**Black Crusade 10.1**

**The Last Dawn**

*I know you are here, Corax.*

*The shadows hide you, but I feel your hatred and my sons told me of the raven feathers you left behind after your massacres.*

*This is pathetic, brother.*

*Are you unable to remember the black sands of Isstvan V?*

*You nearly very well killed me there, I won’t deny it, but by the fault of Curze, you failed.*

*It’s ironic, isn’t it? The Primarch who believed destiny was impossible to change saved my life and altered the outcome of the war. One death must be paid with one death; if Ferrus and I had died in the battle of the Drop Site Massacre, the bargain I passed with the Gods would have been sealed and the doom of our arrogant sire assured. Instead the Night Haunter intervened, all the while pretending he was the weapon the Emperor wanted him to be. Truly Konrad lived his life and went to his death blind, ignorant, and stupid.*

*But for all his failures, the Lord of the Night acted.*

*And you have failed.*

*You failed again when you followed me and my Legion into the Eye. By breaking your chains and releasing your true self, you finally were able to gain skills which would allow you to stand as my equal. One might almost say it was your second chance.*

*But your attempt on my life was not successful, and now my moment of vulnerability has passed.*

*Twice the Pantheon was surprised by your resourcefulness. I hope you enjoyed this luck; you won’t get a third chance.*

*Now we are going to play by my rules. The most devoted and powerful of my sons have completed the ritual of Holy Sacrament. Eight Dark Apostles and eight thousand eight hundred eighty-eight Astartes used their daemonancy skills and lore to create a ritual barrier which will prevent you from stepping into my presence. And you can’t move against my Apostles before removing the Legionnaires, who have all been dispersed and rendered unremarkable to your senses of raven.*

*You can’t kill an entire Legion, Corax. You are more powerful than you were several millennia ago, but your power is not that great and there are rules you must respect, as long as you continue to stay loyal to this decaying corpse on the Golden Throne of Terra.*

*You could have made a formidable Champion of the Pantheon, but you refuse their blessings and patronage, even as your Legion is mutilated and pathetically weak.*

*Like the rest of our deluded brothers, you fail to understand that Mankind’s survival demands we bow to the will of the Gods.*

*Only by embracing the Primordial Truth can we thrive and reconquer an Imperium where all believers will be able to rule under Their eyes.*

*You won’t stop me.*

*I am going to break the armies and fleets assembled at Cadia, burn this empire of lies and falsehoods, and take the Noctilith of the Ymga Monolith to transform it into Octarite.*

*The rats of Anarchy are going to pay their war effort with their souls and lives. Weaver will be cast down, deprived of her light, and tortured by the Pantheon for the rest of eternity. Your legacy and the one of our eight blind brothers will be destroyed and forgotten, dust under our armoured boots.*

*I am going to open the Cicatrix Maledictum and extinguish the light. I am going to free Excess from Khorne’s Prison, kill this pathetic horned shard, and usher the era of Undivided Chaos.*

*I am Lorgar, the Word Bearer. So I have promised, so it shall be.*

*Let the Galaxy Burn.*

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“*It is certainly a guarantee today at the end of your first year, the first question on your exam crystal-slate will be when the Noctilith Wars began. If you don’t want to receive a zero and fail your historical class – and likely be expelled for evidently having learned nothing of importance during twelve standard months – you will answer 188.310M35, as Operation Stalingrad and the 5th Black Crusade began, separated by an entire galaxy. Should the question of ‘how’ be asked, it is of course going to take longer for you to reply, I’m afraid. And no, ‘because all heretics hate Her Celestial Highness’ isn’t going to amuse your teachers. If you stay coherent and logical, your first point must be to write of the martyrdom of the* Will of Eternity *at Commorragh, and how the creation of Aethergold strengthened the foundations of the Imperium in these difficult times. Don’t forget the decade preceding Operation Stalingrad however; the actions of the Imperial Guard and many other successes can’t be understood without relying on proper logistical preparation and war training...*” Attributed to Star Marshal Alexander Macharius, 669M41.

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**13th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KOR PHAERON**

'**THE DARK CARDINAL'**

**‘THE BLACK CARDINAL’**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITORIS MAJORIS**

**AUGMENTED TRANSHUMAN**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THIS ABOMINATION IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS COWARDLY IN THE EXTREME AND HAS BEEN NOTED TO FLEE AS SOON AS EVENTS TURN AGAINST HIM**

**REWARD: 1 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'PURIFIER OF CALTH' AWARDED, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, NUMEROUS LAND HOLDINGS IN THE REALM OF ULTRAMAR, 5 DEFENCE STATIONS, ETC...**

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“*Great undertakings demand faith, determination, and sacrifice. Never forget that*.” These words were attributed to the Primarch Lorgar of the Word Bearers, Great Crusade-era.

“*Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt*.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

**The Eye of Terror**

**High Orbit over Sicarus**

**Abyss-class Super-Battleship *Trisagion***

Thought for the day: Know your destination before you set out.

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Paristur was speaking with Kor Phaeron about the latest failures to obtain more Octarite for blessed purposes when the rats decided to strike.

His pacts only gave him one second of warning before the daemonic communication devices allowing them to communicate with the major command centres over Sicarus began to scream at once.

Once the first series of shrieking and shouting was over, what replaced them was perhaps worse.

“The Basilica is overrun! Masters! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS NOW!”

“They have gotten inside! They have gotten inside! Repel them by the Pantheon!”

“How did the rats manage to breach these gates? ARRGH!”

“This station has been claimed by the mighty-mighty servants of Malal! Praise Anarchy brute-things!”

Kor Phaeron uttered one word and the device which had relayed these heretical words was immediately destroyed in a blast of sorcery.

Unfortunately, more and more voices resonated, all giving tales of disaster and defeat.

“They have taken the Blood Dome! They have taken the redoubt! By the truth of the Great Architect! This is an infestation!”

“We do not have enough ammunition to repel them! I need more cannons, or failing that, orbital lances fired on the Bloodied Plains!”

“My slaves are dying of a bubonic plague! Presence of the plague-rats confirmed!”

“The bells are tolling and my mortal troops are unable to stand its maddening effects! Request a Host deployment immediately!”

Past the initial moment of stupefaction, the Word Bearers rushed to their sections and began to coordinate the efforts of the armies on the ground to eradicate this onslaught of heresy and rats.

But as the lieutenants of Kor Phaeron updated the hololithic-daemonic maps, Paristur could only grimace.

The situation was absolutely awful.

“Angra Mainyu is going to be underwhelmed in short order if we don’t land one of the Great Hosts on Sicarus.” This admission brought him little joy, but the first massive summonings had only brought a few minutes for the –too rare – Word Bearers and the millions of mortals ordered to protect the sacred temples.

“Yes. Of course, Angra believed *Erebus* had dealt with the rodent problem.”

The name was uttered with undisguised hatred, but Paristur didn’t comment upon it. It was very justified in this case.

The Keeper of the Faith of the Seventeenth Legion snorted after speaking.

“If this is total victory is like, I don’t want to see what his next ‘exploits’ will be.”

“It is obvious Erebus screwed up,” Paristur didn’t add ‘again’, but he was sure Kor Phaeron heard it nonetheless. “The rats weren’t vanquished; they merely waited for our vigilance to falter and our forces to be redeployed for the Black Crusade before striking.”

The reports of routs and utter destruction visited upon Nurglite churches arrived mere seconds later, informing the two members of the Dark Council that the rodents had somehow built thousands of tunnelling machines, some as imposing and destructive as conventional Ordinatuses.

“I’m ready to bet the great ‘Hand of Destiny’ didn’t even bother sending his lackeys deep into the under-temples the moment he had crushed the vermin on the surface.”

“I’m not going to bet against that,” Paristur bitterly replied. Ekodas had told them over and over again how difficult it was to hunt the self-proclaimed ‘Skaven’ and their leadership in the subterranean galleries, and somehow, Erebus had successfully demolished their military strength in a single campaign?

No, it was exactly as he had feared: the furry heretics had multiplied until the tunnels were unable to hide their monstrous numbers, built hundreds of thousands of new weapons, invented new devices an Ork would find too dangerous to use, and unleashed everything when the Sicarus garrison was too weak to hold their vermin tide.

“We need to land our troops and stabilise the situation.”

Kor Phaeron’s face showed how enthusiastic the idea greeted in his mind, but he didn’t disagree. Between losing Sicarus entirely and delaying for a campaign the beginning of the Black Crusade, the choice wasn’t difficult. The latter was a mere delay. The former would be the first step before they lost the entire system, for the heretical rodents would not miss the occasion to attack shipyards and their bases in the asteroid belts.

“Very well, I will go ahead and-“

“**You will do nothing of the sort, my son**.”

The Dark Apostle began to bow as he heard the first voice. As the order was completely uttered, the Empyrean screamed as an enormous fleet materialised one hundred thousand kilometres on the starboard side of the *Trisagion*.

If they hadn’t been preparing already a worthy armada for their offensive against the Cadian Gate and beyond, Paristur would have felt awe at the sheer military might represented here. The feeling nonetheless blossomed into his heart, but for a different reason.

At the heart of this fleet, standing side by side, were two juggernauts of the void, starships bigger than the infamous Gloriana hulls.

One bore no similarities with any warship built on the orders of the Seventeenth Legion. It was a gigantic pyramid shining in blessed blue sorcery. The name identifier *Tizca’s Revenge* was not really necessary; Paristur like all other Apostles could recognise the style of Prospero and no one but Magnus the Red would ever have the will and the skill to create something like that.

The second flagship, on the other hand, was a modified Abyss-class Super-Battleship. But where the Trisagion was instantly recognisable with its trident-shaped mass, this colossal temple to the Primordial Truth had been restructured to look like a Gloriana, albeit one with a gigantic prow cannon. Paristur didn’t need much deep thinking to know it was likely the gift of Kelbor-Hal to their father.

The name flashed in black and red, in daemonic and technological transmissions, and the Legion roared in approval.

The *Word Bearer*.

Their surroundings disappeared into the darkness, and under the blessed acclamations of the Neverborn, Paristur appeared into a room where he had never been before, accompanied by Kor Phaeron and seven other Dark Apostles of high rank.

Their father was already there, of course. Magnus the Red, Cyclops and favourite of Tzeentch, arrived nine heartbeats later in a pillar of blue-gold lightning.

They weren’t alone, as an eight-pointed pentacle in brass and fire daemonic runes was carved by invisible hands under their feet. Against the walls and over their heads, Champions of the Seventeenth Legion blessed by the Gods with Daemonhood were waiting fangs bared and elongate carmine wings. These were the Gal Vorbak of the first generation, there couldn’t be any doubt about it, drawn back from the domains of the Gods to serve again. Given how Erebus was whispering wards of protection and the glares they threw him, the rumours of how many had be betrayed by the Vile One were most likely exact.

For once, Paristur ignored it. There were more important things at hand.

“Father. Allow me to deploy my Host in support of Mainyu and I will restore our rule to Sicarus.”

“**I have no doubt you will my son...for a time**.”

“Father?”

“**I** **underestimated how hurtful and corrupting the rats could be to my plans**,” the illuminated Primarch admitted. “**But I have since thread on many paths and tried to gaze at many futures. There is no permanent victory against this plague of tails and furs. There won’t be any as long as the fourth throne is empty. You might pile up the corpses of these heretics on mountains and drown the world in their unholy blood, they will somehow find a way to come back. It is in their nature to grasp what is not theirs to take**.”

“**In other words, what my esteemed brother is trying to say**,” Magnus said in a semi-polite, semi-ironic tone, “**is that you can likely hold Sicarus and stalemate the expansion efforts of your enemies imbued by Anarchy for a millennium or two...as long as you abandon the idea of starting the war against the Imperium**.”

The darkness vacillated, before everything vanished, and Paristur and the other Dark Apostles found themselves floating in high orbit above the homeworld they had settled after Horus’ death.

“**Nsvrrbthn! Bwons’ntos! Nsttsrm’on’mtoeneuaanht’hqn**!”

No Word Bearer had ever heard these words uttered aloud, but even without knowing their meaning, Paristur understood what they represented as the presence of the Three Gods turned towards them.

A large section of the Eye flashed a crimson red, and in the distance there was a tall, dark figure on a throne of skulls. Blood rains began to fall upon the planets, and the Bloodthirsters on the plains of carnage raised their axes and assembled.

A tear sundered reality before spitting out several Silver Towers of the Thousand Sons and multicoloured lightning. Hordes of Screamers and Flamers erupted and began to spread secrets and lies from the nine hundred and ninety-nine canticles of Change. The tear grew and grew, before it became an ever-mutating avian form carrying a tall sceptre.

Previously untouched, the third part of Sicarus celestial possessions gave away to an ocean of blessed rot and decay, a garden of diseases where the Grandfather lit His cauldron and prepared new concoctions to test on the planets where His touch would be gladly welcomed.

“**You know I am your servant**,” his Primarch began. “**You know what I aim to do**.”

The Chaos Marine felt the divine pressure rose to dangerous levels, and Paristur felt the runes on his armour beginning to disintegrate and the blessings decaying, twisting, or bleeding. He didn’t twitch or make a single gesture. The smallest offence, the smallest gesture, would undoubtedly lead to an eternity as a Chaos Spawn.

There was silence. And then the laughter of Tzeentch echoed, followed by Khorne’s rumbling and a song of soul-gardening from Nurgle.

“**You have our attention, Lorgar the Urizen. Speak**.”

The weight of Three Gods fell upon their sire, and despite knowing the sheer power of their father, Paristur felt awe as Lorgar didn’t even flinch while Erebus and several others were already trembling with exhaustion.

“**This Anarchy began with Sacrifice**.” The Minister of Chaos Absolute said. “**I will return the favour with Sacrifice. Let me erase the defeat of Commorragh. The blood, the souls, and the hope of the Anathema will be delivered on your altars. Places of worship of false idols will be yours to rule over. The Cicatrix will allow you to invade the Imperium and create your own realms in the very fabric or reality**.”

“**And in exchange**?”

“**Excess must be freed after the Black Crusade. There must be Undivided Chaos once more**.”

The laughter of the Gods was heard.

Ultimately, it was Nurgle who spoke back.

“**You have your pact, Lorgar the Urizen. Offer your Sacrifice**.”

Their Primarch raised his fists over his head.

And Sicarus began to burn.

**Sicarus/Skavenblight**

**Cathedral of the Maleficent Song**

**High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable**

“One small step for me-me, one giant leap for Malal!” Scrachit shouted while the former slave-things raised the flag of Clan Verminus in his great-large mighty glory. “I rename this place...err...Cathedral of the Barbbuster Anarchy! Praise Malal!”

“Respectfully Arch-Warlord,” one his impolite minions had the temerity to not appreciate-like his genius and to fail to applause-cheer like the others. “Wouldn’t it be better-greater if we renamed this church-location the Cathedral of Verminus Anarchy?”

“I thought we would call it the Cathedral of Skyre Anarchy!” an engineer shouted before shutting his mouth in a hurry-hurry, as bayonets were pointed against his throat. “No! Verminus Anarchy, my mistake!”

“But ‘Cathedral of the Mighty Verminus Horde’ sounds far-far better, Mighty Warlord!”

“Enough!” Scrachit Barbbuster decided to stop this mutiny before things went even more out of control with his plans. “This is my-my great decision, and don’t forget-contest it! I am the voice of the Council of Eleven, yes-yes! And it is my-my leadership which has seen-led us to great-superb triumph! Praise Malal!”

“Your flanking attack was ill-timed and the....Malal save me!”

The treacherous underling-thing had come-scurried to close to the ogre-thing when trying to plan a dagger in his back, yes-yes! The High-Warlord heard his screams of agony and ignored them-them.

“Now that the formalities-entertainment is done-done, we must press on,” the supreme leader of Clan Verminus spoke and all basked in his-his magnificence. “I must-must have picts of my glorious self standing upon corpses of brute-things, and vid-vid of myself directing the fire of the Warp Grinders.”

Not that-that he was going to mount upon one-one when they were firing, no-no! Scrachit had watched-watched and more had been lost-destroyed with their own warpstone reactors than from enemy fire-fire!

“Another incredible invention of Clan Skyre!” an engineer of said clan exclaimed. “Praise Malal!”

“Yes, yes Praise Malal! Today-today Anarchy conquers all on Skavenblight, tomorrow the galaxy! Death to the False Gods, Glory to the Skaven Race!”

In truth-truth, the slaves and daemon-things had not been that-that difficult to beat-defeat this-this time, oh no! The plan of playing dead-dead for a few cycles of reproduction had led-gained excellent results! Truly he was a master of strategy and war!

“Before I begin my great-great propaganda campaign to overthrow the Council and declare myself Anarchy Emperor of Skavenblight, where are we-we with the Spaceports! Faster we take them-them, easier it will be to send young tails-tails in orbit!”

