriously consider the possibility, yes."

**Hive Athena**

**2.613.312M35**

**Minister** **of Foreign Affairs Zoe XIX Attica**

"If I'd known the private audience was going to include free hot chocolate, I would have arrived even faster, Lady Basileia, I swear."

Zoe received a giggle for the humorous effort.

Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, had really changed in the last years. And no, Zoe of House Attica wasn't just saying that because today, the Living Saint was wearing a long elegant *green* robe.

"Chocolate is all the rage among the nobility." The Lady of Nyx declared in a falsely dramatic voice. "I have yet to decide if it's going be a very good or a very bad thing for this Hive World."

"I bet on the 'very good thing', Lady Basileia." As the sweets and the mug of hot chocolate which had found their way into her hands during this private audience were evidence of.

"Of course you do. What happened to the girl who said 'I can't live without my afternoon tea?'"

"She is for the moment nowhere to be seen." The Princess-Minister replied innocently. "By a strange coincidence, the last unofficial gathering with the Regina involved discussions if the chocolate had to be combined with milk before more culinary delights were invented."

"Careful now," an imperious voice drawled, "I would be extremely pained to know my own Minister of Foreign Affairs has been an accomplice in culinary heresy."

"I have no doubt about that, your Celestial Highness."

There were some loud chuckles after that, only temporarily interrupted by the arrival of an Adjutant-Spider. For a moment, the starry eyes turned meditative and turned away, allowing Zoe to watch Lady Weaver attentively.

One thing was sure, the Basileia looked to be in far better health than when she had returned from her latest campaign. Zoe could only tip her hat in direction of Wei Cao and Marianne Gutenberg for that success.

Nyx needed its Planetary Governor smiling and enjoying life while able to choose which reforms were the most urgent, and the two lovers of the Basileia were able to keep her in a good mood so far.

"Good news?" She asked.

"I think so, yes." The Basileia nodded with a pleased expression. "The Senatorum Imperialis passed the motion to have a seat of 'Adeptus Astartes representative' with a large majority. And the Invaders Chapter was chosen for the honour."

"Excellent news indeed," the Minister of Foreign Affairs replied truthfully, "the Invaders more than earned the honour."

There were several parts of Operation Stalingrad which were still classified for the Nyxian population at large. Some, hopefully, would be released in due time, but Zoe was realistic enough to acknowledge some might never be, or if they were, it would be centuries after everyone save the Basileia was dead.

The role the Invaders had played in winning the Battle of Mandragora was not classified, however. Acting in her persona of both Lady General and Living Saint, Taylor Hebert had made sure everyone knew why so many Invaders had given their lives and how it had allowed the Imperial forces to win the Battle of Mandragora.

"They have. They really have." A sigh escaped the Basileia's lips. "Obviously, there are many other proposals that were imagined in the headquarters of Macragge which have met far less success. Some have been outright rejected, while others are still debated in various sub-committees. I don't have much hope some will have been voted on by the time my Triumph comes around. But that's fine. The rebuilding of the Invaders and the position of Adeptus Astartes' representative was the priority, and it is done."

"Mars' support was critical, I assume." Zoe commented.

"Mars, Ryza, and half a dozen Forge Worlds in the Martian Parliament," the black-haired Living Saint nodded, as if she wasn't responsible for this powerful coalition in the first place. "Ryza was one of the big keys, for they are going to replace the warships the Invaders lost. Mars...well, I won't explain why Mars is important, no?"

"No, I don't think that is going to be necessary." More hot chocolate was served, this time by very relieved Nyxian butlers. The Basileia alas forgot sometimes to request their services, assuring herself the service via large beetles instead. "And I'm afraid that in the Great Game of Terran Politics, your experience is far superior to mine."

"I have some advantages you lack," the insect-mistress commented with genuine humility. "And you have yours when it comes to Samarkand."

"I think that it sounds like the opening for one of those requests."

"And you are completely correct." Lady Weaver smiled. "I'm afraid I didn't exactly pay as much attention as someone of my exalted rank should, but there aren't any Knight Worlds in the Samarkand Sector, no?"

It was a complicated question, but one Zoe needed only a few seconds to answer with certainty.

"There are none I'm aware of." The Minister of Foreign Affairs shrugged. "It would be surprising if there were; there is much I don't know about the system of Zaibatsu currently in power, but I know that when the Great Crusade liberated the region, there was a massive purge of xenos and other horrors. Nowhere was it celebrated that valiant Knights managed to resist a tide of xenos invaders. Nowhere in the Samarkand historical holo-vids they use as cultural propaganda and spread across the Quadrant, at any rate. But it's possible there are others in the Sector. Do you want me to investigate?"

"Yes please. It's not urgent, but I would like to know if there are more Knight Houses we have as our neighbours besides House O'Hara."

"Your Celestial Highness has more *knightly* ambitions?"

"Not really, but one of the STC templates unlocked very recently is a Knight one. We may soon find ourselves with more Knight Walkers than pilot cadres to form from eager and hot-headed men and women. And while I know many Houses we fought with at Laphis and Macragge will help, the help in this case will absolutely not be free...and the brand-new machines won't contribute to the security of the Samarkand Quadrant."

"That is completely true," the Princess-Minister agreed. "However, the Samarkand Quadrant has never been considered a heart of chivalry for historical reasons. It may well be that these ties and alliances forged in blood will be necessary. The Questoris Houses are often eager to found cadet branches, especially when the gift of new Knights is involved."

And Lady Weaver knew it, given that it was partly one of those gifts which had permitted the creation of an independent House O'Hara in the Sector.

"Do you want me to send more requests of such nature to Samarkand?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. But the request won't be about Knights..."

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**Aeronautica Imperialis Facility Number Two**

**2.618.312M35**

**Duchess** **Freya Brasidas**

Freya had to say, there was some big brewing storm coming this morning.

The young Duchess didn't know much about politics, but when Her Celestial Highness Lady Weaver arrived with a serene expression, but all senior officers of the Aeronautica Imperialis scowled or made grim faces behind the Dawnbreaker Guard...well, you noticed.

Freya did seriously consider not asking. But if it was about Nyx slashing all the budget for new fighter squadrons or something like that she had to know.

The answer really surprised her.

"We are going to shut down the industrial production of bombers in the Nyx System." The Lady General Militant – in half-pay, technically, but who cared about that? – told her in a very serious tone. "Half of the production necessary for the Nyx Sector is going to be taken up by Alamo; the rest will go to Wuhan's orbital industries."

"That's radical." And she took great care to not put any emotion behind it.

"It is necessary." There was no scowl and no anger. If Freya didn't know better, she would have said it was a form of resignation. "Some priorities have changed in the last year, and I can't afford to fund a 'New Nyxian Bomber Program' anymore. Maybe if there was a design ready to be built in large numbers...but there is not. All we have for now is the Marauder."

"It is a multi-purpose Bomber." Freya had to accelerate her footstep cadence, because while the Basileia wasn't running, she was certainly walking towards the hangars at a forceful pace. And it was certainly a strange situation where she, a fighter ace, had to be a defender of Bomber Command.