“Resistance is heavy-heavy, oh mighty High Arch-Warlord!” A Stormclaw assured him, while a Horror-Lord of Clan Moulder threw the remains of a brute-thing into red armour into a vat of green jelly-things. “But the walls have been breached-broken! Our victory-triumph is inevitable!”

“Excellent-excellent!” The Unstoppable Skaven caressed his whiskers before adjusting his splendid-pretty red uniform. “We are going to-“

Red, green, and blue lightning struck the spire of the cathedrals they had just-just conquered.

Scrachit Barbbuster felt his jaw-jaw dropping. This wasn’t-wasn’t possible! Clan Treecherik had assured him-him that the wards of the brute-things would hold for a few thousands heartbeats after their great-great victory!

The spires were going to-

The Warlord looked at the spires and he grew even more-more perplexed. The spires weren’t falling. What was this saying of the man-things? Ah yes! It was a bluff-bluff!

“False alert-alert, my proud-proud soldiers!” The Verminus Council member laughed. “The brute-things have lost-lost! Now they are trying to launch-fire fireworks in the hope-hope we will scurry-scurry! But we won’t! We are the heralds-champions of Anarchy! Praise Malal!”

Fire poured from the heavens, a three-coloured fire of red, blue, and green. It missed him largely-greatly, but plenty of his Stormclaws were hit by it-it.

More lightning followed, and a great-great storm rose from the other cathedrals, but what caused Scrachit to widen-widen his eyes was while plenty of his Verminus assault forces were dead, as many were frozen, trapped in some sorcery-trap!

“SKAVENS!” He screeched, the familiar musk of fear soaking his senses. “SCURRY BACK TO THE ARMY WARRENS! THE BRUTE-THINGS ARE ATTACKING US-US WITH A RITUAL! DO NOT-NOT STAY THERE!”

There was rage-rage. There was sorcery-sorcery. There was rot-rot everywhere. Time...time was slowing-slowing. Why? Why? He had done-done everything for the glory of Anarchy and Malal!

“MALAL!” The High Arch-Warlord begged. “MOST ANARCHIC LORD! SAVE YOUR GREATEST SERVANT!”

“MALAL!”

“MALAL! MALAL SAVE US!”

A new blast of blue clouded everything, and a couple of heartbeat later, Scrachit Barbbuster felt nothing at all.

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**85th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**ALIVE ONLY – UNLESS YOU FIGURES HOW TO END HIM PERMANENTLY**

**LUCIUS**

**‘THE ETERNAL TRAITOR’**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**ABOMINATION**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF BETA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS ACCEPTABLE TO NEUTRALISE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT FEEL SATISFACTION AND PRAY THE GOD-EMPEROR FOR PROTECTION**

**DO NOT OFFER HIM A CHANCE TO DUEL**

**REWARD: 26 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PARADISE WORLD, 1 STARFORT, OVATION OF THE IMPERIUM, ETC...**

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**87th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**MOTHAC**

'**APOSTLE OF TORMENT'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-BETA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT ALLOW LOYAL MEN AND WOMEN TO BE CAPTURED**

**THE HERETIC LOVES TO TARGET IN PRIORITY ASTROPATHS AND NAVIGATORS**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 25 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 HIVE WORLD, 10 PALACES OFFERED BY THE NAVIS NOBILITE, ASTROPATH SUPPORT OF THE ADEPTUS ASTRA TELEPATHICA, PROTECTION OFFERED BY OVER A HUNDRED SECURITY COMPANIES, ETC...**

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**Outer Sicarus System**

**Battle-Barge *Perfect Legion***

**Lord Commander Lucius the Eternal**

If he had to give a honest opinion about the Word Bearers before the Fall of Commorragh – which he would never had done, he wasn’t that stupid – Lucius would have said the sons of Lorgar were very funny Astartes-monks, with all their religious things and insistence to convert their slaves to ‘Undivided Chaos’.

Oh, the Lord Commander of the Emperor’s Children had no doubt the Gods enjoyed the souls of the slaves which were sacrificed onto the altars, and if they didn’t, their Neverborn allies certainly enjoyed the free meal.

But the moment you gained enough survival experience into the Eye, you knew the Gods didn’t truly care about the liturgy and the words. They cared about actions. They wanted blood, carnage, sorcery, obscene depravity, lethal plagues, virulent poxes, and mountains of living corpses. In one word, they wanted war.

This was one of the many, many reasons plenty of Captains like himself had largely seen the Word Bearers as religious simpletons parodying the Ecclesiarchy holding sway over the ignorant masses of the False Imperium outside the eye.

Before today, Lucius acknowledged, he hadn’t realised how *frightening* that truly was.

“The Shipyards of the Truth are dismantled as we speak.”

“We have numerous impacts on the Illumination docks, Lord Commander.”

“Mechanicum forces are slaying the slaves by the hundreds of thousands! Tell them to stop!”

Lucius licked the blood on his blade, and found little comfort or satisfaction with the act. Much like every time he had done it since his patron had abandoned them.

“Damn you, Weaver.” The infamous traitor of Isstvan III hissed.

And sure enough, he utterly loathed the woman who had created this unpredictable changes sweeping across the galaxy.

But right now, it wasn’t Weaver he truly wanted to blame. Not when madness and folly appeared to be ruling the day.

The Sicarus System was in the process of being thoroughly sacked. If there was one other word which described the situation, Lucius didn’t know what it was.

Thousands of years of industrial-daemonic investments were going up in explosions or were dragged in chains towards the hulls of the Word Bearer’s fleet supply train. Asteroids older than the Long War imploded or were thrown into the maw of Sota-Nul’s harvesters. Shipyards were mangled or disintegrated. Overseers who had been the wardens of the facilities were thrown onto the altars where they had led countless slaves.

Lucius had seen thousands of worlds die as he was present during and after the Great Crusade. Yet there was something...visceral and horrifying occurring here.

What they had done to Sicarus itself was bad enough. The world was still there, but it was immobile...silent...frozen...out of reach, and made so by the will of the Gods. Lorgar had done what even other Daemon Primarchs would balk at: he had offered his chief powerbase in sacrifice to his patrons, abandoned his last forces on the planet, and unleashed what could be best described as a sorcerous stasis on an unimaginable scale. And it would remain that way until the Black Crusade ended, one way or another.

“Lord Commander, Dark Apostle Mothac demands to speak to you.”

Lucius gritted his sharp teeth, and impaled a daemonic servitor with the Laer Blade. ‘Demands’. Before Commorragh, no one save the Naga and Slaanesh demanded anything of him, and the Goddess had been more content to watch the spectacle. Now? Everyone and their cyber-mastiff was treating him with contempt and like he was a minor warlord under their armoured boots. Rallying six capital ships – including this old Battle-Barge – and close to six hundred Astartes, few of them of the Old Legion, was ignored. The only strength that made his enemies pause were the Knights of House Devine they had managed to save on the former worlds of their Empire.

“Open up the communication.”

The device which activated was redder than pink and more Bloodletter’s head than blessed by decadence, but it did the job as the familiar shape of a Dark Apostle in elaborate spiked armour appeared. The smell of blood and sorcery permeated the air.

“Lord Commander Lucius.” The Apostle of Torment began bluntly. “You will accelerate your preparations, or I will find another ‘Lord Commander’ to lead your warband.”

“My slaves and cultists are expediting the preparations as fast as possible,” the fallen Emperor’s Children Space Marine snarled. “But you are asking for the impossible!”

“No, the impossible happens because your forces were busy violating, raping, and doing whatever they usually practise in their orgies despite being ordered to do real work!” The son of Lorgar hotly retorted. “I will be as clear as possible, ‘Eternal’. The forces in your zone are to leave their bases within the next thousand heartbeats. If you refuse my order, I will cut your legs and impale your living body on the prow of your flagship to motivate the others and your serpentine master. Am I clear?”

“You are insane. What point there is-”

“This is a Black Crusade, Lucius!” The Word Bearer shouted. “It demands conviction, devotion, and sacrifice! Did you really think the Gods were going not to demand a price for the abyssal catastrophe engineered by Slaanesh’s defeat? Did you really think answering the challenge of the False Emperor would be all dungeon torture and sadistic orgies?”

A maelstrom of psychic energy was born on the edge of the system, and Lucius realised with horror it was the damned light of the Astronomican unleashed against endless waves of darkness, the Gods striking back against their sworn enemy.

“There is power in symbols, and in old times, conquerors burned their own sea-faring ships behind them to leave no choice to their warriors,” Mothac continued in a somewhat calmer tone. “We can’t do that of course, but symbolically, it is the same thing. Sicarus and everything we build are made barren, the threat of the rats negated at the price of our own garrisons and last assets.”

More asteroids exploded as darkness grew and more ships deployed around his warband.

“Even I know this is a double-edged sword.”

If the Black Crusade won, the threat represented by Anarchy would be completely suppressed, possibly forever. But if they lost...

“Alea jacta est.” Mothac answered in High Gothic. “By the will of Blessed Lorgar, we will win, or perish in the undertaking. Now move your forces into position, or I will begin this Black Crusade by destroying your warband! Oh, and our lateness has earned you a seat among the 8th Great Host of Erebus! Don’t thank me, Lucius!”

For a few seconds, Lucius truly understood why the False Emperor had tried to proscribe religion...there was no ‘logical’ discussion to be had with fanatics like this one. But under the guns of eight Battleships, there was only one answer he could give.

“Compliance. The *Perfect Legion* and its escorts are taking position.”

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*Among the many iconic weapons whose renown was made by Operation Stalingrad, the Astartes Power Armour Mark IX bearing the name of said operation has always received its fair share of popularity. Millennia later, it is a rare holo-vid film on the events having marked the galaxy which will not show Space Marines parading and fighting with the Nyx-created protection.*

*And yet, despite the – justified – acclamations it received for the exploits it allowed the Adeptus Astartes to write in golden letters against terrible opponents, the Mark IX ‘Stalingrad’ is one of those weapons whose life expectancy didn’t last much beyond the formal end of the war, except maybe in the classified operations of the Deathwatch (which remain still inaccessible despite the countless pleas of the Historian Corps). In overall numbers, less than sixty thousand of these power armours were ever produced, the worlds of Nyx, Mars, and Ryza accounting for ninety-nine percent of this model.*

*The question one has to ask is, why this – relative – failure?*

*The first reason, one acknowledged in an open session of the Martian Parliament in 320M35, was that the Mark IX was by its rushed development naturally imperfect. The Adeptus Mechanicus was incredibly conscious of the lethal threat represented by Necron warriors, and considered – rightfully – that an imperfect armour surpassing the existing power armours was better than the kind of casualties a Mark VII-equipped Astartes force would take trying to dislodge a necron stronghold.*

*Priorities changed as a result, and the ‘optimal recommendations’ were decreased dramatically. The goal was not to solve the flaws remarked upon the Mark VII save the most vital. It was to build a machine which would give a chance to the Space Marines to wreck untold devastation upon xenos and other enemies. The ion shield equipping the armours was therefore reduced both in energy resistance and protection area, giving it the output to endure the fire of thirty-plus Necron infantry weapons before failing for five minutes. An armoured collar was added over the helmet’s respirator, addressing the vulnerability of the joints. The lower chest armour received two new additional layers of protections in lighter ceramite alloys, something the Nyx Mechanicus openly thanked the Chapter of the Salamanders for.*

*Obviously, the Mark IX ‘Stalingrad’, for all its imperfection, still made the Mark VII completely obsolete as the moment it was unveiled in 305M35. A Space Marine equipped with one could brave a level of enemy fire bearers of the Aquila Power Armour couldn’t. This wasn’t enough for the Nyx Mechanicus and the Fabricator-General. It is highly likely the research and the tests to develop the famous Mark X began well before Operation Stalingrad, and accelerated after it, giving birth to a new power armour which would go to equip the majority of the Space Marine Chapters.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Editions, 310M41.

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**3.008.310M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

“Well?”

“It works fine,” Gavreel grumbled.

“So glad of you to finally admit it,” Vulkan N’Varr told him with this indulgent smile all Salamanders seemed to learn before they reached the equivalent of ten standard years.

Unfortunately, there were dozens of other Space Marines present, and not all were so prompt to limit themselves to a ‘I told you so’.

“YOU HEARD THAT? THE TRADITIONALIST HAS FINALLY ACCEPTED THE MARK IX! THE END OF THE GALAXY IS AT HAND!”

“Pierre, not so loud,” Cabrero of the Soul Drinkers complained. “The illogical conservatism of our cousin aside-“

“Ahem!”

“Come on cousin,” Midas of the Golden Sons intervened, “You have to realise that with his skills, the ion shield is less useful than it was for us!”

“I refuse to engage a debate with an Astartes which is parading so much gold and auramite we will see him coming a kilometre away,” Gavreel commented.

“Of course not, you are not dashing enough to look the part.”

“As amusing as it is to hear you bicker...” Gamaliel said, bringing the conversation to an end. “Our Lady is coming. Is everyone here?”

“We are,” Kratos answered for everyone.

“WE ARE.”

Mere seconds later, the Basileia entered the room, with T’klis Rubix and Diamantis in tow.

Dozens of fists were struck against their armours in salute.

“I see everyone has donned the Mark IX Power Armour...especially you Gavreel.” The former Dark Angel sighed. He had a feeling he had not seen even the mid-point duration of these jokes, if even their Lady was involved with them.

“I DO NOT HAVE THE MARK IX.”

“Of course not,” Taylor Hebert rolled her eyes, “our Mechanicus Magi have done their best, but they had the modifications of the Quetzalcoatl Dragon Armours to implement these last years, plus the Mark IX development, plus various things which cost millions of Throne of Gelts.”

The golden-winged Basileia sighed as Pierre gave an imploring expression...as far as a Dreadnought could make one.

“However,” the ruler of Nyx sighed, “the Tech-Priests are ready to test giving you an ion shield if you are ready to spend a few days at *Terra Cimmeria* before our departure. I have to warn you though: there’s a high chance it will decrease further your mobility on the battlefield.”

Since the Dreadnoughts were hardly the fastest forces of the Adeptus Astartes – a reason the White Scars were using them more as fortress protectors and teachers than as indispensable frontline assets – this was not something Weaver would say lightly.

“I AM GOING TO TRY THE MODIFICATIONS.” The Heracles Warden Dreadnought said at last, not that there had been much doubt he would refuse. When it came down to it, Pierre was an Astartes, and staying far from the battlefield was not in his nature.

“Good.”

“Not to press upon a point you already know, my Lady,” Chaplain Verdugo of the Star Leopards declared, “but these modifications will be sorely needed. The doctrine of the Codex Astartes for the ‘classical’ Dreadnoughts demands they be more resistant and protected than the average battle-brother.”

“I know,” the insect-controlling parahuman declared, passing a hand in her black hair, and adjusting the red cloak her wife had placed over her golden power armour. “And I see the logic of it. Alas, I have not an unlimited number of elite Tech-Priests available to work upon difficult and valuable projects, and the fierce warriors of Chogoris,” her black eyes gave an amused look to an unrepentant Stormseer Uriyangkhadai, “were particularly insistent the Einherjar-class Dragon Armour was the utmost priority.”

“It is a formidable weapon for our Venerable Ancients,” the White Scars said without a trace of apology in his tone.

Gavreel nodded with many others, reflecting that when the Tech-Priests would figure how to safely transfer the occupants of the ‘old designs’ of Dreadnoughts to the Einherjar draconic mounts, the Castraferrum and the other patterns of land-grounded Dreadnoughts were likely going to go extinct, at least among the ranks of the Khan.

“And one wonders why you’re a favourite of Dragon.” The Basileia said with a good dose of humour in her voice. “Anyway, I have not assembled all of you here today to speak of Dreadnoughts and Dragon Armours. We have confirmation the Battleship of the Queen of Blades has entered the Nyx Sector, and is escorted on its way there. So after my working day, we are all going to the Arena of Blades.”

All levity left the room. During the last twelve years, each and every one member of the Dawnbreaker Guard had trained and trained to become faster and deadlier. No one was ready to bet it was likely going to do anything to the monster of the ancient times known as the Queen of Blades if it decided to fight them seriously.

“I’d certainly hoped she would not answer in time,” the Basileia confessed to them, “but she is here. And she isn’t alone. There are other Eldar starships requesting access to the Arena, though those are of the Craftworld classes.”

“This is...inconvenient,” Kratos remarked, as predictable as ever. “But surely we can blast them apart, right?”

“No.” The golden-winged woman who had overseen from afar the construction of the Arena reluctantly disagreed. “Not as long as they have champions to throw into this arena, anyway.”

“I do not like this, My Lady.” Gamaliel told her frankly. “The Arena of Blades is far from any vital industrial asset, but allowing the Endbringer in your presence is already a tremendous risk.”

“I know. I don’t like it, and if we hadn’t far more pressing things to care about, I would joyously push for a gigantic Eldar hunt across the galaxy. The fewer of these long-ears are around, the better for Mankind. I can assure you I did not forget whose race sneered at us and declared us brutish primates while they at the same time refuse to admit that they almost provoked the end of the galaxy by creating Slaanesh.”

Luminous flies danced around their fingertips, the ones they had trained as pointing markers when training as snipers.

“But I signed several accords, and I won’t break my word first. If they behave, I will allow them to fight, and speak their piece if they’re not dead at the end of the ‘spectacle’.”

The smile of Taylor Hebert returned.

“Before that, however, I have a last war council with nine Battle Group Commanders to preside. And I want you with me there.”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Over a decade ago, being surrounded by men and women having centuries more of experience than her on the frontlines would have made her nervous. Of course, more than a decade ago she hadn’t met so many Chapter Masters that she had truly lost count of them, thousands of guardsmen officers ranking between Brigadier-General and General, entire groups of Admirals of the Imperial Navy, Rogue Traders by the scores, and Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus by the dozens.

Then again, a decade ago or now, Taylor knew she had the unfair advantage – compared to a ‘normal’ Lady General, that is – to have other high-ranked commanders of the Imperium come before her in position of weakness. Being recognised as a Living Saint would ever have its multitude of perks, including in military politics.

It was really important when her interlocutors had the weight of millenary-old traditions and victories to support their position.

“I suppose the Princeps Senioris won our little contest, then.”

“Princeps Maximus,” she replied politely after sipping half of a glass of water. “There was no contest, I can promise you. I assigned the Battle-Maniples of your respective Legios to the Battle Groups which, in my humble opinion, were the most suited to exploit your strengths and negate your weaknesses.”

The black-haired parahuman gave an ironic smile to the black-skinned colossus representing Legio Ignatum. Whoever thought the Princeps of a Titan Legio were frail creatures hiding into an amniotic tank had obviously never met Princeps Maximus Cyrus.

“You will not pretend, I hope, to have gained the tactical flexibility of Legio Astorum since the last war game we organised?”

The Martian-trained Princeps quickly shook his head in denegation.

“I admit my efforts to convince my fellow Princeps to share his secrets have lamentably failed. But since my predecessors didn’t have much luck with it, I know the Fabricator-General is unlikely to fire me tomorrow.” Cyrus drank the contents of his glass in two seconds, and unless she was mistaken, it seemed his preference was inclined towards strong wine. “Perhaps if your Celestial Highness made discreet inquiries...”

The Basileia snorted.

“Nice try, Princeps Maximus. But since you asked politely, I will tell you that for all my popularity among the noble Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus, there are many secrets locked behind adamantium gates, and some of them can’t be opened, not even when they call you ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’.”

And honestly, after the generous contributions of the Lucius Mechanicus to the order of battle of Operation Stalingrad, including but not limited to the support of Legio Astorum, the Aegis-class Battlecruisers, and other vital pieces of machinery, including one now integrated to the *Angel’s Tear* protecting her life, asking for more could be considered tech-gluttony.

Lucius was allowed to protect the secret which allowed them to make Legio Astorum a teleportation-capable assembly of Titans...for now. In the long-term, both Dragon and she had not renounced at the idea of spreading the knowledge among the Mechanicus as a whole. Entire Crusades had been won since the dawn of the Imperium by the formidable capabilities of the ‘Warp Runners’; if three or four Titan Legios were able to gain this capability, the Traitors would never know what hit them.

But as said previously, the Tech-Priests of Lucius protected extremely tightly their most valuable secrets.

“Ah, my Battle Group commander is joining me.” Cyrus said with good humour. Taylor didn’t raise an eyebrow; she had seen Gastaph Hediatrix stopping his conversation with General Perry Tereyev of Battle Group Bagration a full minute ago, and he had already politely declined conversing with other Magi on his walk.

“I deliberately asked for another Princeps to be in charge, you know,” the Voice of Mars among the Nyx Mechanicus drily replied before his metallic tone became nearly filled with despair. “But alas, I was overruled.”

“Your confidence in my Maniples is extraordinary,” the Princeps Maxima placed his hand on his chest with a wounded expression. “Is Legio Ignatum not worthy of being recognised as the foremost Legio defending the honour of Her Celestial Highness?”

“The competition is fierce,” Hediatrix didn’t miss a heartbeat before answering. “Legio Defensor, unless I am gravely mistaken, is already worshipping the Lady Basileia. And I would be very surprised if the Legio Venator wasn’t steering in this direction too.”

Taylor almost snorted at that. By a curious turn of events which made her wonder how much the Emperor planned behind the scenes, the Legio Venator had been created on a Forge World where arachnid mega-fauna was the alpha life-form before humanity landed. Two guesses how they had reacted that she could master spiders wherever they were in range of her power...

“Letting aside levity, the percentage of the ‘Carrhes variant’ being necessary as calculated by the Logis has risen significantly this last year,” the Archmagos Prime commanding Battle group Berezina told her very seriously. “The Orks are not yet routing, but the Ymga Monolith has recently activated plenty of new macro-Gauss capital weapons to massacre them, and if our Necron enemies are able to do that...”

“The scenario of the metallic xenos having restored some measure of FTL travel capability increases in likelihood,” Taylor finished. It wasn’t exactly a new debate. Her nine Battle Group Commanders had exchanged their point of views several times, but for once, were far from unanimous in their replies. But then, aside from engaging the Ymga Monolith and discovering it the hard way, they wouldn’t have a definite answer. “I hope your Battle Group is ready if the Necrons fall into the nice trap you are busy preparing for them.”

“We won’t fail you, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“Legio Ignatum will teach the xenos the wrath of Legio Ignatum.”

“Thank you, gentlemen.” Alas, as fascinating as the conversation was, she couldn’t continue speaking for them for long, there were plenty of other important human and transhuman vying for her attention. “Now I’m afraid I have to leave you, High Marshal Barbarossa isn’t the most patient of the Space Marines...”

**Armoured Train *Celestial Lightning* – on its way to the Giraffe Spaceport**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

“I thank you again for granting my battle-brothers and the Blood Angels the opportunity to fight again by your side.”

It was reassuring to receive that familiar smile in return.

“Chapter Master, don’t be ridiculous.” The Basileia said. “You recruit your aspirants from Nyx. You are equipped with the guns and the tanks coming out of the Nyxian Forges and manufactorums. If I didn’t decide to include you among my Battle Group, people would wonder if there was a problem of loyalty among your ranks.”

Evidently, seen that way...

“Perhaps,” he conceded, “but I thank you for the honour nonetheless.”

The young woman huffed, but the smile didn’t leave her lips.

“Anyway, how did the last naval fleet exercise go? I was too busy speaking with my Guard’s chief of staff and the other superior officers of the Army Groups yesterday. I will analyse the post-exercise data once I am on the *Enterprise*.”

Agiel let Chapter Master Malakbel, his friend and superior of the Blood Angels, answer this one.

“The fleet coordinated well, and all ships were able to stay in formation for the ten hours the exercise lasted. There was no issue from the *Covenant of Baal* or the *Opera Exitium*, and if the *Eternal Crusader* or the *Flamewrought* had issues, our cousins of the Black Templars and Salamanders have not chosen to share them.”

“Hmm. No problems with the Angels Vermilion? I know there were concerns, since they only recently ended their isolation.”

“No,” the tall Astartes wearing the traditional golden armour only the Lord of Baal had the right to do, “I won’t deny they are still mock battles to train onto to improve, but in a way the fact they came only with Strike Cruisers helped. We were – and still are – rotating them aboard the larger ships. This way not only we renewed the bonds of Blood, we form a far more coherent and formidable assault force. I suspect the Salamanders are doing the same with their brothers of the Magma Spiders, and so are the Black Templars.”

There were other Space Marines Chapters, Agiel knew, who wouldn’t have reacted with a smile and approval to this common training and new doctrine.

But since most of those had ‘Ultramarines’ somewhere in their gene-legacy, the protestations weren’t voice, and certainly not in this train.

“Good. Now as for the question of leadership. I apologise in advance for the Brothers of the Red, but it will be Chapter Malakbel who will have command of the companies of the Blood included in the order of battle of Battle Group Volga. You will be his second of command, however.”

Agiel nodded. He did not even feel disappointment, to say the truth, and Malakbel only greeted it by another polite smile.

“I thank you for the honour, obviously,” the golden Chapter Master of the Blood Angels replied. “May I know your reasoning, my Lady?”

“Your Blood Angels having the greatest contingent of Astartes – at least of the Blood – in this Battle Group with four full Companies was of course an important factor. That your Legate-class Heavy Battleship is more powerful and more suited for playing the role of flagship doesn’t hurt. But what is really the deciding factor is how respected you are by Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn and High Marshal Barbarossa.”

“I wasn’t able to place them under a single Astartes hierarchy,” the older Astartes commented with his good nature.

The mistress of all insects snorted.

“If I wanted a miracle of this magnitude, Chapter Master, I would have directly asked Terra. You and I know very well that for all certain idiotic claims, I respect the independence of the Chapters fighting by my side.”

That and the Black Templars and the Salamanders had not come with insignificant contingents. It was difficult to know how many Black Templars were currently assembled in the shipyards and squadrons of Nyx, but the High Marshal had delivered ‘four Crusades’, and given the assets placed at the disposal of Operation Stalingrad, there was a high likelihood the number of two thousand Astartes was not unrealistic.

Expecting the heirs of Sigismund to be completely subordinate to a thousand Space Marines of the Blood – four companies of the Blood Angels, three of the Brothers of the Red, and three of the Angels Vermillion were present – was not infeasible, but it was something the golden-winged commander had decided to not use her influence upon.

“Any other concerns?”

“A minor one. We have an increasing number of simulations where our Furioso Dreadnoughts are falling too much behind the spear of assault forces. In two cases, the gap between vanguard and rearguard was so important the cogitators ruled a Necron force would have been able to separate us from our fierce Venerable Ancients.”

Taylor Hebert didn’t look surprised.

“You aren’t the first one to remark upon it today.” The grand commander of Operation Stalingrad inclined her head. “I suppose these simulations happen whenever there aren’t Guard forces in position to play the role of junction.”

“Indeed.” Malakbel replied, sounding very pleased.

“We will have to give you mechanised support then,” the Basileia shrugged. “It’s not like I or anyone in the Battle Group thought you would be able to land on the Ymga Monolith by yourself.”

Any other operation, Agiel would have protested and voiced this was underestimating the striking impact of an Astartes invasion. Not so much here and now. Like every Space Marine commander, he had been allowed to see what had happened to the Second Legion landing zones. The Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red had watched wordlessly as what happened when overconfident Marines descended upon a Necron battlestation in a flawless Bellicosa-pattern approach.

‘Slaughter’ was maybe the most generous way to describe it. The Second Legion had discovered the hard way that Necron warriors and Necron constructs could come from everywhere, walls or no walls, ceilings or no ceilings, pillars or no pillars. That the fight had lasted close to one hour was a testament to the ferocity of a Legion cornered could unleash, but it certainly wasn’t an example to emulate.

“But what is the most important is that the fleet can manoeuvre together flawlessly. It is the very cornerstone of the Operation we are about to launch.”

“I think I can promise in every commander’s name,” Malakbel said very seriously, “that you aren’t going to be disappointed.”

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*The year of 310M35 would see thousands of ancient ships re-emerge from relative obscurity to fight the cataclysmic battles where the fate of trillions of souls was decided. Of course, many of them couldn’t be considered new designs. For all the repairs it had benefitted from the Artisans of Mars, the Gloriana* Flamewrought *was hardly a new warship. The same could said about Arks Mechanicus, Apocalypse-class battleships, or Astartes Battle-Barges. The Hoplite-class Destroyer had been service for more than fifty standard years now; its presence into an Imperial order of Battle was raising few eyebrows from naval commanders.*

*There were starships were the judgment wasn’t so clear-cut. The Venus-class Cruiser was an improved variant of the Lunar-class whose future appeared compromised before the Fall of Commorragh; after it, the Fabricator-General of Mars and the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy’s opposition to the project vanished and full production was authorised in 298M35 outside of Mars. Nyx and Ryza would be the first Forge Worlds to be granted the authorisation for their construction outside of the Ring of Iron. As a result, thirty-six Venus Cruisers, all Nyx-built, were integrated in Battle Group Volga at the beginning of Operation Volga, with a classified number being placed in the reserves. Some of these capital ships’ presence was definitely confirmed during the Atlantis purges, but that Operation Stalingrad was their first major military campaign was difficult to argue against.*

*On the other hand, the variants of the well-spread Lunar-class were hardly something new in the Imperial Navy. Between the different ‘flights’ of Lunar and the variants, it was often joked the popular warship had as many patterns as they were Sectors in the Imperium. It was an exaggeration no doubt, but one which emphasized how this Cruiser was anything but the herald of a doctrinal change.*

*The situation was completely different where the Aegis-class Battlecruisers and the Warrior-class Destroyers were concerned. These two classes, or any variant of it, didn’t exist before the Fall of Commorragh – Her Celestial Highness had recovered the templates which would allow the core of their doctrinal requirements to flourish in the devastation unleashed against the Dark City.*

*Normally, this would have made impossible the commissioning of any ship relying on these priceless technological schematics, but the favour of the Mechanicus towards Lady General Taylor Hebert and the threat represented by the Ymga Monolith and other heretical forces crippled the political opposition before it could really force more than a few objections.*

*But if things were handled in the councils of war, the Tech-Priests and shipbuilders were nonetheless forced to find hasty alternatives for both classes. The original schematics of the Aegis-class were never put into production; there simply wasn’t enough time to build the hulls to the quality levels demanded by Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan. Instead, the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Imperial Navy requisitioned twenty-four Mars-class Battlecruisers out of mothball, before proceeding to remove each and every offensive armament of the warships as the first phase of modifications. That there was barely a whisper of protest was quite indicative of the fear the Reaper batteries of the Ymga Monolith had spread throughout the Imperial Navy’s officers.*

*The Warrior-class Destroyers faced different problems. Having hulls of Destroyers, time was not the great limiter it was for the bigger Aegis. But it remained a serious constraint. Neither the Adeptus Mechanicus nor any Imperial loyal fleet had ever built a ship integrating an electromagnetic cannon in living memory, and the prototypes of the class were barely completed in 306M35. That the Mechanicus Council successfully delivered one hundred and forty-four in active service before Operation Stalingrad in these circumstances was a triumph of industry, artisan craftsmanship, and military planning. Numerous titles and promotions would be handed by the Parliament of Mars after Stalingrad for this exploit integrally realised in the Nyx System.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Editions, 310M41.

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***Ferrus’ Revenge* Shipyards**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

As usual, her arrival on *Ferrus’ Revenge* was greeted by an impressive clamour coming from tens of thousands of hands applauding, uncountable voices cheering, and the crowd this clamour belonged to.

As expected, she spent the next hour giving ‘unofficial audiences’, kissing babies, giving their blessings to new couples, and congratulating PDF recruits and newly enlisted SDF personnel for their participation to the defence of the Nyx System. It was a delay on her way to the *Enterprise*’s dock, but it was a necessary one; with how little time she spent in Hive Athena these days in preparation of the coming campaign, meeting the Nyxians like she did was the best way to gauge the civilian and military’s mood.

And besides, it wasn’t exactly like only shipyards’ workers and market merchants were taking the opportunity to talk to her, as proved by the presence of Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan herself when she left behind thousands of pilgrims behind her.

“I heard no major problems occurred during the latest fleet exercise,” the black-haired parahuman began once the salutations were done. “Are we on schedule?”

“We are,” the Mistress of Ships proclaimed, her mechadendrites ever in movement. “It took us over three hundred hours of modifications, but the *Megara* at last performed on the level of the other Aegis sister-ships. The blessed Psy-tech Field was recorded at a most impressive ninety-four percent for twenty-four minutes without incident, and the communion with the Aegis squadron will be at ninety-three percent.”

“Outstanding,” the Basileia complimented the female Archmagos. “Where was the problem, in the end?”

“Much as it shame me to admit it, when we received the first Battlecruisers out of mothball, two hulls of out of twenty-four presented alterations most common with warships repaired in the shipyards of Metalica. Previous problems meant the *Petersburg* had already potential altered machine parts removed and replaced, but the *Megara* didn’t have these problems, and thus was allowed to proceed further along its commissioning without challenge. I think that if we had proceeded to more twelfth-blessed verifications, we would have caught the problem sooner, but we were trying to be as close to the schedule as possible...”

Taylor had worked and listened to Arithmancia Sultan enough time to know this was not an implicit criticism; this was just the basic truth. Any warship – or civilian ship, honestly – commissioned too quickly was risking encountering this kind of problems if the Admirals supervising the shipyards were stupid enough to demand the impossible of the Tech-Priests.