"It's horrible at strategic bombing, it's extremely vulnerable and lacks accuracy for free range interdiction, and the dedicated ground attack has proved its hard limits when facing Necron and Tyranid opposition." Her superior rebutted without any hint of compromise at first. "I'm willing to recognise that since it is based on a STC template and all variants are based on the same hull, the logistics are made far easier. But in a peer-to-peer fight the enemy will shoot down tens of thousands of them, maybe hundreds of thousands. We need something better."

And they didn't have it. Nyx didn't have it, and it was...Freya wasn't sure she was going to say 'comforting', because it was not. But maybe 'realistic'? Given the size of a Marauder Bomber, without a STC discovery, you weren't going to create a new Bomber class in a few months.

"Sending Bomber production elsewhere doesn't mean we are going to abandon our efforts to dominate the void and the skies, of course. Space Marine gunships are going to stay an area where Nyx will shine. And the effort to build Interceptors which will be able to annihilate the enemy's aerial hunters will continue. Speaking of which?"

The doors of the closest hangar opened, revealing a superb fighter of the purest white.

It was only the fifth time Freya had seen it, but it was once again something very much like love she felt.

"Your Celestial Highness, Admirals, let me present you the *White Angel* prototype."

It was an evolved version of the Brunhilda she had piloted during Operation Stalingrad, and it was *gorgeous*. It was larger and more optimised for atmospheric combat fighting. It had a greater combat autonomy, and could fire way heavier missiles.

The Basileia snorted.

"The Tech-Priests took a glance at your fighter nickname and instantly changed it to please me, I assume?"

"Yes," Freya admitted in a little voice. By her side, Nils exploded in laughter, the traitor.

"Proof I was rightfully afraid when they began to name the Quantum template, the *Basileia*'s Ansibles," the Living Saint grumbled. "Anyway, it sounds like a splendid fighter. Could you explain the main changes compared to the Brunhilda, aside from the aerodynamics?"

"Certainly, your Celestial Highness."

Over twenty minutes of very technical explanations followed. The Basileia clearly had trouble with some terms, but she didn't seem to mind that some lengthy topics were introduced.

Finally, there was only to wait for the judgement of the Mistress of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

"This Interceptor looks promising. Please warn me when the Mechanicus will have finished its second phase of engineering."

"Yes, your Celestial Highness!"

"And please find another name for the prototype. You can give Minister Dragon's subordinates the recording if you want...there are already twenty White Angel plazas in Hive Ceres *alone*. I won't have another instance this year...even if this Interceptor fighter is beautiful."

Orders were orders, eh?

"Of course, your Celestial Highness, I will deal with it immediately."

**Hive Athena**

**2.620.312M35**

**Leet**

Leet used all his dexterity to make an impeccable last turn, and here came the finish line!

The drones of all his cogboy sidekicks were way too far behind this time! It was going to be his first win! It was going to be his greatest win! It was going to be mere seconds before he passed before this bee making strange signs-

Wait a minute. A bee? There hadn't been any bee-shaped signal posts-

Leet shouted in consternation as he raised his eyes from his console, and suddenly, all the drones involved the race were unable to continue their race, courtesy of being neutralised by giant bees.

"Well, well, well. I see everyone is having a lot of fun testing drones."

Oh, Emperor of Tinkers. This was bad.

Leet turned towards the cogboys...which were all trying to hide the joysticks and the ranking list of the different races under their red robes.

"This one counts as my victory!" He hissed.

"You didn't pass the finish line!" That little traitor, he was going to-

"Leet." Ah, hell. "Would you please explain to me what is this miniature racing circuit is doing here?"

"I can, yes."

Don't look at the star-eyes, Leet, don't look at the star-eyes!

"I am innocent." He began, and saw that behind the bees, Missy Byron had arrived just to hold her ribs and break into giggles.

"Clearly." A hundred beetles surged forwards, and seized from cogboys and non-cogboys the...the compromising evidence. "And seriously, not a single victory in nine races?"

"I had them on the ropes on this one! Their manipulations of the last two races when they invented new shortcuts just to see me in second place had at last failed!"

Missy began to howl in laughter even louder.

"And the strange combination of red and white colour?"

"It's their fault," he pointed his finger at the cogboys. "It was their idea!"

"It was not!"

"So it is a complete coincidence now that these second-generation drones all look like giant Pokeballs, is it?"

"We were going to catch them all?" He tried.

"HA! HA! HA!"

Damn it, the Minister was supposed to stand with...for Justice! She wasn't supposed to have fun at his predicament.

Alas, the explanation wasn't working. Time to change the approach!

"I can paint them red and gold the next time, if you want."

Did a loud huff sound like good news?

"Joysticks to control tactical drones?"

"It already worked when I tried to make a real-life version of Mario Kart." Leet began defensively. "And it works for drones."

"Yes, it does. There was to be a test this morning, so that resistance against potential scrap-code could be simulated for the first time. How many passed it?"

"Eight out of ten," he answered truthfully.

"Promising," Weaver said to his relief. "Leet?"

"Yes?"

"These Tech-Priests of yours are likely completely compromised, but you won't corrupt the rest of the Nyxian Mechanicus with your drone-mania."

"Yes! I mean, no, err...yes, I understand!"

"You will also stop shaping them like Pokeballs, unless it gives the drones some tactical advantage I honesty have failed to see so far. Otherwise I assure you that there will be some catching. But it will be my Adjutants who will do it."

"HA! HA! HA!"

Please note how a certain blonde-haired Shaker parahuman was of absolutely no help. Please.

"Otherwise good work, and your drone racing is going to be done outside of office hours."

"HA?" It was like a violent series of coughs and a series of strangling-sounds had been done at once. "Taylor! You're not serious!"

"I am completely serious, Missy. The drones work and don't explode. This is remarkable enough to be acknowledged, no?"

**Hive Athena**

**The Basileia's Spire**

**2.626.312M35**

**Basileia** **Taylor Hebert**

"I will admit, I did not expect to ever hear from your mouth that Leet was gifted at something." Wei paused a second. "Something beyond creating sizeable explosions, of course."

"Believe me, I was the first one to be surprised. No, to be honest, maybe not the first one, but among the first hundred people who had to acknowledge it."

That Leet was 'gifted' at having projects end in catastrophic explosions, as her wife had mentioned, was indeed hardly a surprise. It was not exactly known to everyone in the Nyx System, but Taylor was sure ninety-nine point nine percent of the Mechanicus was completely aware of that 'minor issue'.

"Let's see the positive side," Wei really had too much fun with it, it had to be said. "You're beginning to understand how his Parahuman Shard works. And you have the confirmation he's the most surprising Tinker of Nyx."

"My dear Regina," the Basileia of Nyx drawled ironically. "There are only two Tinkers on Nyx, and one is completely normal."

"Dragon offered you draconic mugs at the last Sanguinala we spent in this Palace, Taylor."

"It was just a minor joke."

"The emblem of the Nyxian Mechanicus has a dragon upon it now. Many Tech-Priests have taken to changing their metallic carapaces for ones which have fake scales."

Taylor sighed, acknowledging the defeat.

"Yes, yes I know she has a flair for...well, everything draconic." The insect-mistress raised an eyebrow. "What was the point you wanted to make?"