Unfortunately, she and Arithmancia Sultan had agreed upon a construction schedule which came very close to it.

Alas, there was no alternative – at least not one which wouldn’t cost the forces of Operation Stalingrad years of delay. After watching once the sheer firepower used by the Szarekhan Necrons to annihilate the Second Legion, the Battlefleet Volga needed the Heimdall template installed aboard the Aegis-class Battlecruisers. Not having them increased the possibility of the first major engagement turning up into a one-sided butchery, and it wouldn’t be the humans doing the killing this time.

“I know you have done your utmost.” The supreme commander of the ten Battle Groups assembled between Nyx and Triplex Phall reassured her. “The Warrior-class Destroyers?”

“The forty-eight of your personal Battle Group have all passed the fleet exercises with flying colours. So do the other forty-eight sent to Battle Group Berezina. As agreed during our last meeting, twenty-four have been placed into the Reserve Fleet. The other twenty-four have been sent to Battle Group Dnieper like you desired. Coupled with the Hoplites, I have no doubt our new Destroyers are going to be the bane of many Necron ships.”

“And I am sure plenty of officers will come to thank you after the operation,” the owner of the *Enterprise* nodded. “While the Hoplites decimate the Monolith’s heavy starfighter cover, the Warriors are going to shred the armour of their Cruisers.”

Best of all, it wasn’t something the Necrons could anticipate. The Railgun template had only been recovered at Commorragh, and the numerous prototypes had begun to be tested after Trazyn dealt with Orikan. So unless the perfidious ‘Diviner’ had warned his fellow genocidal partners of everything which might or might not happen in the future, the surprise should still be maintained. The Second Legion had not deployed any electromagnetic weapons during their final stand, and the Orks had not shown them any either.

“A much satisfying outcome for these enemies of the Omnissiah,” Arithmancia approved. “I have more good news. The modifications of the Moth Super-Carrier *Aethergold* are completed. You can transfer your singing companion when you want.”

“I am going to wait until I return from the Arena for that.” Taylor answered slowly. “I don’t want to do everything at the last minute, but the longest Lisa is unable to move, the more her food requests are going to be...significant.”

Her Moth-Diva would also find uncountable ways to bring her escort of Templar Sisters and Tech-Priests to tears. Best to leave her in her Dome for as long as possible, where she stayed – relatively – well-behaved.

“A last point I think has not yet been brought to your attention. One hour ago, the Ark Mechanicus *Zar-Quaesitor* translated out of the Warp.”

Taylor blinked. Any Ark Mechanicus was always welcome, but the Mechanicus orders of battle for the ten Battle Groups didn’t include this one, and all fleet exercises were completed. Adding more elements was always going to be a headache.

“Archmagos Belisarius Cawl has returned.” Her Mistress of Ships and Shipyards informed her when it was obvious she failed to react in the expected manner.

“Ah.” Honestly, how many Arks had Cawl in his service? The reason she hadn’t connected the dots was because after seeing the *Iron Revenant*, the parahuman hadn’t believed an Archmagos could own two of these gigantic starships. Hediatrix was a very senior Archmagos of Mars, and he had the El Dorado. The same was true about many other high-ranked figures of the Mechanicus.

Her conversation with the Archmagos ended a couple of minutes later, and the Dawnbreaker Guard and she pressed on, direction the *Enterprise* – across a cheering crowd, it went without saying.

There were barely two hundred metres from her personal Thunderhawk when one person she had really not anticipated meeting today intercepted her group.

“Lord Commissar Zuhev,” if there was something reassuring, it was that her senior officer of the Commissariat had barely changed these last years. The Atlantis Purges had been such a lightning-fast affair he had no time to gain new scars, and though he accepted a rejuvenation treatment, it had been a light one, barely enough to return to the vitality he had during the Fall of Commorragh. “Have there been any problems with the Commissariat?”

“No, everything is proceeding as per the schedule I gave you,” the austere and threatening-looking man told her. “But there have been recently...unforeseen developments.”

“I was made aware Cawl is back.”

Zuhev...grimaced. Interesting, apparently whatever he wanted to tell her, Cawl played no part in it.

“I hope he’s not going to play with more moons.”

“I will confiscate his Ark Mechanicus if he thinks about it.” The insect-mistress promised. “But you were seen about interesting developments?”

“Ah yes,” Zuhev took two steps to the left, revealing in full the woman half-hidden behind him. “Your Celestial Highness, may I present Lady Foronika Argovon, Rogue Trader, operating until recently in the Nephilim Sector. She has some information I believe you need to be informed immediately.”

Apparently, it had been too much to hope for a few hours of free time aboard the *Enterprise*...

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Rogue Trader Foronika Argovon**

Foronika felt completely insignificant as she was politely invited to sit on the red couch. The moment she had been given permission to walk aboard the massive Battleship called the *Enterprise*, it was scenes after scenes of bronze and gold, silver mechanical cogs and painted walls. It was like being in a museum, except the various stations and the uniformed personnel everywhere made it clear it was a true warship. If she had had any inclination to preserve otherwise, the moment you looked at an artwork, you noticed immediately there was something to protect it from fire or damage, be it a stasis field, a fire extinguisher station – the big red letters ‘ANTI-FIRE FOAM’ were a clue – or something else.

It was galling to recognise it, but not only the *Enterprise* had more wealth in one compartment than her entire *Dice of Topaz*, it could destroy it in a few minutes before breakfast, AND it was far better protected internally than her own ship was armoured.

But what was the more striking was the Living Saint. She was so luminous, so pure, that Foronika felt really unworthy to be welcomed in her presence. The Rogue Trader of the impoverished Argovon line had always known she wasn’t a beautiful woman; her own cousins had not been shy in telling her every flaw they found in her appearance. That she was too small, barely managing a lowly one metre and fifty centimetres. That her acne spots that for some reason had never vanished after their appearance in her teenage years disfigured her. Her nose was too sharp, her mouth too uneven, and her lips hardly beautiful. Minor consolation, her near-empty resources meant she had not compensated this by trying to gain weight, but then again she wasn’t able to really afford clothes befitting of a Rogue Trader; from boots to coat, she wore black. That way she didn’t look like a beggar, but she hardly looked like a dashing Rogue Trader either.

In comparison, the Living Saint was a true angel. She was tall. She was beautiful. She was illuminating the entire room with her magnificent golden wings, projecting a divine aura blessed by the God-Emperor Himself. And if half of the rumours Foronika had heard were true, Her Celestial Highness had accomplished more exploits three or four hundred Rogue Traders did in their lifetimes.

Given all of these facts, it immensely surprised her she had been introduced so fast in Her presence.

“Where do you want me to begin, your Celestial Highness?” she found enough courage to timidly ask.

“I think the beginning is always necessary,” the golden-winged woman told her gently. “Do you want some refreshment? You look incredibly exhausted.”

It had to be some kind of dream, because the fruity tonic she was given was far better than everything she had tasted in a decade, and the tiredness was hitting her bones and her muscles less and less.

“It began with the Hour of the Emperor’s Wrath, your Celestial Highness. The Nephilim Sector has important Warp trail which allows ships to travel quickly towards Segmentum Solar, but plenty of systems and unexplored regions were wracked by Warp Storms. Since I had some...arrangement with a shipyard of Nephilim I wouldn’t find elsewhere, I was trying to access – with little success – several stars until the Warp Storms all vanished. Not losing any time, I activated my Warp Drives and translated to one of the most promising systems I had managed to guess the location of, and it was there. So I claimed it for the Imperium.”

“Well,” the ruler of the Nyx System said, “congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you.” Foronika cleared her throat. “But this was once I left to reveal my discovery that the problems began. I was made aware that two people named ‘the Monsters of Lomorr’ had seriously damaged a tithe-fleet of the Adeptus Administratum and killed the tithe-master. Your name was mentioned in rumours, in general associated with the fact the dead Adept was a member of the Vandire Clan.”

The poor Rogue Trader didn’t know what she had expected, but the Living Saint rolling her eyes, showing an exasperated expression, and mumbling something between her teeth were not it.

“These...these ‘Monsters of Lomorr...their names weren’t ‘Leet’ and ‘Borek’, by happenstance?”

“Err...yes, yes, they were. Do you know them...your Celestial Highness?”

The beautiful woman sighed.

“Yes. I have the great misfortune of knowing them. And the moment I can catch one, we are going to have a little discussion about the vagueness of their Astropathic communications. Amongst other things. They had told me they had killed someone named Mephistopheles Vandire; they had been terribly shady about everything else. But since we didn’t find a Lomorr System near the Maelstrom or in any Mechanicus database...”

A Space Marine poured a ruby-coloured liquid in the glass of the Living Saint, her own glass was replenished, and for a few seconds they sipped their drinks in silence.

“I suppose the Administratum threw a fit over it, and there are going to be violent complications. But I don’t know how it is a problem for you.”

“The two Rogue Traders sponsored by Mephistopheles Vandire fled as fast as they could when their patron died,” Foronika explained. “They took the liberty from emptying the coffers before departing, though. So the local Administratum is really need to present something good for their superiors, and a newly system ready to be colonised would their life-saver.”

“Ah. But you discovered it, so they want you to transfer certain colonisation and trade rights to them...in perpetuity, I imagine?”

“Exactly,” Foronika agreed, the warmth of the tonic a welcome help in her throat. “This is obviously highly illegal, but the Nephilim courts are theirs, and I’m hardly an influential Rogue Trader.”

In fact, if she didn’t manage to push forwards her claim on this newly discovered system, it was likely that in a decade there wouldn’t be an Argovon Rogue Trader. She had loved her parents, but their disappearance with the penultimate ship of their dynasty had left her a mountain of unpaid debts and the *Dice of Topaz*, which was itself in need of massive repairs and space parts’ replacement.

“I see.” The black-haired Saint with a sympathetic smile. “But why come to me specifically? I mean, I feel a bit responsible for having given a ship to Borek and Leet. I should have sent an Astartes company or two to keep them on the path of order, and the Administratum plotting is characteristic of what happens once you get rid of a Vandire. I think he was pilfering into the Sector’s coffers well before his Rogue Traders took to steal precious metals and other resources. Still, rumour or no rumour, Nyx isn’t exactly next door to Nephilim.”

“Because some of the rumours about you I learned from an Explorator Tech-Priest from Stygies VIII. He was hardly...err...the best source of information, but he affirmed he had been there at Nyx and certain edicts approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus.”

“I’m afraid you will have to be more precise. I used the Adeptus Mechanicus to enforce many edicts during the last twelve years.”

Foronika drew from her pocket the black rock – darker than obsidian, to be accurate – that she had show to the Commissar.

One of the Space Marines present hissed, and the Living Saint’s visage also turned from polite to incredibly attentive.

“Noctilith,” the name passed her lips, the same the near-heretek had mentioned. “Gamaliel, if you would?”

A tall golden Space Marine, armoured like an angel and more beautiful than most propaganda vids, advanced and placed a strange device against the night-coloured stone as she continued to hold it.

“This is Noctilith indeed, my Lady,” the confirmation arrived five seconds later. “The purity is a bit inferior to the one the Mechanicus refine at Alamo, but it’s still over ninety percent. And judging the form and the list of impurities, it wasn’t gathered on a volcanic Death World.”

“It wasn’t.” She mustered her courage to not feel...too intimidated by the gigantic Angel of Death. “There many of these rocks on the surface of every planet of the system I discovered.”

“How many planets?”

“Six.”

“Six,” an angelic version of the same Space Marine, but clad in white and gold, repeated with what had to be a slightly ironic voice. “And to say the Mechanicus is still trying to find one where the deposits don’t run out in a few months...”

Foronika felt incredulity. It was that rare? Of course, the Space Marine had hardly any reason to lie about that...

The Saint rose from her couch and delicately took the Noctilith stone from her hand. The moment her fingers touched it, it was like veins of gold were revealed inside it. It was...beautiful. It couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but when it was over, it was like a new lighthouse had been created to help the Living Saint.

“Aethergold,” the golden-winged woman explained. “Noctilith imbued with the power of the Emperor. The bane of the darkness and the heretics. Wherever it shines, hope continues to exist and the monsters flee.”

The formerly black stone was placed in her hand, and aside from a brief feeling of warmth, the only sensation was a sort of...dancing song playing in her head.

“Congratulations, you passed the test.”

“Err...thank you?”

The Living Saint chuckled.

“While it can have unpredictable effects, Aethergold isn’t doing that much to men and women who are untainted and loyal to the Golden Throne. The corrupt and the untrue...well, let’s just say that if you were one, we wouldn’t be holding this kind of conversation.”

Foronika couldn’t be gladder that she had always followed the advice of her mother and never forgotten the ancient words written on the vellum of the Warrant of Trade. Though her mother mustn’t have ever thought about a situation like this one...

“Err...you want it back? The Aethergold, I mean?”

“Keep it,” the Living Saint waved her hand. “Think of it as an insurance on my part, since you’re going to become a very wealthy woman.”

“You will support my claims on the Argo-...err the system I discovered?”

“Yes, yes I believe I will.” One of the red-clad Space Marines handed her a data-slate. “I will even repair your ship, the Dice of Topaz, and send a Mechanicus flotilla to secure the system and protect your assets while I’m waging my wars...though I have one request.”

“And this is?”

“Please don’t call the discovered system ‘Argovon’. I have nothing against the name, but calling an important system with your own identity is in general not the most humble thing ever done. The name of your ship could be a good choice.”

The Living Saint read something on her data-slate before giving it back to the Space Marine.

“But it is a request, feel free to disregard it if you want. Do you have brought more Noctilith with you?”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness. One ton.”

“I will buy it for ten billion Throne Gelts.”

Foronika felt weak again. This was...she was going to be able to repay all her debts and then some! She was...

“Gamaliel, please call the Magi Biologis for a full medical check-up, this poor Rogue Trader don’t seem in good health...”

**Nyx System**

**Arena of Blades**

**3.025.310M35**

**Maea Teallysis**

The new ‘Arena of Blades’ was already an incredible sight viewed from a spaceship approaching it: a jewel of emerald – the dome protecting arena fighters from the void – surrounded by a vast fortress-stadium.

It was even more impressive once you were introduced inside, Maea acknowledged it from the start. There were wall frescoes no matter which direction you looked at, sculptures representing Asuryani and Drukhari by the hundreds in various gladiatorial positions, and precious gemstones beyond comprehension, the majority being emerald, rubies, or stones having similar colours.

Maea felt very underdressed walking the long avenue they had been directed to...and she was in the new body-tight black-and-blue armour the Queen of Blades had ordered her to wear. By the lost temple of Asuryan, she didn’t want to know who she would have felt if they travelled half-naked here.

Not that there was a big risk of this happening. The forty Wyches and she that Lelith Hesperax had ‘volunteered’ to fight in the human-built arena had all been to wear similar armours. The main difference with hers was that their armours were a combination of black and this magenta fuchsia which seemed to have become the colour by default of the Atharti worshippers in the time it took to reach and return from the Shrieking Labyrinth.

When she thought about it, it was likely it wasn’t a minor detail that aside from Lelith Hesperax and she, all the Wyches had these magenta Spirit Stones under their armours, and the ancient Aeldari had feigned to not see them when they reunited with the Cult of Blades recently.

“Ah, at last a welcoming committee.”

Maea didn’t know whose mouth had run wild, but she had to repress an urge to strangle them. Because when the great gates at the avenue – the ones carved in a very realistic artistic representation of Hesperax – opened, it was no human army or even one of the ‘Space Marines’ who greeted them. It wasn’t even the Queen of the Swarm.

It was a massive gold spider with silver stripes, one which was big enough to do a size contest with a grav-tank...and likely win if it came to close-quarters, as its ‘legs’ and abdomen had a formidable chitin armour.

Maea tensed, and her reaction was likely the less vocal of the group – minus Lelith’s reaction, which was to smile and bare her teeth. Because of course the Queen of Blades would see this opponent as a worthy challenge. One of the Hekatrix Bloodbrides outright asked if the arena contest had already begun.

“No, it didn’t, arrogant female long-ear.”

The voice was entirely metallic, but since there was no one around...and the metallic box dangling like a collar around the spider’s neck...merciful Isha, had *Maelsha’eil Dannan* found spiders which were able to talk?

“You are a new one, aren’t you?” The Queen of the Arenas spoke with non-hidden curiosity. “I didn’t see spiders of your species at Commorragh.”

“Indeed I am!” The spider’s mouth clicked loudly, and her posture shifted from defensive to what could be described as ‘prideful’. “The Glorious Webmistress, May She Rule the Swarm Forever, recognised the majestic beauty of the arachnid form, and ordered her Tech-Priests to enhance us into a new glorious body. We are the *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert*, and we have sworn to protect humanity, in the name of the Webmistress! And since we need to be polite and present ourselves, even to infuriating long-ears, I am Bellona, daughter of Artemis, the Warden of the Arena of Blades.”