"I think 'normalcy' is extremely overrated on Nyx. You know, between your loyal arachnids visiting the markets on the morning, the explosions of Leet in the afternoon, and the Dragon Armours patrolling above the Fafnir Forge-Temple."

"You may very well be right." Now she thought about it, when had her life really been 'normal'? It certainly hadn't been when she arrived in this galaxy and survived the first months in the Imperial Guard. And before that...many memories had faded away, but she couldn't call Brockton Bay a symbol of normality. Unless you thought an Endbringer Fight was something that needed to happen every once in a while?

"Of course I'm right. Wasn't there something like that in our marriage vows?"

"I am going to have to answer there was." And she received a kiss on the cheek as a reward.

"What did you want to do with Leet in the future, anyway?"

The question was asked in a light tone, but Taylor could hear the curiosity of Wei beneath it.

"I was thinking about sending them to the Galactic Core again." The Lady of Nyx revealed. "You know, as passengers aboard Magdalena's flagship."

"That is...audacious." Wei smirked. "Aren't our 'Disastrous Duo' still being hunted for a long list of crimes going from offense against public order to public drunkenness and desecration of Administratum buildings?"

Taylor couldn't retain her self-control; she giggled.

"Yes, they are." The Basileia answered when she had regained enough composure to not chortle. "I paid a significant sum to make sure the so-called 'crimes' were forgotten. Something which, for a certain long-eared species, was paid in a lot of spirit stones we had obtained at Commorragh and elsewhere. Atharti was very pleased by the bargain. There is only one bounty active. Guess which one?"

"Vandire."

"Vandire," Taylor echoed. "You can say many things about the High Lord of the Adeptus Administratum, but he takes his grudges seriously. The reward for Borek and Leet's heads is big. You could very much buy yourself a Paradise Moon with that."

"Well, *officially* he's rescinded the one on *your* head, but we both know he would gleefully pay it if given the chance." Wei rolled her beautiful eyes. "Why don't you send Borek to the Core and keep Leet there?"

"Don't you dare suggest perfectly rational strategies," the two women chuckled. "I already proposed it to Borek, to be honest. But he invoked several important ancient Duardin customs I was aware of, and some additional ones I wasn't when I tried to be stubborn. The summary of our respectful debate can be summed-up like this: wherever one half of the 'Disastrous Duo' plunges into danger, the other will have to follow."

"Especially if it is Borek." Wei commented drily. "You can say a lot of negative things about Leet, like his tendency to be surrounded by explosions, but he only runs towards danger by accident. Borek charges in its direction because he loves a good fight."

"Exactly," the Angel of Sacrifice nodded. "And I dutifully noted that all the members of my Dawnbreaker Guard are of absolutely no help when this problematic subject is discussed. At best, they're laughing. At worst, they go to spar with Borek and share an 'ultra-beer' with him."

"My poor Taylor..." the giggle of her wife was absolutely not reassuring. At all. "I'm sure you are going to find a solution. You always do."

"Oh yes," the Destroyer of Commorragh declared with a confidence she really didn't feel on that particular subject, "but at the moment, I really have no idea what that solution is going to be."

**Nyx System**

**Battleship *Standard Template Construct***

**2.637.312M35**

**Archmagos** **Desmerius Lankovar**

"I hadn't realised how big the Tau built their Attack Craft."

"Some of my colleagues wanted to classify it as a Monitor." Desmerius remarked.

"Wanted?"

"They still want it," the Archmagos corrected, "but I've begun to ignore them entirely."

"Which is sometimes the best decision. How did the Tau classify it, by the way?"

"It depends how it is configured. The Manta can be used to attack Destroyers and Frigates in void battles, though their preferred target seemed to be the starfighters and star-bombers of the Imperium. And of course for planetary invasions, it is their version of an orbital drop vehicle and heavy fire support."

It was, overall, a beast of a xenos vessel. It weighed over three hundred and eighty tonnes without passengers, and its width of fifty-two metres explained in part why Desmerius had brought it to Nyx in separate parts. And it possessed two Railguns and six Ion Cannons to kill.

"And you believe it can serve the purpose we want."

"Yes. As you can see here, here, and here, the Manta possesses what, translated from the Tau language, we can call 'deflector shields'. Quite clearly, they can't be compared to the efficiency of an Escort Ship's Void Shields. But it is voluminous xenos machinery, and yet the Tau managed to integrate it inside the Manta hull. And if they managed it..."

"If they managed that, then we can replace the Deflectors with a small Aegis Psy-shield generator, yes." The focused star-eyes of Lady Weaver turned to stare at him. "I suppose you already have a role for them in mind."

"Between the Aegis and the Decoy Launchers, this modified Manta would be perfect to protect your Titan-Moths." Desmerius spoke. "Examining the practical facts, it is evident that the Word Bearers and other enemies you faced and vanquished had other problems to deal with when Lisa arrived on the battlefield. But if the Archenemy has the means to counterattack in the future, your giant companions will be a priority target on their elimination list. Converting a Tau Manta into a 'Moth Guardian' would severely decrease the risks of bringing one onto the battlefield."

The insect-mistress examined the different parts of the Manta, then spoke again.

"Coordination with the Titan-Moth will be key, since I doubt we can integrate an Aegis which will protect the equivalent of the Azkaellon Stadium in terms of volume. Do you believe there is enough space for several psykers and an Adjutant-Spider inside the Manta?"

Had Desmerius not been an Archmagos of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he would have winced.

"The psykers do not present a problem. The Tau routinely transport forty-eight of their warriors inside a Manta; even considering the rotation requirements due to exhaustion, I doubt we would need forty-eight aetheric-gifted men and women to power the shield when the Aegis of the Battlecruisers can function with far less. I admit I had not considered adding an Adjutant-Spider, however. Are they really necessary?"

"If I am in range, no." Lady Weaver's voice was at first reassuring, "but during Operation Stalingrad, I was not always in range. And in the hierarchy of the Swarm, Lisa has a very high opinion of herself. The other Moths are less prideful, to be sure. But even they don't tend to listen to orders which don't come from the Queen-Ants or the Adjutants. To transform Noctilith into Aethergold isn't a problem, they don't really need orders to do it as a reflex. But in the middle of a battle, where objectives often change, it could represent massive complications."

"I see." Desmerius studied the problem rapidly...and arrived at a semi-favourable conclusion. "I don't think a fully mature Adjutant-Spider like Artemis could be transported inside a Manta. But maybe a younger and smaller spider would work? I would have to make a few tests to be sure."

"A lot of tests."

"Chosen of the Omnissiah?" There were after all many witnesses, Lankovar had to throw out a few respectful words here and there...

"The idea of using the Manta as a Moth-Guardian system is excellent." Lady Weaver said in a deadly serious tone. "The fact it can be added to a carrier complement very quickly is invaluable for coordinated Manta-Moth operations. And if you could keep it a secret until the next major campaign, it could become a very nasty surprise for the Archenemy."

Ah. And here came the problems he had anticipated...but not answered to a degree which satisfied the simulations of the *Standard Template Construct*.

"I'm afraid that if it is secrecy you intend, Chosen of the Omnissiah, there is going to be a choice to make. Wismer studied the question with me, and we both independently concluded that the 'reverse-engineering', to use one of the favourite words of the Great Radical, is certainly possible using proven and existing Imperial technologies. But it is going to take a lot of time and resources, for the Marauder Bomber is not a void-capable starship, and the Starhawk is incredibly inferior to the Manta."

Desmerius was prudent; he didn't mention how he had heard that several Bomber programs of the Nyx Sector had ended in dead-ends and metaphorical crashes.

Since the Angel of the Emperor-Omnissiah muttered a few curses under her breath in the next second, this prudence was confirmed to be the best course of action.

"And the other choice, I suppose, is to let the Tau modify the Manta for the 'Moth-Guardian' variant themselves, I take it?"

"Yes, Chosen of the Omnissiah."

Desmerius had known Taylor Hebert for many, many years; he could see she didn't like it. Not necessarily because she didn't trust the Tau; after all, there were several arachnids and Imperial Guard regiments acting as overseers and quartermasters for the reconstruction of the blue-skinned xenos' planet as they spoke.

No, it had more to do with about how important her Titan-Moths were to her, and a Manta built in Tau shipyards was by virtue of its existence an unknown factor you ignored the limitations and the weaknesses of.

"Several young Adjutants will be sent to Tau for the tests." The decision came after fifty-six seconds of silence. "I grant you the authority to build several 'Moth-Guardian Mantas' in my name in the manufactorums of Tau. Given the importance of the work, I give your team five years to present a prototype working to my satisfaction. On the other hand, I also request some of your subordinates give me a basic industrial plan of what would be necessary to build our own Mantas somewhere else in the Nyx Sector. This will be a plan only known to Dragon, Archmagos Hediatrix, and myself."

"By your will, Chosen of the Omnissiah." The master of the *Standard Template Construct* answered. "Now if you want to proceed to the next hangar. We have prepared for you the first 'Lorelei Void-Drone', and I think you will be pleased by its performance..."

**Somewhere in the Nyx System**

**TFNS *Spirit of Eternity***

**2.655.312M35**

**Commodore** **Yang Wen-li**

To be honest, it was absolutely not what Yang had imagined.

When he had heard of a 'discussion lunch' from superior officers for the first time, it certainly didn't involve anyone of a higher rank than you agreeing to pay the bill for the cooks, food, drinks, and to organise it aboard the *Spirit of Eternity*!

Yet that was exactly what the angelic-looking woman next to him had done.

And the lunch was excellent.

Whatever your opinion of how the Imperium governed its planets, it seemed they had not lost everything in terms of culinary arts. Yang had stayed far away from the spicy food; the 'cod accra' had made him cough the moment he chewed the first one. The meat and vegetables were more 'conservative' to be sure, but they were incredibly good. As for the drinks, the Commodore had chosen to avoid wine. The sparkling water was good enough for the lunch. Yang didn't think he would ever sell the *Spirit of Eternity* while drunk, but better to have a clear head.

And honestly, the expressions of all his crew when he let the alcohol bottle get away without touching it was well worth abstaining for the time being.

"There have been rumours, lately," Yang began as the polite and extremely dedicated restaurant personnel in golden uniforms began to take away plates and everything, before promising the dessert would enchant their tongue. "Rumours your Ladyship recovered the Standard Template Construct of the Ansibles."

"I see the Tech-Priests have once again been unable to control their urge to speak in locations they aren't supposed to." The absolute ruler of Nyx replied drily. "And I suppose I can confirm it is not a rumour. I made a deal with Trazyn the Infinite, the most infamous Necron thief of the galaxy. I gave him a lot of valuable trinkets from my military operations and other sources I have at my disposal, and in return he released a lot of STC templates into my custody."

The Basileia finished her drink before continuing with a faint smile.

"I might have informed you sooner, if not for the fact the STC security protocols informed me the authority of a Federation Commodore was completely insufficient to access the data of the templates."

"*I always said you should have shown more dedication, Yang*." Admiral treacherously jumped into the conversation. "*A bit more dedication, and you would have climbed up to Vice-Admiral*!"

"I didn't enter the Navy because I wanted to command millions of men and sail the stars commanding an Armada of Dreadnaughts," Yang groaned.

Unfortunately, this also attracted the attention of their 'host'.

"Why did you enter the Federation Navy then, if it's not too curious on my part?"

Yang stared at the water of his glass morosely. Maybe wine would have helped, now that he considered the matter seriously...

"My father was...my father was a great father, but a poor businessman. Before he died, he made some investments he really shouldn't have, and as a result got into a lot of debt. Thankfully for me, the Federation had strict laws about not making a son pay for his father, but everything my father owned that could be confiscated was a few days before his death."

"That's...bad." Lady Weaver conceded. "But you are completely right that the debt legislation of the Federation can be commended to not make young children pay for the problems created by their parents."

"*I still say that if he had made some effort, he would have risen high*," Admiral announced petulantly to everyone inside her hull.

"We are not having this conversation again." Yang sighed before returning to what he wanted to say. "I am not going to pretend I had big problems or anything like that, Lady Weaver. I was still a regular student when my father died. Since I was born in the Heinnesen System, I could have easily stayed unemployed and spent my time reading the history books I loved."

"*But the Federation's core principles weren't made to tolerate such lazy behaviour*." Admiral, once again, had to inform everyone of some things that should have stayed under the carpet.

"It isn't laziness if...oh, forget it." There were some debates you were never going to win. "The Federation, contrary to what my loudmouth of an AI claims, was perfectly willing to tolerate my behaviour. But in return, it provided minimal social services and benefits. It was far better if your reason was to create a family and have children, but that wasn't my motivation."

"*Assuming you had one*," Yang sighed loudly as all his crew chuckled. Yes, he had asked for that one.

"By these 'minimal' standards, what would have been the equivalent in the Nyxian society of today?"

"Noble," Yang replied without hesitation. "Definitely noble. I wouldn't have been given one of the palaces some of your court takes for granted, residential areas were not that big, and it wouldn't have been practical anyway. But the access to hololithic devices, the entertainment parks, and everything we took for granted as free activities were there to be enjoyed."

"An example to prove it?"

"The recreation of long-extinct Earth species was something the big Gene-splicing companies were very eager to hand out for free, though they made modifications so that the animals couldn't be used for their venom or some other nefarious purpose." Yang smiled before reminding of the problem it caused. "Of course, since everyone was not completely satisfied with the fact the cat was too disobedient, more species were created, and we progressively lost sight of what the original species once were. I owned a big cat, but I know one of my friends had commissioned a singing serpent with pink feathers."

"Pink feathers?" At least the good old memory was so hilarious even several millennia later, it managed to make everyone chuckle.

"He was in love."

"Ah."

"Anyway, what we were able to do when staying unemployed paled in comparison to the activities you had access to once you had sworn an oath to the Federation Armed Forces and served your time in uniform. I thought when I joined I would be able to join the Historian Branch, but for some reason I've never understood, they kept throwing me into the classes of the Tactical course. And I couldn't have a drink without having someone trying to steal my bottles!"