“Of course the Queen of Helspiders would let spiders rule this arena...” A Wych complained. “I mean, what we were expecting?”

‘Bellona’ appeared offended by this comment, since she stopped using her four forwards legs and went on a position which for an Asuryani or a human would have been considered ‘bipedal’. Of course, since the spider had a massive abdomen, the effect was...intimidating. Very intimidating.

“I assure you, arrogant long-ear, I am more than capable of administrating this arena! For two standards years I have been in charge, and I have prepared this event far better than any of your perfidious race can!”

“I’m sure Al’krina meant no offence,” Lelith smiled, though whether it was because she was amused because a huge spider was insulting one of her Wyches or for some other reason was impossible.

“I am rather sure of the contrary,” Bellona clicked a lot between each metallic word coming out of the metallic box. “But I’m not one to bear grudges infinitely. Since she emitted reserves, she can open the ball with my Helspider cousins. They are very, very enthusiastic to end their lives in a glorious massacre of long-ear lives.”

Al’krina flinched. She had been among the Drukhari who had fled Commorragh before the Gates were closed, Maea remembered.

“This won’t be necessary,” the ancient Aeldari voiced an objection. “The opening needs to be grandiose, no? Al’krina won’t give a good opening performance.”

The Queen of Blades smiled, and Al’krina gave her a look which was half-relief, half-confusion.

“I want my Apprentice,” and suddenly she felt, really, really alone, “to go against the Helspiders in the opening fight. I can assure you she will give the spectators and your mistress a prodigious fight.”

Oh, no. Oh, no...

“An interesting suggestion,” the golden spider shook her gigantic head in a very humanoid gesture. “And one which merits a lot of thought...”

Maea, watching these eight eyes filled with curiosity and a great intelligence, knew she had just been volunteered to become Helspider-chow.

“You don’t seem that annoyed at the idea of modifying the order of the fights nor their composition?”

“I was already modifying it before you set a foot on this Arena!” Bellona exclaimed, two of her legs slashing the air. “We were not expecting so many long-ears to accept our invitation to get themselves killed!”

This time the Queen of Blades allowed them the rare instance to hear her purring laughter.

“You are confident. I like that.”

In a feat of dexterity, the spider took something on her back and threw it to Lelith Hesperax, which caught it without looking.

“The plan to access your lodges, the other facilities, and the basic organisation of the grand gladiatorial event. I will send my cousins to escort you when everything is ready. And do not slay any of them, or I will punish you myself.”

The most dangerous sword-fighter of the Aeldari race chuckled.

“You want to kill me, spider? Your mistress failed, and you aren’t to her level.”

“I didn’t mention anything about fighting you,” the golden spider immediately disagreed. “Of course I will lose, though you might be unpleasantly surprised at how good I am at coordinating my cousins. But I was more thinking about cutting the warm water supplies of your lodges.”

The Aeldari blade-mistress...grimaced.

“Threat acknowledged. Wyches, do not slay the spiders...at least not until we fight in the Arena.”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Before the Deathwatch had presented her the ‘Protocol Armour’ in person, Taylor had almost refused one could spend so much on a parade armour no one would even don, and for that matter whose primary goal wasn’t even the protection of someone.

But it had been the complete truth, and even after watching it several times, the ludicrous decoration – over one hundred diamonds, dozens upon dozens of former Aeldari gems, more than fifty sapphires, all upon a base of Necron Metagold – was still ridiculously impressive. If there was a reward for the most ostentatious parade armour, the Protocol Armour recovered from Aryand won it without trying.

“I am forced to admit that for all his tyrannical behaviour, your Silent King knows how to offer kingly gifts.” The Basileia told Neferten, as after stepping backs, the honour guard of the Nerushlatset Dynasty surrounded the Protocol Armour and teleported it back to the starship waiting half a million kilometres away.

“Make no mistake,” the Phaerakh replied conversationally, “Szarekh didn’t give away this armour for the sole purpose of placing the Nephrekh Dynasty in his debt. He was making a diplomatic point. The process of creation and the other secrets of the hyper-alchemical ‘Metagold’ are something the Nephrekh Crypteks were particularly proud of. So either Szarekh’s court of Technomancers managed to replicate it by only seeing its properties from afar, or he used the Command Protocols to seize their inventions and mind-wipe the incident from the Nephrekh data-memories. And by giving them this armour, he made sure the Nephrekh leadership was aware of these possibilities.”

Spoken like that, there was little doubt which option Neferten considered the most likely, but at least she had presented two sides of the debate.

“Assuming this is the latter and you can prove it, you may be able to convince some Nephrekh Crypteks to change their allegiances once all the Protocol artefacts are recovered.”

“I examined the practicalities of such a move,” the Necron ruler admitted. “Unfortunately, to avoid potentially unpleasant complications, Phaeron Sylphek must be neutralised first. And it appears he didn’t trust his court enough to place his royal crypt at Aryand.”

One of the reasons the attack of the Deathwatch upon the ‘Crownworld’ had been even more devastating than the success won at Orrak. It had barely taken three hours before the Tomb’s AI was neutralised, and the Space Marines’ casualties had been extremely low, even by Orrak’s standards.

“It wasn’t his Crownworld, then?”

“No, it was, the few vaults your forces found is proof enough of that.” Taylor hid a grimace; it had been hell to convince the Tech-Priests to respect the treaty, especially when the artefacts found were so close to impressive piles – or was it mountains? – of strategic metals. “But Sylphek apparently decided to go against tradition and move his most dangerous weapons and most precious vaults to a secret location. It is...innovative. I didn’t expect that from him.”

It was a friendly reminder that for all the knowledge brought by a Necron Dynasty, the Imperium’s best source of information – Trazyn didn’t count – was not infallible.

“My Overlords have emitted the hypothesis this will be the last Protocol Artefact we will be given back in a while...aside the one you have made so many preparations for.”

“The hypothesis is indeed correct.” Taylor told her Necron ally. “Given how defended this Protocol Artefact is, the numbers the Deathwatch need to deploy to have good odds of success, and how much things can go wrong during Operation Stalingrad...I can’t possibly justify operations against the other targets you gave me. Nothing went wrong when the Deathwatch attacked Orrak, Sarlok, and Aryand, but it doesn’t mean the other citadel-crypts have not nasty surprises waiting for invaders. And if they do have these surprises, I will have no Mechanicus or Inquisition fleet available to bombard them to oblivion for at least a couple of years.”

Both organisations had been very generous – though as always, Aethergold and Bacta were so priceless she could afford to name her price and get away with it – but they couldn’t be everywhere. Priorities had been established. First, everything which could be deployed to help the Imperial forces involved in Operation Stalingrad and the Obscurus fortification projects. After that came the protection of the Forge Worlds and other critical bastions of industry and warrior-tithing. And then there were the Noctilith-searching operations. The ‘Protocol Artefact’s Quest’ came at the bottom of the list.

“I am not surprised.” Neferten said diplomatically. “But I must inform you as a result that as long as a Szarekhan noble is in control of the Throne of Oblivion, I won’t be able to deploy even the smallest Scythe engine to help you across the Eastern Fringe. I will deploy three fleets north of the Maelstrom to protect the Nephrekh-Oruscar Pylon Line, and Sitkah has spread her assets to intervene should your Traitors move to seize important Necron fortresses. But this is as far as I can risk my Dynasty’s military forces.”

Given how much risk encountering a Szarekhan force placed the Nerushlatset Dynasty, there was no arguing with that.

“This is already a lot. And since the fleet of Ryza, the White Scars and several other allied forces are already trying to entice the Damned of the Maelstrom to sally out before they spring their trap, I think it will be enough for the contingencies in that theatre. The real problems will come from another direction.”

“The world you call Cadia.”

Taylor nodded silently.

“It may have already begun. The Astropathic communications are getting erratic in western Obscurus. A veil of darkness is falling upon the Gate and the nearby systems. This is of course I will leave soon with my forces. It is time to strike.”

A massive blast of green lightning announcing a teleportation erupted five feet away, and Taylor thought at first it announced the return of the Honour Guard...but no, it was not them.

It was Trazyn.

“My friend!” The unrepentant thief greeted her. “I thought it was the perfect time to-“

“The Lady Basileia and I were about to go to the Imperial Lodge, Chief Archaeovist,” Neferten interrupted him. “Why don’t you escort us here?”

**Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr**

Vulkan N’Varr didn’t like arenas, beautiful or not beautiful, and he wasn’t going to change his opinion for this one.

This was an impressive construction, the Salamander Forgefather was ready to grant the builders that, but it was a large orbital station built on the order of a xenos, and worse, a *Drukhari*. He didn’t care if the Queen of Blades was so old she was practically her own race, when someone lived at the heart of a corrupt civilisation, it was impossible to keep your hands clean. And though Commorragh was no more, there weren’t enough years in the history of all humanity to forget the raids these depraved monsters had launched against Nocturne. The sooner the ‘arena-fighters’, ‘Wyches’, and other long-ears died, the better.

Fortunately, it seemed the God-Emperor was smiling upon them as even the long-ears appeared to be ready to betray their treacherous brethren and throw them into the one hundred and fifty metres-long arena.

“I think you are asking for a difficult price, my friend,” he didn’t turn his head to keep an eye on the Necron thief; that was the duty of Catalan, Dos Santos, and Forman.

“Nonsense. I made you a favour by taking the Bell of Saint Gerstahl, in addition to all the others.”

“What are these ‘others’ you’re mentioning?”

The sigh of their Lady was very loud.

“Trazyn, I’m ready to accept my Tech-Priests are not the most disciplined individuals, but when in three artefact-recovery operations they each time discover compartments missing up to two-thirds of the relics they had safely stored, even they know to suspect your intervention.”

“And to think you were so busy safeguarding your collections,” the Necron Phaerakh spoke. “I wonder if I should not try to find ways to make yourself valuable. Like trying to entertain the Deceiver into a Tesseract Vault.”

“There’s no need to reach these violent extremities!”

Yes, there was.

Trumpets sounded, and just below the Imperial lodge divided neatly between Necrons and Humans – and Trazyn going back and forth between them – entered one of the massive ‘Adjutant-Spiders’.

“Webmistress! Everything is ready!”

“Then you and your sisters can invite the public in. Excellent job.”

“We live to please you, Webmistress!”

The most incredible thing in this exchange, was that the spider really didn’t talk. When the Genetors had given birth to this new species, it was rapidly obvious that for all their intelligence, the *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert* was not capable to communicate except by a few loud rattling sounds. Yet these giant arachnids, aside from a talent in silk-weaving which had made them extremely popular among the Nyxian upper classes, were telepathic, at least with other spiders and other psychic species. As a result, the metallic boxes placed around their necks were not a common translator, but in fact a plain vox-caster which allowed other spiders in a vox-central to convey their thought-orders into proper sounds.

To date, Vulkan N’Varr didn’t know it was an idea of genius or utter madness. It was true that with these spiders’ creation, one of the principal weaknesses of their Lady was gone – when she went to sleep, an ‘Adjutant-Spider’ was simply taking the relay and continuing loyally to follow instructions, and they could be complex to the point normal humans would struggle to memorise half of them.

On the other hand, well...Bellona was bigger than a Leman Russ, and she was not the biggest specimen they had running around. Plus like Lisa the Giant Moth, all of the adjutant-spider’s ‘commanders’ had a contagious enthusiasm, and often, in their eagerness they forgot how fragile their surroundings were.

“Welcome! Welcome dear public to the Arena of Blades!” Bellona repeated at regular intervals. “In the name of Basileia Taylor Hebert, I dearly hope you are going to enjoy the spectacle!”

No, no they wouldn’t.

Bellona had been informed of the basics – what the public could and couldn’t do – but she was unaware of the political realities in the Imperium of Mankind.

And the political realities imposed that the fewer people left to tell everyone what they had seen into the Arena of Blades, the better. It wasn’t to protect their Lady’s aura of invincibility. Unless the Queen of Blades went berserk today, Lady Taylor Hebert would not fight physically anyone, even via interposed insects. It wasn’t because the mere presence of xenos was corruption – though several ships had brought Drukhari prisoners which were undoubtedly tainted and to be exterminated with extreme prejudice.

It was because unless they succeeded into the Queen of Blades, the public was better off not knowing that killing all Eldar in sight was the policy of the day. The revelation of the atrocities committed on a daily basis by the monsters of Commorragh had generated an intense wave of anti-Eldar propaganda, and there were people as important as the High Lords debating if after the current series of threats was over, hunting the Eldar to extinction was perhaps the best service that could be given to the galaxy.

After that, the only question had been how to find half a million expendable spectators. No Gubernatorial rebellion having agitated the Nyx Sector in twelve years, it was in the Atlantis Sector Lady Weaver had found her ‘volunteers’. While many men and women were directly thrown into the Penal Legions – where they would have the honour of being in the first wave of Operation Stalingrad – five hundred thousand adults had been set aside and prepared for a very different assignment.

Decadent nobles, avaricious Ecclesiarchy Priests, gladiator of illegal arenas, Frateris Templar Traitors...they all had in common they thought their precautions had been enough to trick the Arbites, the Administratum, the Ecclesiarchy, and Lady Weaver.

They didn’t.

These men and women didn’t yet realise it, but they weren’t going to leave this space arena alive. The only question was how they were going to die, and how long it was going to take.

“In this arena, I am the Executor, the Judge, and the Commentator!” Bellona shifted from greetings to her instructions. “If I say a combat begins, it begins! When I say a combat is over, it’s over! If you don’t listen to my instructions, I and my sisters will make you stop! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“WE UNDERSTAND!” The crowd answered like a single man, beginning evidently to have some dark thoughts about the reason they had been led to this spectacle when they had just been ‘judicially pardoned’.

“Good! Now let’s begin the grand opening of this Arena of Blades, under the wise guidance of the Webmistress and the Golden Throne! On my right, the magnificent, the lethal, the veterans of Commorragh, my cousins the Helspiders! They will face before your very eyes the Apprentice of the Queen of Blades herself, in equilibrium above an acid pool!”

**Maea Teallysis**

There must have been a more partial crowd of spectators in galactic history, but Maea wasn’t able to remember *when*.

“DEATH TO THE ELDAR!”

“DIE DIGUSTING XENOS!”

“CUT THEIR EARS AND THROW HER INTO THE ACID POOL!”

Why the hatred for her ears? They were very nice and well-proportioned, by Isha!

Really, these humans were cruel and barbaric.

Two heartbeats, and Maea toned down the noise of the crowd like she had learned to do in the Shrieking Labyrinth. Save the ‘judge-referee’ – which was obviously the gigantic spider speaking just below the grand podium – everyone was unimportant for the time being. The Malan’tai Asuryani needed to focus on her survival.

Something which was easier said than done. It wasn’t the Labyrinth where the floor could collapse at every moment, but it wasn’t normal ground either. Someone had weaved multiple layers of silk in equilibrium above the large arena, and the ‘web’ was neither very solid nor very large. A normal Asuryani would be able to walk upon it reasonably safely...assuming the silk was not doused with a slippery substance – which it obviously was.

And since the humans – or the spiders – had chosen this time to reveal their building capacities were up to create a pool of acid to ‘welcome’ the losers of this arena bout, the incitation was strong not to fall. Maea was rather confident this acid was a wraithbone-dissolver, developed by the red robed-humans who had sacked Commorragh.

“Let the First Game...begin!”

The Helspiders stopped their choreography at the other end of the arena and charged her. They were all Death-touched, of course – Asuryani and Drukhari both had agreed upon this nickname to designate insects which had been once placed under the control of Weaver. Aside from making them more intelligent, it also led them to be more organised and vindictive against their people in the Webway.

This wasn’t the only change shown by these arachnids, descendants of the ones bred in the pits of Commorragh. Four of their legs were busy keeping them alive on the silk webs, but two of their appendages held long spears, and two others rather large shields.

Weaver had taught Helspiders how to wield weapons. What was wrong with this galaxy?

“There should be a law against arming Helspiders,” she grumbled, jumping and avoiding largely three of the weapons which had been used as projectiles. “Fine, no need to restrain myself.”

Embers began to burn in the palm of her left hand. Three heartbeats later, a storm of fire was born and struck right in the head one of the Helspiders, which surprised wasn’t able to avoid a deep plunge leading to her demise.

“One down, err...ninety-nine to go.”

The Helspiders tried to encircle her, just as several humans were catapulted forcefully on the upper layer of the spider silk’s web.

“Ah, our first courageous volunteers of the night!” Bellona proclaimed. “We are glad for your timely arrival, citizens of Atlantis! Your challenge is simple: kill this Eldar, and you will receive an Imperial Amnesty! Good luck, citizens!”

The crowd screamed so loudly even the Helspiders appeared to suffer from the storm of noise.

But sure enough, the humans thrown into the arena had really, really vicious expressions looking at her. Well, the ones which managed to stay on the web for several heartbeats. It was slippery, after all...and one Helspider profited from their inexperience to impale them on a bloodied spear.

“No, my cousins the Helspiders aren’t on your side! Isn’t it exciting?”

For the first time of the arena night, Maea wondered what the penalty was for killing the chatty giant spider.

**Autarch Ulion Lakadieth**

The problem when your Craftworld thought you were a hero was unquestionably the fact the Asuryani thought you were obliged to continue playing the role.

At least this time he wasn’t forced to stare at an armada which had destroyed several fleets and was advancing on his. He just had to watch a series of fights in the arena which would result in the deaths of many members of his own species, though at least the Drukhari were estranged cousins at best.

This was why like every soul in their lodge Ulion cheered when the last Helspider died and Maea Teallysis emerged victorious. Trained by the Queen of Blades or not, the young Asuryani performance had been a thing of beauty, and she had proved that no matter how unfair the fight was – seriously the Helspiders receiving new weapons and shields every time they asked was just cheating – victory was possible.

Now the question was...

“Victor: the Eldar,” the enormous golden spider grumbled in the device allowing to play commentator of the arena. “As per the will of the Webmistress, the life of the winner is spared and she will be granted an audience with the Glorious Basileia and Phaerakh at the end of the event. Now as Warden of the Arena I am proud to propose you an interlude while we reconfigure the Arena for the second round of fighting. Before that, one minute of silence for my poor cousins who fell trying to kill this tenacious long-ear.”

The crowd booed. Whether this was because of the spider’s words or the reality many humans had taken a final bath in the acidic arena, Ulion didn’t know, but the spider – Bellona – didn’t like it at all.

“I SAID ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE!” The arachnid did the equivalent of a roar. “OR I WILL PICK TEN OF YOU RANDOMLY TO SERVE AS MY NEXT MEAL!”

Silence fell immediately in the stadium.

“Thank you,” the spider added sweetly...and despite the metallic ‘tone’, the threat was not far from it.

“Well, it is a victory,” Eldrad whispered next to him. “And *Maelsha’eil Dannan* looks ready to respect her word. I will treat it as a good sign.”

The Autarch rolled his eyes.

“I will really stop watching back when we will be safely back in the Webway, out of reach of her Battleships and her Swarm.” Ulion Lakadieth gave the Senior Farseer an unimpressed look while murmuring. “Let’s not pretend that anything save the presence of the Queen of Blades is protecting us right now.”

If anything, they had a demonstration of it as the acid fluids were removed in record time and then what felt like millions of beetles, crabs, centipedes went to redecorate, burning the web silk – who knew they were pyrokinetic crabs? – and bringing large decoration stones and what looked like gigantic dart-launchers.

“Thank you for your respect,” the spider spoke again. “Now for the second round of fighting! Three Wyches of the Queen of Blades will have the honour of fighting our Mecha-Centipedes! Oh and I suppose we will throw in the tainted wretches some of our long-ear friends so generally delivered in our care!”

Ulion Lakadieth grimaced. It was him who had captured the Drukhari...hundreds of them, fleeing the Webway, pursued by the Harlequins. Needless to say, they had not been the kind of dark cousins interested in redemption. No, these ones had already sold their souls to the Primordial Annihilator, specifically the aspect of lies.

He didn’t know what was the most unpleasant thing: selling dark cousins to a grisly fate, no matter how much they deserved it, or having the unpleasant realisation that the Drukhari population they had tolerated for so long saw nothing wrong in worshipping the Primordial Annihilator as long as they could continue slaughtering and torturing.

“There was no other option,” Eldrad said calmly.

“I know. It does not make me any happier,” the Lugganath fleet commander voiced as three Wyches in armours dark and...dark pink?...walked into the arena. Not long after, the other Drukhari were admitted by another gate. There were one hundred of them, clearly not the entire group of prisoners he had surrendered to the spiders.

“So she has followers of Atharti inside her ranks,” the older Asuryani commented whimsically. “The threads hinted it was possible, but the Cult of Blades moved too fast to be absolutely certain.”

“You’re playing with fire, Eldrad,” the grating and arrogant voice of Farseer Eldorath Starbane introduced itself in their conversation. “What do you think is going to happen when this psychopath of Aeldari is going to do when you are going to snatch away her Wyches?”

Ulion had wondered from the moment he had met this idiot what the purpose of Starbane coming here was. It was certainly not for his mental clarity or the wisdom of his speeches. It wasn’t for his capacity at deciphering the threads of the future; one might think not seeing the future would have taught him a little humility like it had for so many Seers, but apparently not.

Eldorath Starbane was a peerless Farseer, all must bask in his mighty presence or risk of being utterly wrong.

The Autarch wondered which Alaitoc female had committed the sin of siring a child with a Biel-Tan male, because this stupidity was usually more the domain of the warmongers than it was usual in the corridors of Alaitoc.

“And now, dear public, the Mecha-Centipedes!”

For the second time in a short period, the human spectators went silent.

Ulion thought...at first...these were human machines. At first. But no, these masses of metals were undoubtedly insect, for all the guns and the blades strapped to them. At least they behaved like insects, the golden lights where their eyes should be glaring at everything.

They were huge, and their progression was anything but silent. How many flesh was hidden inside this armour was impossible to discover without psychic scrying, but Ulion knew it wasn’t going to be a lot. After arming Helspiders, Weaver had evidently found a way to parody the Necron constructs and make her own metallic insects. An army which was as loyal to her as her talkative spider, but wouldn’t need to breathe, eat, drink, or rest. All it needed was energy...and the blades of the Wyches seemed really, really insufficient for the task.

The tainted Drukhari were the first to scream imprecations and charge, prayers to the Primordial Annihilator on her lips.

It was a one-sided massacre.

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

The strike was flawless and the target had not recognised the feint for what it was.

The head of the Wych rolled on the sand of the arena, cleanly decapitated.

The tall and dark Space Marine, presented as a ‘Blackshield’ by the giant spider, raised his sword and saluted Weaver, before cleaning the massive blade and placing it black in its scabbard. Then he moved towards the exit, not a glance for the two Wyches, the small army of ‘volunteered spectators’, and the countless carnivorous beetles which had been part of the contest and were now truly and completely dead.

“Victory goes to the Adeptus Astartes! Five minutes of interlude before we move on the next round of fighting!”

Aurelia murmured a word, and the world pulsed. Six heartbeats later, two magenta Spirit Stones appeared into her hands.

“These girls deserved better.”

“Yes.” Part of the Cult of Blades or not, there had been no real way for the Wyches to survive a duel against such a formidable opponent. They were simply too young, too untested, and not enough coordinated. “But I did not choose to let them participate, and neither did you.”

The massacre had been as far as he had feared after having the first visions about the Arena of Blades. It was quite clear the Destroyer of Commorragh had not changed her opinion about their race, and as far as she was concerned, the more Asuryani and Drukhari warriors she killed today, the better.

Counting Maea Teallysis among them, eleven out of forty-one Wyches had survived the game of massacre in the arena. All of them had done it by sheer talent, not luck, for the Queen of the Swarm and her executor-spider had definitely not made things easy for them.

Mecha-insects had been released, bastardised versions of the ancient Necron Canoptek weapons, but no less efficient in the art of murder. Monstrous insects covered in blades, spikes, and armour, some of them able to shrug off the best Drukhari weaponry. Three Space Marines had also fought, the official reason being given for their presence being egregious failures having led to the death of their brother-in-arms – except the last one, they had died, but not before taking down four Wyches and twenty more Drukhari Hellions with them.

There had been hellish traps. The lake of acid of the first fight had been just the prelude to things much, much worse like a small sea of flames. The final count had to be close to three thousand Drukhari killed, most of them brought here by his hand or the help of the Lugganath ships. The worst part was that if the choice was placed once more upon his shoulders, he would do it again. Except the Wyches sworn to Atharti, none of those Drukhari souls were redeemable. They had, by weakness or by delight of ambition and lies, said ‘yes’ when the Great Liar of the Primordial Annihilator came forwards with his bargains of nightmares.

Eldrad had wondered at first why so much of the Swarm’s priceless assets had been unleashed when the souls of the Damned would inform the empyreal monsters all that happened here. But one try to look at the future had told him everything there was to know. He had received a massive headache and no visions.

The Anathema’s null-maidens were forming a circle immediately outside this arena. Not close enough to forbid the usage of psychic skills, but not so far their presence in such numbers didn’t destabilise the threads of the years to come. Their enemies would know little of what happened here, and the hazy visions may be more damaging than no vision at all.

“I have a bad feeling about these negotiations,” the Herald of Atharti confessed.

“I am not exactly quite enthused about them myself,” and not just because he had no idea of how they could go or whatever good would emerge from them. Being blind to everything was not happening to him often, the last time it was that bad was during the Fall of Commorragh, and this alone put him ill-at-ease.

Eldrad sighed before giving his lover a sad smile.

“At least it is almost over. I don’t think the Cult of Blades arrived with a lot more Wyches than those who fought, and I know for sure the tainted dark kin are all dead. Which means-“

“And now, for the chief of spectacle of this grand event!” the giant golden spider said excitedly as her ‘cousins’ pushed more spectators on the stands to replace those who had been thrown into the arena. “She is the eleventh most wanted being of the Imperium! She is one of the rare enemies who can challenge the Webmistress! She is older than most sins in this galaxy! She was fighting C’Tan and the War in Heaven millions of years ago! All rise for Her Excellency Aenaria Eldanesh, the Queen of Blades! Cousins, play the Imperial March!”

A second later, the order obeyed, and the gates opened in a very martial music to reveal the crimson-haired foremost killer of Commorragh...and certainly the rest of the galaxy.

Call her Aenaria Eldanesh or Lelith Hesperax, these were merely two out of a list of uncountable names and titles.

“To greet such a prestigious opponent, we didn’t skimp on the quantity!” Even from here, Eldrad could see the smugness radiate from the golden spider, and as a result he knew this one kept her independence of thought from Weaver. The servant of the Emperor was in total control, but let this strange spider serve her of her own will. It was...dangerous. The human woman was only a single being, but if her giant spiders spread across the galaxy...

“Obviously, all the spectators in this arena have volunteered to try to claim the bounty!” Bellona the golden spider exclaimed. Terror exploded in the crowds of humans. “A bounty which stands over one quadrillion Throne Gelts, and provides an Imperial Amnesty signed and sealed by the Great Webmistress. But you won’t be alone!”

The different gates allowing participants to walk into the arena the ‘normal’ way were opened, and from them a small army of Necrons marched out.

Eldrad felt himself froze. It was one thing to see the ancestral enemy of his race from afar. It was another to see them march in tight formation going to war. And it wasn’t a small deployment. Eldrad hadn’t the slightest idea of how these units were called, but many had such decorations and molecular-severing blades that they couldn’t possibly be simple warriors. From hovering constructs with enormous guns to ground machines, this was a force which could wipe out entire cities.

Just merely looking at them was generating a feeling of dread, something that went well beyond the greenish glow of their monstrous weapons and the unmoving metallic skulls.

“I wish you good luck...” this had to be one of the most partial referees into the history of arena fighting, and Eldrad had been forced to be the spectator of into a Drukhari arena once. “You are going to need it. BEGIN!”

The Necrons instantly opened fire, an annihilation bombardment of green light materialising to strike everything. The crowd bayed, either for blood or in terror, and began to leave its seats. In less time it took to say it, thousands died.

But where the Necrons had struck, the Queen of Blades wasn’t here anymore. Instead in a single jump she had landed on one of the tallest Necron machines, and eagerly proceeded to cut it with her two daggers.

“XENOS,” Eldrad felt at last the presence of the massive blue machine waiting behind them. But why was it wearing this ridiculous pirate hat? “MY LADY WANTS TO SPEAK WITH YOU.”

**Yvraine Kaydinn**

“This monster allowed you to train with her?”

Yvraine felt her question was very legitimate, since two heartbeats before, it began to rain down Necron parts over them and only the shields protecting the principal lodge was preventing them from receiving these debris on their heads.

“No,” Maea whispered. “I died ten thousand times and she called it training before beating me down until I passed her ‘minimal standards’. The Queen of Blades didn’t train with me, she sparred...often with a hand tied behind her back, naked, and sometimes with a mini-dagger.”

Yvraine wanted to believe her friend was joking. But as the small army of Necrons in the arena was trying to kill Lelith Hesperax and utterly failing, she had to admit it was entirely plausible.

As they climbed the last marble steps, Yvraine shook her head and tried to shrug off the feeling of terror she felt towards the old Aeldari. She was good with a blade, but the ‘demonstration’ which was playing out in the Arena of Blades was something else. The humans trying to swarm her by sheer numbers? With a good strategy and a few specialised weapons, it would be quite easy to tear them apart. Not with a pair of daggers, though. But no one, not even the greatest of the Phoenix Lords, was known to fight the ancient monsters that were the Necrons alone and unsupported.

And yet the Queen of Blades was doing it all the same.

Suddenly, the ‘ridiculous rumours’ of Commorragh didn’t seem that ridiculous at all.

“Webmistress! Should I unleash the Mecha-Centipedes again?”

“No, Bellona. They can’t coordinate with the Necrons...and they are too slow. We will keep them in reserve for another day.”

“By your command, Webmistress!”

If anything, this exchange forced Yvraine to refocus on what the lodge they finally entered. It was an incredibly beautiful place with shifting landscapes of greenery on the walls, a profusion of sculpture and other artworks, and a lot of furniture in green and red colour.

It was also very big, but the reason of it was revealed immediately: the massive judge-referee-commentator spider known as Bellona was taking instructions from her ‘Webmistress’.

Somehow, Yvraine knew instinctively it was a spectacle similar to the one offered by the Harlequins. The Angel burning the Cycle of Entropy didn’t need to speak to her arachnids; the attack on Commorragh wouldn’t have been that successful if it was the case. No, she spoke to this spider because she had use for it as a performance...and this spider was largely able to hold a conversation with her.

Silence reigned as they advanced past the arch and the white pillars marking the entrance of the lodge.

It was a parade of monsters. On one side of the lodge, the Necrons were staring. More than twenty-five Necrons, and all were presenting so many richly decorated armours that Yvraine knew these were incredibly powerful nobles. The Nerushlatset Dynasty, Eldrad Ulthran had called them, but this was just a name. Seeing them awake and glaring at you was a reminder the War in Heaven had not erased the threat they represented.

The other side of the lodge was no less dangerous. Yvraine had seen plenty of the ‘Space Marines’, but the thirty-plus present here were bad news. Armoured like they were going to stroll in battle at any moment, the gene-modified humans were colossi bred and built for war. And the golden-winged figure they were surrounding, well...

Merciful Isha, what had convinced Biel-Tan it was a good idea to attack Weaver after the first time?

“Phaerakh Neferten, by the treaty which governs the diplomatic relationships between our two Empires, I inform you several individuals of the Aeldari sub-species have entered contact with me, in affairs not related to the Queen of Blades.”

“I acknowledge the information,” one of the Necrons replied, the one sitting on a silver throne. “I formally consent to your suggestion of letting them speak. We should have some amusement out of it, since it appears my warriors won’t be able to kill the Queen of Blades today.”

“Or you know, we might add them to my collections,” another Necron with a purple cloak intervened, and Yvraine instinctively knew it was the ‘Necron Arch-Thief’ Trazyn.

“Do you not have enough of the long-ears in your collections, Overlord of Solemnace?” Another Necron asked in what was a rhetorical answer.

“I do not have an Apprentice of the Queen of Blades, no,” the thief admitted, harbouring a greedy stance which made Maea flinch. “And I could always benefit from an Ulthwé Farseer and his interesting escort.”

“The two Primarchs have reunited in the Webway.”

Yvraine didn’t know why she had blurted it out so quickly, but she had, and at least this had the effect of the Destroyer of Commorragh stopping caressing her spider and turning her head – hidden by a beautiful golden helmet – in her direction.

“Continue.”

So Yvraine told her tale. How the Harlequins had permitted her to follow the tool of the Primordial Annihilator, giving her a single opportunity to reclaim Kha-vir, the Sword of Sorrows, making sure the thing had no chance against the Space Marines and their two leaders.

“You could have guided them out of the Webway.” The golden-armoured force of psychic light said. It wasn’t a question.

“The Harlequins refused. In their own words, a sword cast in the sea of fate can’t return until the right moment.”

Trazyn laughed.

“Typical Harlequins. You know my friend, I’ve always wondered if they truly can see the future, or they just deliver a few prophetic lines nobody can understand, that way they will always smugly confirm they were right a million years later.”