The smiles were indulgent everywhere...of course they were, this time the bottles were offered by the Basileia and the Imperium!

"I would wish to hear more of the Terran Federation. These little pieces of information are tantalising enough to make one want to know a lot more."

"You have the files." Yang noted.

"Many are painstakingly written in formats that bore my Adjutants to death, and there is little holo-imagery to make them more interesting."

"*We would have had more if our first journey hadn't broken every plan we ever considered*." Admiral casually commented. "*What do you want to know*?"

"The capital, system of government, some good anecdotes about what citizens do in their everyday lives...well, I suppose the Federation Capital was Terra, but still-"

"*Actually, the true capital was Alpha Centauri*." Admiral interrupted the golden winged woman with a tone that could be described as her lecturing mode. "*Terra kept the High Star Court for the Judiciary System and all the cultural institutions, but the Executive and the Legislative were transferred to the Great Nexus some six hundred years before Yang was born*."

And naturally, the *Spirit of Eternity*'s Artificial Intelligence stopped there in her explanations.

"That was an evil cliffhanger, Admiral."

"*If Lady Weaver wants information, she has to exchange information we need, Yang. That was Navy Diplomacy 101 last time I checked*."

Many of Yang's subordinates face-palmed, and they had every reason to, in his humble opinion.

"What do you want to know?"

But force to admit, it worked.

**Hive Athena**

**2.671.312M35**

**Sergeant** **Gavreel Forcas**

It was Kratos' fault, of course.

As every member of the Dawnbreaker Guard knew, a bored Flesh Tearer was a very dangerous Flesh Tearer.

Lady Weaver had not let Kratos stand idle in the last weeks, of course. The scion of Cretacia had had to participate in dozens of manoeuvres and strategic simulations with various Guard and PDF formations.

But for a Flesh Tearer, this was sufficient to reach the threshold of 'boring' after several days of the same schedule.

And unfortunately, there was an Eldar in the vicinity. And said Eldar had likely also been close to what for her species approached the 'dangerously bored' level as well.

It had taken only a few insults and provocations for the inevitable to happen.

The formalities – bribing the Adjutant-Spider in charge of the training grounds with two pizzas – had been respected, and the modalities agreed upon.

It was to be a fight of fists, with zero psychic powers involved.

It had ended up a one-sided humiliation.

The good news, really, was that someone was having a lot of fun.

The problem for Kratos was that this someone was definitely not him.

"Ouch! That must have hurt." Gavreel commented as the Flesh Tearer Champion was once again thrown into the pink-white bags filled with foam which were everywhere in the training area.

"I have to admit, I'm beginning to feel a bit bad for him." Karael mused as Kratos' tormentor seized him by the leg and with incredible skill managed to somehow turn him into a spinning mass which once more crossed half the training area before being arrested by the 'pillows' supposed to prevent major injuries.

"Only a bit bad?"

"Well, he volunteered for it." The member of the Blood Swords Chapter pointed out, before grimacing as a single palm strike of the xenos managed to be as devastating as an artillery shell in its own right. "One thing is sure, someone else will have to assume his duties tomorrow. I suppose-"

"Ishtar, you can stop thinking about pizza."

All comments and shouts when it came to Kratos' performance suddenly ceased.

"Webmistress! I can explain!"

"Explain why pizza is your fatal weakness? Yes, by all means, my faithful Adjutant, please explain."

"Err..." the arachnid shivered, and then decided to go for the safe path. "I was wrong, Webmistress! I was tempted by the pizza! Please forgive me!"

"You are forgiven, Ishtar. And as a reward for your past good conduct, you will get one pizza for your dinner tonight." The magnanimity hid something, Gavreel thought. "And then you will abstain from it for an entire month as punishment."

"Yes, Webmistress! I hear and I obey!"

"Good. Riel?"

"My Lady?"

"Choose two of your brothers, and move Kratos to the Apothecarium. I will decide his punishment myself tomorrow."

"It will be done, my Lady. Renaldo, Morael, with me."

For several seconds, no words were spoken.

But when the sentence arrived, it wasn't good news for them at all.

"Don't think I have forgotten half of my Honour Guard stood by and watched this display of...I don't know what was it's supposed to be, actually."

"A demonstration of Aeldari martial arts, my Empress," the Eldar of course looked very pleased with herself. To his sorrow, Gavreel admitted she had reason to feel that way. Based on her breathing and the signs her face was betraying, she had beaten Kratos almost effortlessly. "I was told during my old training it was an excellent training experience."

Lady Weaver didn't seem to be very amused by the proclamation.

"It might be, but I don't think Space Marines will have a willingness to learn it. And in the unlikely case they did, the benefits for their duties would be very limited. Martial arts have stopped having any relevance on the battlefield a long time ago."

"That is indeed true...for them."

Suddenly, the red-haired Eldar was behind their Lady. Muscles tensed, and they were ready to act...but the xenos limited herself to speaking in a lower voice.

"But you are different. You can give the knowledge of the martial arts to your Swarm, and increase the potency of the fighting style by imbuing them with its powers."

"I have...there was nothing in Ynesth' memories that hinted at anything special about that."

"Many Muses trained and trained in their narrow area of specialty and forgot everything else," the Eldar female proclaimed, circling around Lady Weaver, but not like a predator, more like...more like a Blood Angel deciding whether the base resources for an artwork were going to be good enough for a masterpiece. "Your Empress form, please."

It was always strange to see it happen, and this time, the being who had defeated Kratos made it worse, for instantly both their clothes turned it into xenos bodysuits which were clearly made for martial arts...all the while showing a lot of flesh on the back, the legs, and the torso.

Yet the red-lipped Eldar watched their Lady like one of the prey birds the sons of the Khan owned.

"Your body and soul would resonate well with Dromlach, I think, my Empress."

"Dromlach? The Cosmic Serpent?"

Oh yes, there had been something discussed about that one week ago, something about old Baalite legends...

"The martial style was named after the Cosmic Serpent, yes." As always, the behaviour of the Eldar seemed to radiate smugness. "It was never popular like the Falcon Above the Rainbow and some other favourites of the Phoenix Court. It demanded too much dedication to speed, yet control. You had to be extremely aggressive, yet have your mind utterly in control of every single move. Some of the younglings of the Embassy told me that in several ways, the riders of Saim-Hann adapted some moves, but for their mounts."

"And you think I can learn this in a reasonable amount of time?"

"I think you can learn, my Empress."

"That is not an answer, Liandra of Caledor."

"Oh, but it is, my Empress."

In less time it took to say it, Gavreel thought he had seen the Eldar's body twist like a serpent.

A second later, their Lady was propelled into a large mountain of foam-filled bags, much like Kratos before her.

Only unlike Kratos, she was already back on her feet within a second, and then she sprinted to punch her opponent.

Except when the strike occurred, the red-haired monster had already twisted her body again, so much that half of it touched the ground in a move that would kill most humans if they dared attempt it at that speed.

And then the insect-mistress received another blow, this one with a single finger, one directed against her ribs.

The shout of surprised pain indicated the Eldar had known exactly where to strike.

The Basileia of Nyx was thrown into the protections of the training area once more.