Much as Yvraine wanted to say the Arch-Thief was wrong...well, for once the Necron was making a disturbing amount of sense. The Harlequins were not a community which revealed their plans in plain words. They were worse than the worst Farseer in that regard, and that was saying something.

“These clowns should be forced to attend several seminaries,” Weaver nodded, “I, for one, certainly fail to see how their jokes are funny.”

“They have been fighting against the Primordial Annihilator and its servants since the Fall,” Eldrad Ulthran spoke for the first time in the presence of the Queen of the Swarm.

“When it suits them and butchering human populations is boring them, I suppose,” the tone of the mistress of spiders had stopped being so pleasant. “Two of your group know what I am speaking about, after all. Did you think I would not recognise you, the two prisoners we took on the Ork battle-moon?”

Well at least this answered the answer of how good the memory of the Destroyer of Commorragh was.

Maea stepped forwards.

“We wish...to mend the differences existing between our two species. Further conflict will only reinforce the Primordial Annihilator.”

Several of the armoured giants, both humans and Necrons, made noises that Yvraine knew were ones of derision.

“Further conflict will make your race extinct, you mean,” the Necron leader corrected in something that would be akin to amusement for the soulless. “Commorragh was not enough to wipe you out to the last life, weak descendants of the Aeldari, but it ended a significant majority of your population. Even if the Imperium of Mankind lost a million humans for every single warrior you have left, they likely have enough to drown every Craftworld and world you have left.”

“My point stands. It will leave you open to the attacks of the Primordial Annihilator.”

“Give us a little credit, *Eldar*,” Weaver had returned to caress her spider. Well, to each their own, Yvraine supposed. “We are going to fight the Primordial Annihilator. Unlike your race, we have no wish to empower the Ruinous Powers and let them tear open the fabric of this galaxy. No, I have no intention to fight a war against your species in the next centuries unless you continue to annoy me. If you do however, I can promise you the retribution I sent against Biel-Tan will look to you like a mere skirmish compared to the efforts the Imperium will unleash against the Craftworlds and every power allied or supporting your race.”

“You need us.” Oh, damn it. Wasn’t someone supposed to shut the mouth of this Farseer if he tried to speak it.

“And you are?”

“Farseer Eldorath Starbane of Alaitoc. And you need us to counter the rise of Oblivion, Angel of Death.”

The golden-winged being burning in golden light...exploded in laughter.

“Oh that’s a good one,” Trazyn chuckled too. “Can you repeat it once again? I wasn’t properly recording it the first time.”

Even a few Asuryani laughed behind her, the Autarch of Lugganath foremost among them.

At least for a few seconds, the great lodge was a chorus of laughs and hilarity.

Laughter which abruptly stopped when they realised who else was laughing-purring with them.

“I’m sorry,” the Queen of Blades said baring her teeth, playing with her daggers and leaning against a green column. “But there are no more opponents, and you sounded like you had fun. Don’t worry, I will just listen. Act like if I wasn’t here.”

This had to be one of the most ridiculous ‘suggestions’ Yvraine had ever heard...

**Herald Aurelia Malys**

Aurelia had to admit it. Like a child, she gaped. The fight was over in the arena...everyone was dead. Well, everyone but the Queen of the Blades.

Khaine’s bloody hands, how strong...how strong was this monster? Necrons, humans, insects...all had been slain with a frightening rapidity.

“Do you want to spar with me, ‘Empress’?”

It took a long moment for Aurelia to realise the last Eldanesh had spoken to *Maelsha’eil Dannan*.

“No, thank you,” the golden human replied. “I am soon going to leave for a military campaign, and I don’t want to do it counting how many of my bones won’t be broken up.”

“Ah yes, the Dark Throne of the C’Tan.” The tone was light, but there was underneath...respect. “You’re going to have a lot of challenges with the Necron opposition with that horror.”

“I’m really surprised you didn’t choose to go fighting with them at least once a while.”

For the first time, the ancient red-haired beauty sounded...less than confident.

“I am a highly-psychic being, despite my preference for the blade.” The Queen of Blades reluctantly admitted. “The null zone hurts my psyche and my body...significantly.”

This was apparently something born of experience.

“I can’t fight normally there, and there’s a reason we named it ‘Dark Throne of the C’Tan’, you know. Even after the Star-born monsters were shattered, many of their shards have been stored there. Attacking it...I hope you know what you’re doing. You may be able to shrug off partially the effects, but a lot of your troops won’t.”

“We’ve been working on sabotaging the devices creating the null-zone.” Weaver said slowly.

“This might be exactly what the Primordial Annihilator is awaiting.” Eldrad Ulthran warned.

The mistress of giant spiders made no move, but Yvraine could almost feel her irritation.

“I’ve spent twelve years planning for this campaign, Eldar. Do you really think I’ve not thought about it once or twice?” This was not an official dismissal, but it was very close. She immediately returned to her exchange with Hesperax. “I suppose you aren’t eager to participate, then?”

“There are a few heads which might be worth my time,” the Queen of Blades said. “But I’ve not decided if I will intervene. My Wyches really need more training.”

“Too bad.” The human seemed sincere. Maybe because after fighting each other at Commorragh, Weaver would like the Damned and the Soulless to deal with Hesperax.

“We however are willing to intervene.”

It was not a very unpleasant to be the undivided focus of this fledgling burning angel. A song resonated deeply everywhere. And it demanded Sacrifice, a shadow even affecting the power of Atharti.

“And you are?”

“I am Aurelia Malys, Herald of Atharti, now of Ulthwé-“

“-and formerly of Commorragh.”

That...had not been part of the plan.

“I believe I had a few clues now why the Emperor wanted you taken captive. Creating a new God? That’s impressively arrogant, even for Eldar.”

Aurelia feigned to ignore the purring of the crimson-haired gladiator.

“The Aspects were purified by your own deeds, Queen of the Swarm. And there isn’t one, there are two.”

“Yes, I suppose the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom is the other one, right?”

The human was...disturbingly well-informed.

“How?”

“There are few things I failed to do at Commorragh. Your capture was one. His survival was two. Since I see you burning in pink-red fire, it’s a rather easy deduction to think he’s the other one.”

The golden human took what had to be a meditative stance.

“Obviously, knowing your species, this has disaster written all over it. I just hope the next disaster won’t end with you creating another galactic-spanning nightmare.”

“We have learned of our mistakes.”

“No, no you really haven’t.” There was no negotiation, no hint of compromise. “Let’s stop the debate, I have better things to do. Why have you come speaking with me? You know I hate your species. I’ve seen the pit of atrocities you called Commorragh. I can assure you, I have not forgotten the good men and women who perished in my service to obliterate this evil realm of depravity.”

This was...not the way Asuryani or Drukhari conducted diplomacy...ever. But since there was no other choice...

“I am the Herald of Atharti. As you said, it might come as a God protecting our souls in full from the Primordial Annihilator. But to let it grow in strength, aside from prayers from dedicated followers, we need to consecrate new temples. And for that, the resource you call ‘Blackstone’ or ‘Noctilith’ is required.”

“You want us to deliver one of the most vital strategic resources in this galaxy?” the outburst had not come from Weaver or the Necron ruler, but from the Arch-Thief. “No, no! The last time they stole important stocks from us, they used it to build the ‘Talismans of Vaul’, also known as the Blackstone Fortresses! We can’t trust them to not stab us in the back immediately once they will have completed their new weapons!”

Several eyes turned to Lelith Hesperax, but the Aeldari female feigned to sleep. Obviously, no one believed that for a second.

“For once, I am fully in agreement with the Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace, young Asuryani.” The ‘Phaerakh’ rose from her throne. “I would not have trusted your race with our precious Noctilith during the War in Heaven, and I trust our crippled sub-species even less now. You created an abomination the likes had only been created by accident and the greatest conflict the galaxy had ever known. Most of your fellows refused to change their behaviours. And if there’s one pact you never betrayed, one species you have never insulted or broken oaths with, I have no idea which species this is.”

A sceptre slammed upon the decorated floor of the lodge.

“Humans and my Necrons have already enough difficulties finding sufficient quantities of Noctilith for our own purposes. Why would we even consider opening negotiations with Craftworld Ulthwé...or any faction of Asuryani?”

It was a good question...and one which had taken them a lot of time to find a good answer.

“Because,” the Herald of Carnality tried to not show any nervousness, “we believe we have discovered the very goal of the ‘Word Bearer’ faction which will strike at your alliance.”

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From: Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller

To: Lady General Taylor Hebert, commander-in-chief of Operation Stalingrad

Date: 700.309M35

Clearance: Sapphire-Black

Subject: Preliminary Order of Battle, Battlefleet Volga

*Your Celestial Highness,*

*As per your previous request, I can present below the warships which I can guarantee the full readiness in time for the beginning of the military operations. For the reasons you know about, the special units and the Mechanicus warships dispatched ahead of schedule to the Oblivion Quarantine Zone aren’t included in that list.*

*1st Battleship Division:* Eternal Crusader *(Gloriana, Black Templars),* Flamewrought *(Gloriana, Salamanders),* Covenant of Baal *(Legate, Blood Angels)*

*2nd Battleship Division:* Enterprise *(Enterprise, Stalingrad flagship),* Hornet *(Falchion, Mechanicus),* Opera Exitium *(Battle-Barge, Brothers of the Red)*

*3nd Battleship Division:* Dominus Astra *(Emperor, Müller),* Admiral Lawson *(Apocalypse),* Divine Diadem *(Apocalypse)*

*4th Battleship Division:* Son of Victory *(Victory, Reuenthal),* Sword of Jupiter *(Victory),* Admiral Kennington *(Victory)*

*5th Battleship Division:* Xenos Slayer *(Apocalypse),* Imperial Dawn *(Apocalypse),* Illustrious *(Emperor)*

*6th Battleship Division:* Crusade of Defiance *(Retribution),* Venerable *(Apocalypse),* Colossus *(Retribution)*

*7th Battleship Division:* Holy Diligence *(Emperor),* Prince of Stars *(Apocalypse),* Admiral Greenwich *(Apocalypse)*

*8th Battleship Division:* Star Ocean *(Retribution),* Superb Triumph *(Vanquisher),* Neptune *(Emperor)*

*1st Carrier Division:* Audacious *(Nemesis Fleet Carrier),* Admiral Houston *(Nemesis),* Moonstone *(Nemesis)*

*2nd Carrier Division:* The Great Quest *(Peregrine Fleet Carrier, Adeptus Mechanicus),* Holy Seneschal *(Peregrine),* Khan *(Nemesis)*

*Aegis Defence Squadron (4 Divisions of 3 ships): 12 Aegis-class Battlecruisers (Navy and Mechanicus crews)*

*Mars Battlecruiser Division: Champion of Kar Duniash (Mars), Domination’s Pride (Mars), Tribune (Mars)*

*Cruiser Divisions (72 ships in total, 12 Divisions of 6 ships):*

*36 Venus-class Cruisers*

*12 Dominator-class Cruisers*

*6 Gothic-class Cruisers*

*6 Lunar-class Cruisers*

*12 Astartes Strike Cruisers*

*Light Cruiser Divisions (72 ships in total, 12 Divisions of 6 ships):*

*24 Dauntless-class*

*18 Defender-class*

*15 Endeavour-class*

*15 Endurance-class*

*Frigate Flotillas (130 ships in total, 13 Flotillas of 10 ships):*

*22 Falchion-class*

*24 Firestorm-class*

*70 Sword-class*

*14 Tempest-class*

*Destroyer Flotillas (144 ships in total, 12 Flotillas of 12 ships):*

*48 Hoplite-class Destroyers*

*48 Warrior-class Destroyers*

*48 Cobra-class Destroyers*

*Starfighter Squadrons:*

*20 000 Fury-class Interceptors in 2000 Squadrons*

*10 000 Starhawk-class Bombers in 1000 Squadrons*

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**Nyx System**

**Emperor-class Battleship *Dominus Astra***

**3.031.310M35**

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

“A new contingency plan? With all due respect, Lord Admiral I can’t say it fills me with excitation.”

Neidhart didn’t turn his eyes from the spectacle of the hundreds of warships returning to the *Ferrus’ Revenge* shipyards a last time.

“Something tells me it is more the source of information which might have caused such plans that troubles you.”

“One can’t hide anything in your presence,” Oskar von Reuenthal joked before returning to a more serious expression. “But yes, the origin of the information is...troubling.”

The Lord Admiral had a feeling the younger man wanted to use a far, far stronger word than that, but refrained, for the sake of politeness.

“I understand. To be clear, what this contingency implies don’t fill me with joy either. And I don’t think the Basileia is overjoyed to consider it too. But we have a duty to the Imperium, and in that case, the Eldar have a really good motivation to sell us the truth. After all, the Basileia and the Nerushlatset Necrons have only agreed to begin true negotiations *if* the information ends to be valuable for the campaign and they don’t stab us in the back. In the case the Eldar are...their usual Eldar-selves, they will receive nothing, and I suppose whatever Battlefleet we can free from patrol duties will receive the nice gift of punishing them.”

It was not a plan ‘whatever happens we will win’, but it was not a situation where the Imperium had a lot to lose. Unless the long-eared xenos had really decided to begin a total war against the Imperium and believed ambushing the forces of Operation Stalingrad was the first part of their master plan. That said, whatever early their victories would win in the first months, it would end with their bases destroyed and the Eldar being on the receiving end of a xenocide. After Commorragh, the mood of the High Command of Kar Duniash wasn’t Eldar-friendly. Not when the rumours about the ‘Drukhari’ had revealed themselves true, no matter how horrible.

“I will concede it is true,” Reuenthal said before saying the fatal word. “But...there was no logical incentive I am able to see which would benefit some of these xenos from intervening at Commorragh – apart from their love of killing our soldiers, that is – and yet, they did it nonetheless. So yes, there are no obvious reasons for the Eldar to betray us, but that doesn’t mean their twisted minds won’t find one.”

“A point,” the grey-haired Admiral agreed before shrugging. “That said, I don’t see what the new contingency will change if they try to betray us. We aren’t really placing any Battle Group into position of a stellar region where their corsairs are able to strike with impunity, and if anything, the fact they presented themselves in front of Lady Weaver is heightening our state of alert against any Eldar’s sneak attack.”

“Yes...” His second in command for their –temporary- detachment to Battlefleet Volga nodded. “With your permission, I would like to relay the basic details to von Schafer. I know he probably won’t need it, but at least if the Eldar want to do more tricks in the Sector, the fleet assets we leave behind will be on their guard.”

Neidhart thought about it for a few seconds while abandoning his sightseeing hobby and returning to his desk.

“Fine. It’s not like it is really classified information in our circles anyway. Now what was the next order of the day?”

“Oh, the usual, Lord Admiral.” Reuenthal was not known to show him wide smiles, so when the young Admiral did, Neidhart knew it was going to be ‘interesting’. “I think you missed it with all the fleet exercises, but Archmagos Cawl is back.”

Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx Neidhart Müller groaned.

“Please don’t tell me what I think you have on your data-slate.”

“Sorry, Lord Admiral.” The apology was particularly insincere, in his opinion. “He wants to be included in the order of battle.”

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**3.035.310M35**

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

Marianne had expected a lot of things to happen the moment she landed on Nyx.

She hadn’t expected to be intercepted by a golden spider the size of a Baneblade.

Second surprise, the Vicequeen had not expected the spider to be able to *talk*.

Evidently, things had changed at Nyx during this last decade.

“Now let’s go back to my original question,” the metallic box serving as translator wasn’t sufficient to hide the curiosity of the enormous arachnid. “What is in the container behind you?”

“It’s a surprise for Lady Weaver.” The Speaker’s daughter replied before frowning. How did one address an arachnid in the first place? “Lady-“

“I prefer the title of Adjutant-General of the Webmistress, but I love Lady too!” Had her impressive interlocutor been human, Marianne believed she would have beamed and inflated under the compliments. “I am Artemis, the Cunning Huntress, Prime of the *Araneidae Gigantis Nyxian Amazonia Hebert*, chief of insect operations under Marshal Rokossovsky for Operation Stalingrad.”

Marianne smiled.

“The Departmento Munitorum really accepted that? I don’t doubt your talents, but the Munitorum in general is very...err...discriminatory about the presence of non-humans in the command structure.”

“They are very racist, you mean,” the spider corrected without bothering with diplomacy. “But I became very good at burying them in mountains of vellum with the help of my sisters, and if Lisa bludgeoned her Templar Sisters into accepting them as ‘Mistress of Lisa’s Dome’, then surely I should have a title, the influence of all my arachnid sisters and cousins in the Swarm demands it! The ants are already the wardens of Formicarium, the spiders must unite and prove they are one of the three great powers of the Swarm! We are after all the sole and only providers of the fabulous silk! Don’t you think that alone deserves plenty of recognition?”