"We should have brought pizzas the moment Kratos suggested his idea." Cabrero bemoaned with a wistful expression on his face.

"YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED TO BE TEMPTED BY THESE PIZZAS!"

Gavreel sighed.

"And hello to you, Pierre. Have you come to watch our Lady fight the former Blood Muse?"

"NO. I CAME TO GIVE HER MY REPORT. BUT IT LOOKS LIKE THAT WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW. OH. THAT MOVE SHOULD BE FORBIDDEN IN ALL OFFICIAL COMPETITIONS OF THE SANGUINALA GAMES IMMEDIATELY!"

**The Basileia's New Baths**

**Vicequeen** **Marianne Gutenberg**

It was not known to the public, but three years ago, there had been the beginning of a major relocation inside Athena's Spire. Some parts had been left untouched, like the Basileia's office and bedroom near the summit.

Others, like the Great Baths, had disappeared entirely from their floor to reappear many levels below.

It was something many Planetary Governors of inner Solar would have been aghast to learn of. As far as these august characters were concerned, the higher you were above the plebeians, the better.

Many Nyxians had viewed the problem in a far more pragmatic light, one including the water supply of the Spire, the means to renovate it, and several other aspects.

As a result, the Baths had migrated from Level Ten to Level Thirty. Naturally, there had been a momentary decrease in the quality of the decoration; with Stalingrad being fought across the stars, there was no one to investigate about the possibility of integrating new mosaics into the newly built 'Great Baths'.

Still, the decoration modifications were happening at a gradual pace. Many ungainly pipes were now hidden by statues specifically built to mask them. Mosaics and colourful sections of well-being centres had begun to appear. There were plans for a Jacuzzi and more.

And all of this was very necessary for a grinning Regina to take care of her wife.

"I think," Wei cheerfully declared, "that the moral of the story is not to challenge an Eldar martial artist to a fistfight."

There was a fierce amount of coughing.

"Please Wei, don't try to make me laugh! I am in pain *everywhere*."

"You certainly looked like you just fought a war and lost when your spiders carried you here," Marianne agreed cheekily. And yes, the 'looked' was completely intentional. It needed to be seen to be believed, but the bruises and all the other signs of injuries were already disappearing one by one with every minute. "What urged you to try that when you are skilled with a sword?"

"There were some good points made...and I wanted to vent some frustration."

"And did it work?" Marianne asked, very curious about the answer.

A loud groan was the thunderous response, and both she and the Regina laughed.

"Let's look on the bright side, we can send your spiders to fulfil the duties you have for tomorrow."

"I can't-"

"You can and you will." Marianne commanded. "You are going to rest, Taylor, at least for a few days. You've kicked the entire anthill into action, from your Ministers to the average Tech-Priest, now you can take several days of rest."

"I thought we were going to do that before the Sanguinala." The Vicequeen mused that at least, her lover had recovered enough to make coherent arguments.

"That was *before* we saw what quantity of work you considered normal on an average day." Seriously, Adjutant-Spiders or not, there were teams of a thousand men and women which did less work in a year than Taylor did in three days. "You are going to decrease your workload...or I will tell your Eldar martial artist to enforce the message."

"I approve."

The musical two words almost made the blonde noblewoman jump.

Of all sights to see, the one of the golden-skinned, red-haired xenos female entering the section of the Great Baths where they rested was certainly not one she'd expected.

"I see the Dawnbreaker Guard let you pass."

"I think they know better than to deny me now, my Empress." The answer was very, very smug. "And after today, they have acknowledged I don't intend to kill you."

The shock, by then, had faded enough for Marianne to realise the Eldar was gloriously and shamelessly *naked*. Okay, they all were, but still-

"Was there a reason why you decided to inject yourself into this private time of mine, Liandra?" Taylor asked in a very resigned tone.

"There were several," the golden-skinned Eldar suddenly ran at an unbelievable speed, before doing an impossibly acrobatic jump, and diving head first into the warm waters of the thirty-metres-long hot bath.

"The first, clearly, was to enjoy a nice hot bath instead of requesting the permission to use the artificial lake of the Embassy." Taylor drily commented.

"Clearly," the Eldar answered shamelessly. "You told me yourself I could come here."

"I seem to also remember having added 'if neither I, my wife, the Space Marines, or other citizens with Alpha-clearance are using them'."

Marianne giggled. Taylor sent her a disappointed glance.

"The Baths are big enough for one more body." Yes, if the Eldar as a people had at any point been aware of what shame was, the one in front of them seemed to have forgotten it completely. And since the xenos female displayed her body, the Vicequeen couldn't help but look at her. Obviously, she had seen many Eldar since they arrived this year, but none of them had a body so athletic and muscled. 'Liandra of Caldor' was two metres-tall, but the height was almost forgotten given that all of her body was muscle, yet remained sharp and elegant like a beautiful Power Sword.

"I suppose I will have to give new orders to my Adjutants," Taylor laconically replied. "And while I didn't have the time to say it at the end of this beat-down session, your Dromlach style *hurts*."

"And I didn't add so much a single spark of my gifts to turn it into the devastating weapon which made the Cosmic Serpent a figure of dreaded legend."

A loud groan was the answer, swiftly muffled as Wei 'took care' of her wife.

"I just wanted to know when your wives would join us."

This time, Marianne really believed there was a problem with her ears.

But Taylor's suddenly very cold expression convinced her that no, it wasn't a problem coming from her.

"If this is a joke, it is not funny Liandra. If Kratos had been an unaugmented human, his little sparring session with you would have resulted in his death."

"A point I'm well aware of, my Empress. That's why I accepted his challenge; with one of these giants, I can use some of my training and not get completely bored." The crimson eyes flashed dangerously, and with that, the predatory aura increased. "That was why my question was more of an indirect remark to ask when did you intend to make your wives immortal like you?"

"Immortality is a very arrogant thing to claim," Taylor countered, her face an emotionless mask. "The Emperor was widely considered to be immortal before the Horus Heresy. He's now in perpetual agony on the Golden Throne wishing for it to stop. Or should we speak of the Empire of a Billion Moons and their eternal immortality? All the elite of the Aeldari Empire could boast they were indeed immortal...until Slaanesh was born, and suddenly they weren't."

This, at least, made the red-haired Eldar laugh.

"The repartee is accurate, yes. Yes, let's not use the word immortal in your human language. 'Long-lived and invulnerable to diseases and frailties not inflicted by the Warp' sounds horrible to say, however."

"We know Taylor is going to be long-lived now," Marianne interjected. It was a topic which had come up often on several evenings, both in the Macragge System and in the months after it.

Even if she had not absorbed the power of an Ancient Eldar, her status as Living Saint would have made sure of it. There were reports of some reappearing after a millennium of absence, and looking to not have aged a single day. Of course, Living Saints rarely lived peaceful and long lives; thus why everyone would hesitate to add 'immortal' to their list of qualities...

"With Ynesth's gifts and power flowing in her essence, long-lived is an understatement, as your human race says. Before needing to shed this body, my Empress will likely live twenty thousand of your years, assuming of course no one manages to damage her corporeal shell."

Twenty. Thousand.