“Assuredly,” Marianne quickly agreed. “Judging by your words, should I believe a Guild of Silk is going to be created?”

“Its official unveiling will happen immediately after Operation Stalingrad,” the spider joyously proclaimed. “We have already plenty of positive returns for contracts of heraldry banners with the Titans Legios we could contact these last years.”

In the depth of her mind, Marianne reassessed significantly upwards how intelligent this species of spider was to think about business practises...if not particularly to sprout all their secrets in the middle of a spaceport.

Unless...

“You are trying to convince me to join one of your business ventures, aren’t you?”

“The Webmistress’ affirmations you were very smart aren’t exaggerated!” The eight silvery eyes stared at her. “She also said you were quite attractive, but no offence, except the Webmistress, you humans are all the same to me. You are intelligent, that much isn’t in doubt, but you have too few legs and eyes to be as attractive me! It’s not your fault, of course...err...I’m going to stop talking. The Webmistress tells me I should not speak with everyone I meet.”

Marianne chuckled.

“Yes, you should follow their advice.” The owner of the *White Ducat* said. “Do you know where I can find the Lady Basileia?”

“Oh she should be here soon! I was coming to give her my report. You aren’t here to ask her in marriage, don’t you? I have already ordered to incinerate thousands of proposals this year! Or is it about what you have in the container?”

Marianne wasn’t going to reveal to this Baneblade-sized arachnid she had another spider in said container. Would ‘Artemis the Cunning Huntress’ insist upon freeing her ‘cousin’ immediately? She had a good feeling as it was that the stasis field trapping the elusive spider was the only thing which hid it from the ‘Adjutant-General’.

“It’s a surprise for your mistress, not you, Cunning Huntress. Now you were saying something about business opportunities?”

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*Vehicle Name: Sphinx*

*Classification: Self-Propelled Howitzer*

*Project leader: Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus*

*Worlds of production: Nyx, Alamo*

*Known Pattern: I*

*Crew: 5; Commander, Driver, Gunner, 2 Loaders*

*Powerplant: Nyx-Vulkan V18 Coupled Multi-Burn*

*Weight: 50 tonnes*

*Length: 7.5 metres (without cannon); 12 metres (with cannon)*

*Width: 4.1 metres*

*Height: 2.91 metres*

*Ground Clearance: 0.47 metres*

*Operational Range: 500 kilometres*

*Max speed – on road: 65 km/h*

*Max speed – off road: 30 km/h*

*Transport Capacity: none*

*Main Armament: Sphinx Cannon (175mm Delta-Septimus pattern)*

*Maximal Range of the main armament: 60 kilometres*

*Secondary Armament: Heavy Bolter*

*Traverse: 360 degrees*

*Elevation: From 0 to 60 degrees*

*Main Ammunition: 50 rounds*

*Secondary Ammunition: 500 rounds*

*Armour Superstructure: 100 mm*

*Armour Hull: 150 mm*

*Gun Mantlet: None*

*Vehicle Designation: S162-P7725-H4102-I223-N9001-X6734*

*Firing Ports: N/A*

*Turret: N/A*

*Important: Possesses its ammunition resupply vehicle based on an unarmed Sphinx-pattern*

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**Hive Athena**

**3.039.310M35**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

The Spire’s kitchens of Hive Athena were a temple where the noble art of cooking was worshipped. Even someone like Dragon who had no real need to eat normal food acknowledged it without hesitation.

Immense – the cooks had to satisfy the hunger of the entire Spire, from the Basileia to the humblest employee – you could ask someone to present you anything related to food or drinks, and save very rare exceptions, it would be shown to you. Baking ovens, pans, utensils, spit to roast the meat, and countless other things were at the disposition of some of the best persons, receiving each day enormous quantities of food from the new Agri-Hives, the Garden-Domes, the Agri-World of Ruby’s Harvest, and other locations of the Nyx System where food was grown. Sometimes it went well beyond that, but it was exceptional: Taylor Hebert didn’t like wasting money when an extremely varied array of meat, crustaceans, vegetables, fruits, and more delicacies was harvested next door. These days, even Lisa and the other Titan Moth’s impressive regimen were satiated by Nyxian food-production...mostly. Especially in the case of Lisa, who was always ready to ‘discover’ new culinary experiences.

In this kingdom were the chefs were vice-kings, two Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard were playing the role of overseers, sentinels, and master chefs. Unlike what had happened for paintings, statues, and other forms of art, the two Astartes weren’t line of Sanguinius but of Dorn. Their names were Apothecary Moreno of the Halo Brethren and Captain Vilanova of the Emperor’s Warbringers – though the latter preferred in general to be called by his title of Master of Reconnaissance. Ever pragmatic, the descendants of the Imperial Fists recognised that for all its claims of ultra-performance, a Space Marine had to eat regularly. And since the sense of taste was not in the least diminished when you were surgically altered to become one of the Emperor’s Angel of Death, it was all the better that the food was of excellent taste and quality.

They had not met much complaints coming from the other Space Marines; everyone knew that on the battlefield, the ‘rations’ of the Mechanicum had all the nutrition elements to survive one more day...and were so awful even starving men still complained about them. Indeed, the ‘culinary reforms’ began ten years ago may very well be the ones which would have the greatest impact from the point of view of the lowest-ranked soldiers of the Imperial Guard.

Dragon didn’t come often to these kitchens, she could say this without lying. And in general, it was for the same reason she did today: because Taylor was here.

It would be a surprise for many, though not for the people who knew her, but the no-longer-terribly-young ‘Living Saint’ frequently visited the kitchens of the Hives she resided in, and didn’t hesitate to play with the ingredients for a few hours on her own.

Dragon was rather certain this was the case today, as when she had passed the security checkpoints outside, a rather pleasant odour of cooked tomato and cheese arrived nearly overwhelmed her senses.

Seconds later, she found the Victor of Commorragh busy preparing a few more pizzas to accompany the dozens cooking into the ovens.

“Dragon!” the black-haired woman welcomed her. “You see Moreno? I told you Dragon would smell the pizza half a continent away!”

The Space Marine shrugged and continued a precise and incredibly dynamic work of putting the topping on the pizza before him.

“These are the pizza for your Astartes, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” the Basileia replied. “What gave it away? The pieces of poisoned lobster, or the ultra-concentrated ingredients?”

“The poisoned lobster,” Dragon snarked. “Though I think the ‘light tomatoes’ used are also a clue. Normal humans don’t exactly eat those.”

“Which is a pity,” remarked the second Space Marine, bringing new piles of food which would undoubtedly serve for new pizzas. “The taste is absolutely fantastic.”

The conversation was idle chatter for a few more minutes, until the work on the last pizzas was declared complete and there was nothing to do but wait.

“I have good news. We were able to finish one more division worth of modern artillery before the deadline.”

“Basilisks and Vermilion rocket-launchers?”

“And Sphinxes. We’re beginning to resolve our trained manpower problems in the orbital production lines.”

“Well...that’s good news.” The parahuman insect-mistress touched her lower lip in deep thought. “Of course the big question is what we’re going to do with them. The Tank Armies and the Artillery Armies have all received their standard allowance in artillery guns, and it’s far too late to shift from Basilisks to Sphinxes for the armies which haven’t them.”

“I know.” Only someone who had not learned anything about weapon training and logistics would try that. “That’s why I’m willing to experiment a few things like we did with the forces we sent in the Atlantis Sector a few years ago.”

“We did that for the Nyx Mark II Carapace Armour, Dragon and it wasn’t exactly what I would call a triumph.” The answer of her ‘boss’ wasn’t exactly filled with unbridled confidence.

“And the rocket-launchers,” the Tinker joyously added. “In fact, this was what made the soldiers change the name from Katyusha to Vermilion Dawn.”

The bureaucratic change of the name had taken a lot more time, but it had been done nonetheless, proof officers and enlisted men could really do their share of paperwork when they wanted something.

“I have not forgotten. Do you really think it’s that good an idea? I’m not against the concept of improvising, but this isn’t going to be Atlantis PDF and corrupt Priests on the other side this time, Dragon.”

“Technically, one side is consisting of corrupted Priests...”

Taylor snorted.

“Be careful and don’t let any Ecclesiarch ears hear that. I have a feeling they wouldn’t like the comparison.”

“What is said in my enclaves, stay in my enclaves.” The draconic Tech-Priestess swore, before giving the latest updates on the multitude of things produced by the Nyxian industry to contribute to Operation Stalingrad. Most were the routine updates on the Mark IX Astartes Power Armour, the ‘Hospitaller’ equipment of the Templar Sororitas, the new Volkite Bolters, and obviously the ferrying of her Dragon Armours to the *Hornet* and other warships where they would wait the order to be unleashed. “And speaking of what must stay behind closed doors, I’ve noticed our dear Lady Marianne Gutenberg is back.”

“Well, since Artemis is the queen of gossipers and happened to meet her at the Giraffe Spaceport...”

Dragon smirked. She had had her doubts about the orders which had led to the genetic experiments on several spiders, but the mistress of the Fafnir Mechanicus Enclave had to admit the final result was...very entertaining.

Oh, Taylor had absolutely mastery of these giant golden spiders when they were in the range of her power – which had never stopped expanding these years. But these ‘General-spiders’, as the crowds loved to nickname them, retained funny personalities in addition to an adamantium-strong sense of loyalty to their ‘Webmistress’.

“Afraid that your loyal Adjutant is trying to play matchmaker again?”

The Basileia raised her eyes to the ceiling in consternation.

“Very funny, Dragon.”

“Well, it is very funny, you have to admit.” The Minister of Industry was tempted to laugh. “You know, when you arrived at that conference, the High Queen of House Terryn was sooo disappointed Artemis had falsified the papers...”

“Continue and I confiscate your personal command vehicle.”

Dragon tried the expression of outraged innocence.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

She received a very ironic expression for sole answer.

“Fine.” The Mistress of Dragons relented. “Pleasant company aside, were there important technological items released in your custody?”

“One, as a matter of fact. You know the request we made a few years ago to examine the Ansibles of Sol?”

“The one which is probably buried somewhere between Mars and Jupiter, you mean?” She asked rhetorically. “Yes, I remember. Did the Heiress managed to recover it and pass it through?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Though she confirmed the ‘delays’ may be due to the intervention of the Administratum.”

“The Adepts of this organisation have no business in the...ah, I see. Vandire is trying to play his games because it’s you making the demand?”

“Almost certainly,” was the not very comforting answer. “But while it’s still blocked officially, the Fabricator-General and the Speaker for the Chartist Captains accepted your arguments...unofficially. Some of the data will be sent via an unofficial line to Fafnir and stocked there. Obviously proper studies will have to wait we’re back from the military campaign, but the data will be there waiting for you.”

“That’s very good news. It’s only the first step onto FTL communications I have in mind, but it is a massive step.”

“Don’t sell the bear’s skin ahead of schedule,” the golden-winged parahuman warned her. “There’s a reason the Tech-Priests are unable to build new ones.”

“I remain confident I will be able to find what’s missing. Don’t ask me for a proper schedule, however. I have a feeling understanding the basics of these devices is going to take me months if not years.”

“Even if it is years, at least you won’t have the weight of the Terran bureaucracy on your back to screw up everything...”

**Nyx System**

**Grand Cruiser *Pavian Victory***

**3.042.310M35**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

“And so I asked the spider how much her services cost,” Julia finished. “She told me ‘one billion per hour’. And I suddenly realised that flattering this superb silk-weaver was not enough to give me a free dress.”

Wolfgang laughed at the final outcome of the ‘dress negotiations’.

“I’m regretting having missed the last years of Nyx. They looked like they were eventful, especially if these giant spiders...actually, what are they called? Surely, you don’t use their High Gothic Name every time.”

“No, we don’t,” Adriana admitted. “Only in the spider’s presence. It’s one of the few flatteries they are really vulnerable to. In the Navy, we call them Maximus Spiders. The Guard call them General Spiders.”

“And so the legendary rivalry between the Guard and the Navy continues on another field,” Wolfgang drily commented. The twins didn’t comment. “Are there many on the *Enterprise*? Just trying to prepare myself for the inevitable confrontation, you understand.”

“No, not really,” Julia said. “Artemis – she’s the Basileia’s the favourite and proud of it - is the one whose presence aboard the Battleship has been confirmed. I doubt there will be more than two. The automated systems mean there’s some free space, but we can’t exactly bring a colony of Baneblade-sized spiders.”

“The size of a Baneblade?” Wolfgang narrowed his eyes. “You mentioned big, but not *how* big!”

“I didn’t?” Julia spoke in an innocent tone which didn’t fool him. “Oops.”

“To be fair, this is their fully adult size,” Adriana told him in a relaxing tone, “and since the first stable generation has barely reached the age of maturity, I doubt that there are that many who are bigger than a Leman Russ.”

“This is a guessing game and you know it, sister,” Julia told her twin before turning towards him. “When it comes down to it, we don’t really know how much of these ‘Mecha-insects’ and giant specialised arachnids have been mustered. While plenty of armies and fleets mustered for Operation Stalingrad are common knowledge, the only thing we know about the ‘Swarm’ is how many transports have been gathered. And there are a lot of them, so...”

Wolfgang raised his glass in salute.

“To the Swarm, then,” the twins gave him back surprised looks. “You weren’t at Commorragh when the Helspiders allowed us to devastate the first lines of defences. But I can assure you that they did a fantastic job, and these were forces the xenos had been stupid enough to give Her Celestial Highness. If we are able to land these specialised insects upon the Monolith alive, I know the Necrons are going to live the worst day in their metallic lives.”

“Golden Throne, I can pray to that,” Adriana spoke. “I certainly don’t want to share the fate of this wrecked Gloriana they towed here five days ago.”

“So they recovered it,” Wolfgang murmured. “I was told an operation would be prepared before I left. It looks they were successful.”

“The Super-Battleship should have reached the Ring of Iron by now,” the newly promoted Commander of the Imperial Navy said. “And the political infighting will have started in earnest.”

If anything, it was certainly two weak words to describe the schemes and betrayals which would literally and metaphorically send blood everywhere where the Throneworld and Sol were concerned. With the *Flamewrought*, the problem of ownership had not existed: it belonged to Nocturne – technically it belonged to the Primarch Vulkan, but who was going to argue with the Salamanders? – and thus the pyromaniac Space Marines were using it again. The case of a Gloriana which legally and bureaucratically didn’t exist was...complicated.

“Nothing you or I can do about it for now, I suppose,” the Rogue Trader said.

“Indeed,” Julia approved. “But there are other activities where you have much leeway...”

“We are ordered to present ourselves on the Enterprise in forty-eight hours, Lord Rogue Trader.” Adriana added. “And since the Lady Basileia doesn’t tolerate any slacking off under her command, it might be the last period of free time we will have in a long time.”

“It would be a shame, a shame I say,” he said in an aristocratic drawl, “to refuse your so-pleasurable invitations when we have stayed apart for so long...”

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*Order of Battle of Army Group Volga on 3.001.310M35 (24 Armies)*:

*20th Tank Army of the Vostroyan Firstborn – 110 regiments, 500000 men*

*2nd Tank Army of Nyx – 105 regiments, 500000 men and women*

*3rd Tank Army of Nyx – 105 regiments, 500000 men and women*

*2nd Tank Army of the Faeburn Vanquishers – 121 regiments, 600000 men and women*

*5th Shock Army of Nyx – 170 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*6th Shock Army of Nyx – 170 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*51st Jaeger Ventrillian Noble Army – 350 regiments, 2 million men and women*

*312th Shock Army of the Vostroyan Firstborn – 100 regiments, 1.4 million men*

*19th Shock Army of the Faeburn Vanquishers – 130 regiments, 1.7 million men and women*

*9th Zoologist Assault Force of the Indigan Praefects – 85 regiments, 500000 men and women*

*4th Paragonian Mechanised Army – 143 regiments, 3 million men*

*25th Mechanised Army of Nyx – 154 regiments, 2.5 million men and women*

*26th Line Army of Nyx – 193 regiments, 4 million men and women*

*10th Korps of Krieg – 672 regiments, 10 million men*

*40th Zoologist-Group of the Indigan Praefects – 268 regiments, 3 million men and women*

*6th Field Army of the Vostroyan Firstborn – 228 regiments, 2 million men*

*1st Line Army of Ophelia – 100 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*2nd Line Army of Ophelia – 100 regiments, 1 million men and women*

*22nd Army of the Paruthan Immortals – 201 regiments, 750000 men*

*33rd Army of the Auroran Rifles – 117 regiments, 2 million men and women*

*11th Artillery Army of Nyx – 120 regiments, 400000 men and women*

*12th Artillery Army of Nyx – 120 regiments, 400000 men and women*

*75th Artillery Army of Vostroya – 109 regiments, 500000 men*

*64th Artillery Army of the Indigan Praefects – 71 regiments, 700000 men and women*