Taylor had said to them it would be 'long', but since she had no idea of how the strange 'cycle-system' of the Eldar could be compared to the Imperial Calendar...

But...no.

Twenty thousand years.

This was easily five times the amount of time the Imperium had been around until now, and the Imperium wasn't young anymore.

"I'm telling it to you because even for the Aeldari, enduring the cycles when you are alone, it is incredibly long and painful." For once, the Eldar didn't sound smug at all. "The Queen of Blades...she never admitted it, but that's why she's taking Apprentice after Apprentice, no matter how much some disappoint her." You could hear the unsaid 'like me' resonate loudly in the Great Baths. "Seeing everyone around you die and staying alone is a terrible curse many Aeldari warriors were familiar with. I don't advise walking that path."

"I have thought about it," the Basileia declared with her star-eyes looking very troubled. "But I am the Angel of Sacrifice, Liandra. Sacrifice will be required."

"And you likely won't be able to use the gift for more than a few people around you, Legion of Sacrifice or not, I know." The smugness began to return. "But don't go on the path chosen by the Queen of Blades. It is incredibly frightening to be alone, and most of those who survive it end completely mad when they truly realise what they've lost."

On that point, the former 'Blood Muse' likely didn't exaggerate. Everyone knew about Trazyn, of course. The Necron thief had turned his 'collection-gathering' into an unhealthy obsession. And several Necrons Taylor had spoken with had developed...eccentric behaviour, shall we say?

"I'm going to have to think a lot about it in the next days." Taylor answered, meaning every word of it. "Though don't think I don't realise you have other motives for this."

"Of course," and like a button had been pushed, the Eldar female was back on 'maximal smugness mode'. "After all, if you change your wives, then it will be one fewer obstacle in the way for me to be invited into your bed, my Empress."

This time, the growl of Taylor wasn't in the least faked.

"GET. OUT."

"Make. Me. My Empress."

It took twelve Adjutant-Spiders, an ungodly amount of beetles, plus some very large nets to capture the smug Eldar.

And they all knew the smug xenos had accomplished her goals nonetheless.

**Invictus Citadel**

**2.674.312M35**

**General** **Paul Dundee**

As could be expected, by the time Paul reached the Strategium with his subordinates, the Adjutant-Spider had been busy proving why she had been chosen to play the role of ruling authority in the Arena of Blades.

"We only want the best of the best for this operation! And you are the best of the best, aren't you?"

"WE ARE!"

Paul was honestly curious how long the giant arachnid would have been able to continue to 'motivate' her audience that way, but alas, his duties had priority over his need to amuse himself.

That was why he faked a loud cough, and eight eyes immediately turned towards him.

"General Dundee!" for all her enthusiasm, there was nothing wrong about the salute of the Adjutant-Spider. "I am Adjutant-Colonel Bellona...but you already knew that. Where is General Death? I was told he would arrive with you."

"General Schwarz has unfortunately been delayed," the Indigan officer replied, not showing on his face how amusing he found that the subordinates of Lady Weaver had taken to calling the man 'General Death' no matter the circumstances. Of course, many spiders had watched him fight in the inferno of Ravenna. "He contacted me; the delay will be of at least fifty minutes. As per the importance of this meeting, General Schwarz commanded you were not to wait for him."

"Ah..." eight eyes blared with golden light for a second, before the spider shook her huge head in a very human behaviour. "If General Death wishes it, then we can begin! The best of the best are gathered today to be briefed on Operation Hell Garden!"

As could be expected, the theatrical proclamation made sure the whispers spread incredibly fast everywhere in the Strategium. There were hundreds of men and women here, and the overwhelming majority of them had fought on at least one battlefield of Operation Stalingrad. Some of the most decorated – like a dozen of fellow Indigan guardsmen – had been present on more than two, and one of them had been the epic battle against the Tyranids.

It went without saying that for veterans like these, the codename of the operation was like waving a red flag in front of an agitated grox.

"Now you might wonder why the Webmistress chose such a great name!" The Adjutant-Spider really had a gift to capture her audience's undivided attention. "The 'why' is very simple! By the will of the Webmistress, we are going to invade Catachan!"

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Temporis Cruor System – formerly known in Imperial cartography as the Lathes**

**Caedes**

**The Millennium of Ashes**

**Valkia, the** **Red Angel**

The Red Angel waited for the Lander to be back in the skies before giving the command for the Archaeologists to stop their strange machine.

Immediately the air around her shivered, and Valkia's appearance was once again revealed to all: the red-skinned, black-winged Conquering Queen she had become.

"**I will never cease to be amazed by the greed of some Rogue Traders**," Valkia commented, smiling.

"There is a limit to how much of the Blood God's influence the Archaeologists can hide," Kossolax warned. "Of the three planets of Temporis Cruor, Caedes is the one your vassals left mostly untouched for now. If the Rogue Trader comes back and sees Daemon Engines, the things he's content to ignore for now are going to be too much for him."

"**It doesn't matter**." Valkia bared her teeth. "**The Rogue Trader may think the exceptional performance of his crew allowed him to evade the rifts and storms which would have swallowed others, but he's wrong. Khorne allowed him to pass the Haematia Tempest protecting the Calyx Hell Stars. That is the only reason why he and his crew are still alive. He may think this will leave no mark upon his soul. He is very much wrong. The blessings of Haematia are not so easily blocked**."

It wouldn't be very long before the first signs of mutation appeared. If not on the Rogue Trader's skin, then it would be his crew who would show the sign of Khorne's favour. Their behaviour would change in turn. They would make their hierarchy one of might. They would thirst to prove their worth.

"As long as he is not intercepted by the dogs of the False Emperor, his services are worth the heavy cost in resources, I suppose." Kossolax commented. "Do you want to examine the machines, my Queen?"

"**I did not come to Temporis Cruor just to shake the hand of a greedy imbecile, Kossolax. Lead the way**."

It did not take long to reach the location where the Heavy Drop Vehicles had unloaded their precious cargo. Without surprise, Valkia noted that Exegete Hundsturm had already arrived. The soul of the Archaeologists' leader smelled of oil and sulphur as always, but he had also replaced the usual demonic black masks used by his subordinates with a red-black one which looked, admittedly, somewhat intimidating.

"I feed oddly nostalgic looking at these carcasses." Kossolax told her.

"**I'm more surprised you remember what 'nostalgic' means**." Valkia drawled.

It went without saying that their arrival did not go unnoticed, and most Archaeologists had the good sense to momentarily ignore the tanks and other vehicles that had been unloaded on Caedes, and adopt a properly subservient behaviour.

"**The spoils of Isstvan V the Twelfth Legion abandoned in an Astartes Depot, as was promised, Exegete Hundsturm**."

"And I thank you for it, Chosen of the Skull Lord." The Archaeologist replied promptly. "There are a lot of Iron Hands' tanks."

"**Unlike the two other Legions, the Tenth Legion's heart and head barely had the time to realise it had been trapped before dying. They left essentially all their arsenal in our hands far from the Drop Site itself. However, as you can clearly see, they didn't die without fighting with all they had**."

There was a lot which could be said about the Space Marines still clinging to the oaths they swore to the Anathema. But Valkia promised herself to never forget that those Astartes would fight to their very last breath to defend the Throne of Terra. It could never be forgotten, otherwise the skulls of thousands of her own Legionnaires would decorate the throne of Khorne.

"**But enough of the history lesson. Do you understand why I negotiated with that greedy imbecile for these rusted carcasses**?"

"Yes, Chosen of the Skull Lord. You need tanks."

"**Yes.**" Valkia could have lied, of course. But what was the point doing it to one of her eight great warlords? Hundsturm knew as well as she did how badly the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star had hurt them. "**I need a tank for my new generation of Legionnaires. I also need tanks for the Blood Pact and other mortals. One way or another, I have great need for an armoured spear, and I want it to be built in vast numbers**."

"I thought about it..." the Archaeologist leader momentarily turned his head to observe the metallic scrap she had given him. "And I believe I have a solution which might suit the Legionnaires. There are many heavily damaged and destroyed Cerberus Heavy Tank Destroyers here."

"Over a dozen of them," Kossolax grunted.

"Yes. We Archaeologists have lost the secrets of the mighty Neutron Laser Projector, as well as the Cerberus' reactor. But all not bloody technology has been buried yet. We can offer substitutes which will be pleasing to the Skull Lord."

"**Many complained about the Cerberus' maintenance requirements and its dangers when Blood began to alter the machine-spirits inside**."

"I assure you, Chosen of the Skull Lord, we have known about this problem and will deal with it."

"**I will hold you to this oath. When I return to Temporis Cruor, I will expect to be presented with a few samples of this new tank based on a Cerberus hull**."

What would happen if Hundsturm did not provide, the Red Angel didn't waste time saying out loud. If he failed, she would find a more competent Archaeologist.

"**Now that the tanks have been appropriately discussed, let's deal with the rest. I want a new Dive Bomber for my Legion**."

"A Dive Bomber? Mighty Chosen, Hell Forge-Mistress Sota-Nul proved during Lorgar's Folly that Super-Heavy Bombers like the Harbingers could be built!"

And for all the tactical surprise that was theirs at the beginning," Kossolax replied with her blessing, "Sota-Nul lost hundreds of them in a short amount of time. The moment the enemy realized what they were, the starships began to hunt them. These things are way too big, and cost too many resources. The starfighters can hunt them in packs, and the anti-air batteries on the ground inevitably focus on them."

"If you say so," the white-cloaked, red-black-masked figure was clearly unhappy with her reasoning, but he would have to tolerate it. As Kossolax had said, the Harbinger was far too expensive in resources. Worse, at the moment Valkia had no carrier that could really take advantage of a Super-Heavy Bomber that big. "And the third priority is the Power Armours, I assume?"

"**It is**." There were many rumours about Weaver's Space Marines dancing around the realms of the Gods, but one of whose veracity the Red Angel was absolutely sure was that the 'Stalingrad Space Marines' had received a newly improved pattern of Astartes Power Armour. "**The new recruits need their Legionnaire Armours. They have to be clad in Armours worthy of a Blood Crusade**."

"And the second shipment brought by the Rogue Trader should bring you a significant number of crippled Mark IV, V, and VI, Exegete Hundsturm." Kossolax informed him. "You have already taken a few Mark VII, I believe."

"I have. Will that be all your primary orders, Chosen of the Skull Lord?"

"**They are**." Valkia bared her teeth. "**Make these worlds proper Hell Forges, worthy of the blessings my master gave you**."

**Invictus Citadel**

**2.675.312M35**

**General** **Jack 'Death' Schwarz**

"I suppose it is kind of useless to tell you this isn't going to be easy."

Jack snorted loudly.

"If it was easy, it wouldn't be Catachan."

It would be a lie to say he had not thought about his homeworld recently. Jack did.

But completely truthfully, the General of the Imperial Guard had never thought of Catachan as the orb that was shown on the hololith. Seen from the recorders of a spaceship, it looked almost beautiful and calm. It was a world of lush green colours, to which some blue had been added here and there.

Maybe this was this view which had convinced desperate refugees of the Dark Age to settle upon Catachan. And no, no one knew for sure, because most of the records had been lost millennia ago. By the time the Imperium had rediscovered them, the Jungle Fighters weren't even sure how many colonist ships had landed, and how many humans had breathed the air of the Death World, ignorant of the hellish trials to come. There must have been billions, because for the first hours, it was an absolute rule that ninety-nine percent of non-Catachan lifeforms didn't survive.

For Catachan was no Paradise World. It was a growing beast which fed on everything.

"I like the name," Jack added. "And I think the resources the Mechanicus is ready to place under our authority are going to be acceptable for the first phase."

"A first phase Adjutant-Colonel Bellona nicknamed 'Negotiation and Acquisition'," the Indigan General commented drily.

"As long as the Adjutant-Spiders are indeed able to convince most of the insects of Catachan upon the landing zones to side with us, I really don't care which nicknames they give to the sub-operations." He replied. "They are our main assets, and they represent the big difference between victory and an inglorious suicide."

Many officers around them, some of them his own men, nodded grimly.

Even with Adjutant-Spiders to forge an insect army like Lady Weaver did on every battlefield, the fact was every member of the force to land on Catachan would either be in sealed Power Armour or a Skitarii with the rare flesh bits sealed in some metal container.

"Obviously, the first phase is critically important." Jack Schwarz continued. "Lady Weaver needs genetic diversity for her Catachan ants if the Imperium wants a sustained increase of Bacta production in the long-term."

"Does it mean certain rumours about moon teleportations in the Neptunia System are true, General?"

The man who had received the Star of Terra ignored this question with the disdain it deserved.

"Even if the Lady Basileia did not require these vital insects," Paul Dundee continued, his eyes on the various holo-representations of the most lethal Catachan fauna species, "Her Celestial Highness made it loud and clear that the previous status quo can't be tolerated anymore. The Tyranids are coming, Ladies and Gentlemen. We don't know *when* they will invade; but we know they *will* attack, whether in one day or in one millennia. And on the day these freaking monsters will launch their grand galactic campaign to eat us all, you can bet all your medals they won't restrain themselves."

"Indeed," Jack looked at his best men around the hololith, and none flinched. "As General Dundee correctly stated, we don't know the when. But since there is a Tyranid life-organism hiding somewhere, there is no question the homeworld of the Jungle Fighters is on the list of this Devourer. We must be sure the resources of Catachan will fight on the side of the Emperor in this war."

And if they could understand in the process just how the Tyranids had managed to transform Fenris and Catachan into the Death Worlds they were, so much for the better.

"The plan is for the muster of the space and ground assets to be completed by the Sanguinala. Yes, Jackson?"

"Not that we really need them, General," the Catachan Captain asked, "but will there be Space Marines invited to the party?"

"Lady Weaver's Spiders should be in the process of informing them of Hell Garden's existence as we speak." Schwarz replied honestly. "I guess we will see soon if they want to run away from the Great Barking Toads soon enough."

**Author's note**: The Legacy Arc has officially begun! The next chapter should be titled *Legacy 13-2 Legacy of Change*, though there is a high possibility it could change in the meantime.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

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Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption