**Extermination Interlude 1**

**Commorragh Delenda Est**

*The future of the Aeldari race was bleak after* Maelsha'eil Dannan *had finished annihilating Commorragh and participated in dealing the final blow to She-Who-Thirsts.*

*If yet more evidence was needed of how far we had fallen, the survivors of this massacre and the Webway factions not involved in the fighting ended up being unable to even give accurate estimates of how many lives the Second Fall had cost.*

*Several Farseers spoke of very vague numbers for cycles, but ultimately we had to use the human estimates, which, for all their imperfections, at least could be reasonably counted on to serve as minimum casualty figures.*

*It made, no matter your point of view, for very grim reading. Seven hundred and seventy-seven Battleships, two thousand five hundred and twenty-one Cruisers, seven thousand four hundred and ninety-six Frigates and Destroyers, and over three hundred and fifty thousand Light Attack Craft had met their end during the successive fleet engagements and one-sided genocidal punishments. The Imperium of Mankind announced that their invasion had been able to kill one hundred and thirty-six billion Drukhari, Asuryani, and Harlequins; a number that most Craftworlds would determine was decidedly low compared to the real level of destruction. The death count of mercenaries was more nebulous, but the winners spoke of at least eight hundred eighty billion non-Aeldari disintegrated.*

*The fact that over a hundred and thirty billion veteran Drukhari and Asuryani warriors had been lost in this maelstrom of blood and psychic devastation was bad enough. It was nothing however compared to the loss of Commorragh and all surrounding realms, the three Great Ports and Pandaimon, the millions of weapon factories, the tens of thousands of spires and bastions, the fifteen thousand-plus Haemonculi labs, the millions of slave-holding facilities, and the absolute annihilation of all strategic reserves, be they warriors, metals, or esoteric artefacts. Seventy-five percent of all shipbuilding and ship-repair infrastructure in the entire Webway was confirmed destroyed. The percentage of skilled workforce of expert artisans, architects, and machine-builders was even higher than that.*

*The Angel of Death had truly deserved her name, and as the Harlequins spread the tale of The* Fall of Slaanesh and the Return of Hope*, a new doctrine was formulated. Contact with* Maelsha'eil Dannan *had to be avoided at all costs. Battles which had the potential to summon the new human warlord who had brought us to our knees were outright cancelled. The mere sight of the Swarm was an event which had to be answered by an extremely quick escape. Avoiding provocations wherever the humans were involved and fleeing immediately at her coming were the new orders. Commorragh and Biel-Tan convinced even the harshest conservative commander that trying to attack Weaver was pure folly. The Destroyer of the Dark City was – and still is – a force of elemental destruction, and attempting to manipulate her and failing would be sure to end in a lot of dead Craftworlds and billions of disembowelled Aeldari.*

*The exception is the Queen of Blades. But then that old monster always played by her own rules.*

*The Mark of Commorragh was not all awful news, of course. Slaanesh was dead, and thanks to the ingeniousness of Farseer Eldrad Ulthran, the psychic brand of Sacrifice could be almost ignored after a while, though of course the nightmares and post-battle shock would pursue all survivors for many long cycles.*

*Aeldari were still important targets for the Primordial Annihilator, but the last daemons of Excess which had survived the Second Fall were far too busy fleeing through the Great Ocean and managing their dwindling power and resources to hunt us down.*

*She-Who-Thirsts was dead. Our Doom was gone. The Folly of the Ancient Empire had been reduced to pitiful scraps, by a species we had always refused to consider as anything more than a potential source of slaves.*

*And yet it was clear, contrary to what some idiots claimed, that things couldn't return to the 'good old days'. The Old Gods and the immensely powerful beings which had made the Aeldari the rulers of this galaxy and the apex of civilisation...they were still dead, missing, or crippled, save one. The shards of Khaine were dispersed and uncontrollable. Yes, the foremost predator was dead. But the consequences of the First Fall had not disappeared just because we wished it to be so. The Aeldari souls were still vulnerable, and immortality was not restored.*

*It was a New Age which dawned on the billions of Aeldari disunited across the galaxy. One we had to accept where we would not play the leading roles.*

*I am Aurelia Malys of Ulthwé, and I survived Commorragh to see this New Age begin.*

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“*Attention pathetic debauched mongrels of the Third Legion! Since the so-called 'Eternal One' has fled with his whip between his ass cheeks and four-fifths of your forces are dead, I generously reiterate the terms of your surrender. Once this communication ends, you will have one minute to comply. I advise you to make the correct choice...if your heads still have* *anything approaching sanity into them after the drugs*.” Announcement of the warlord called 'the Warsmith', Battle of the Blue Maelstrom.

“*SHE IS DEAD! SHE IS DEAD! SLAANESH IS DEAD! ALL IS LOST! SLAANESH IS DEAD! WE ARE LOST! SLAANESH IS DEAD*!” Psychic outburst emitted from the Battle-Barge *Sculpture of Orgy* of the Third Legion Astartes. The Fifteenth Legion which investigated several days later found no survivors aboard, yet the astropathic communication somehow continued for the equivalent of six months.

“*HA! HA! HA! I WAS RIGHT*!” according to Consortium witnesses, the first reaction of Fabius Bile when he was given the news about the Fall of Commorragh and the Death of Slaanesh.

“*The Governor was making his speech about resisting the tyranny of the God-Emperor when he suddenly fell to his knees, screamed like a little girl, and writhed in agony for long minutes! NO, THIS ISN'T A JOKE! The Governor is dead, and so are his two sons, three quarters of his wives, and half of his cousins! The plebeians are assaulting the palace! They have two-thirds of the PDF with them! Send us...what do you mean the Purple Guard of the Glorious Republic is dead too? You know what, I don't care. Send us the Valkyries, we are cancelling the contract and leaving. NO I AM NOT OVERREACTING! The crowd has been roused by several 'aquila-preachers' and are proclaiming that this is the Hour of the God-Emperor's Judgement or some such nonsense. There are millions of them! Send the Valkyries, we are leaving this damned planet*!” Exchange of communication on the frequencies of the Mercenary Company 'The Lucky Devils' on the Hive World of Braganza, five hours after the Mark of Commorragh.

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*The Battle of Commorragh and the Death of Slaanesh were, I will freely admit, an unpleasant surprise, and not just because I was present in a full session of the Ur-Council when it happened.*

*No, I didn't see it coming. I am not exactly in the favour of the Golden Throne, am I? And for all my talents and skills in predicting certain events, this secret was especially well-guarded. By my most optimistic estimate, I doubt more than ten Custodes and the architect of the plan had any idea an invasion of Commorragh was on the table.*

*Now let's speak of what you wanted to hear. Yes, the Death of Slaanesh...or as the citizens of the Imperium prefer to call it nowadays, the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement.*

*I was overseeing a session of the Ur-Council when it happened. Three men died. The first was Lord Admiral Srirangapatna, I think, with the second being Judge-Maximus Warangal, and the third being Lord Champaner. Yes, there were 'only' three. Yes, I knew they were cultists. What do you mean 'three is far too much'? The Ur-Council, much like the Senatorum Imperialis it detached itself from, was an assembly of tens of thousands of members. I wonder...if I led an investigation of the Senatorum Imperialis, how many worshippers of the Four would I have found before the Scouring of Commorragh? No answer, Inquisitor? Thank you, I continue.*

*It was the Mark of Commorragh. It was the Death of a God. It was certainly the Emperor's Judgement delivered upon Slaaneshi cultists, and at least in this instance the Terran propaganda had no need to befuddle the masses. Before the day was out, I knew most of the plans I had drafted for this millennium were reduced to ashes.*

*Terra-Nova and the Segmentum it ruled over would have likely fallen anyway, that much I think we can both agree on. The rumours of a full STC Database had already brought the hundreds of Forge Worlds toeing the party line to the brink of defection. Urdesh and a few other worlds had already returned to their Martian overlords. And I had evidence that at least Milhand and Artemia Majoris were negotiating with Mars.*

*The Scouring of Commorragh was the final push the cogboys needed to be convinced it would be far better to serve under the Angel of the Omnissiah than the daemons of secessionists who had never respected them much, if at all. And without the cogboys, Nova-Terra's armies would have little left in terms of* *ammunition production, construction dockyards, and all the other things one absolutely has to be in possession of to wage a war. People too often tend to forget that hundreds of worlds in Pacificus hadn't seceded, or if they had, it was not to join a pseudo-Imperium.*

*The Interregnum would have likely been over within the century given the new disastrous rapport of strength against the Imperium...but it was not strength which mattered anymore, was it? It was* faith*. Pacificus was without contest the least religious Segmentum of the Imperium, but even its citizens weren't immune to what the appearance of a Living Saint and the millions of 'miracles' the elimination of Slaaneshi cultists in a single hour represented.*

*Adding to what already promised to be the disintegration of a two centuries-old nation, Weaver was not a fanatic like most people who are imbued with a part of His power tend to be. Yes, I met two of them before her. Both times, they had received Wrath. My opinion of both was that while they were terrifyingly efficient on the battlefield, they made poor friends, sub-par rulers, and 'light is a merciless pyre' was a proverb that described them perfectly.*

*Unlike them, the Angel of Nyx wasn't fond of oppressing billions of civilians, launching Wars of Faith left and right, and while she massacred billions of xenos, it was difficult to argue that Commorragh didn't have it coming. It also helped she made for a rather attractive figure on the holo-vids and she genuinely brought peace after the flames of war.*

*I knew the moment I had a full report on her this was a very, very dangerous woman. And I didn't need foresight as the Nova-Terra Empire collapsed at its foundation to realize that Weaver was going to create something the Legions of Astartes waiting in the Eye of Terror should stop before it was too late.*

*The Basileia of Nyx had saved enough soldiers from the furnace of Commorragh to build herself an army which knew the Chaos Gods existed...and they knew because they had the proof that they could challenge the monsters and win staring right at them.*

*It was without precedent, and I was really surprised the few of the Old Guard who had once known the Primarchs didn't realise the implications of it. By the ashes of Caliban, even the Eldar understood it was best to either launch an offensive with everything they had or not march at all, and they are* *some of the most arrogant creatures in all creation.*

*Maybe they were too arrogant. Maybe they were too busy dealing with the consequences of the utter annihilation visited upon the Third Legion. The debased line of the Emperor's Children had lost ninety-two percent of its numbers in a few minutes, after all. And with their destruction, dozens of opportunities existed to seize planets, warships, forges, millions of slaves, and every other asset vital to continue the Legion Wars.*

*I was not there to see their reaction when Operation Stalingrad's results became common knowledge, but I imagine there was a lot of screaming and curses when it became obvious that they had a very large problem on their hands, and one they had foolishly assumed was going to disappear before they had to make a serious effort to get rid of it. When all evidence pointed towards the fact they had failed to learn the lessons of Operation Caribbean, the death of Commorragh, and the shattering of Excess.*

*Ah, they arrived. I'm sorry Inquisitor. I fear our time together is at an end. I advise you to run. Dark Angel interrogators are rather infamous for their lack of respect for proper authority.*

*Oh, my name?*

*I am Cypher, Saviour of Praxus. I am Fallen.*

*And I have a new long road ahead of me.*

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**96th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

'**DRAZHAR'**

'**THE LIVING BLADE'**

'**THE HIGH EXECUTIONER'**

**ELITE ASSASSIN**

**EXTREMIS-PHYSICAL THREAT**

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

**THE XENOS IS TO BE KILLED ON SIGHT AND INCINERATED COMPLETELY**

**REWARD: 13 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PLANET**

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"*Do not worry, Ibram. You did exactly what you had to do...and finding extraordinary STC toys is not exactly my department anyway. I leave that to one of my predecessors. I'm sure you know her name*," words attributed to Saint Sabbat upon the conclusion of the Battle for Menazoid Epsilon, 766M41.

"*The number of awards, rewards, and celebrations the Battle of Commorragh generated among the Imperium of Mankind was downright astonishing. The seven Stars of Terra and two Lions of Terra were what the historical* *records emphasized the most, but there were plenty of commemorative medals, street namings, and monuments for everyone. As a consequence, the fact the Imperial Navy has failed to give the name of Augustus von Kisher to a single starship, no matter the administration in charge, proves that the issue of the 'Fast Battleships' was not one a lot of Lord Admirals and naval commanders felt ready to forget*..." Extract from the *Price of Victory* by Victor II Cain, 001M41.

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**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**Twenty Minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

Thought for the day: Abhor the Night, it is the Light that Endures!

**Inquisitorial Acolyte Crixus Taft**

A lot of people had hoped years ago that the moment the Saint-Basileia took over the Nyx Sector, most of the reprehensible conduct of the nobility would cease. As Crixus Taft passed the green doors of a palace decorated with iridescent feathers, rubies, and golden statues, he thought many of these hopes must have been cruelly dashed in the Wuhan System.

Oh, the junior Acolyte of the Holy Inquisition didn't blame Lady Weaver. Firstly, because it was imprudent to blame someone who could remove your head from your shoulders while five kilometres away by sending a spider directly through your throat while you slept. Secondly, because it wasn't the fault of Lady Nyx that Wuhan stayed a place of the nobility's indulgence and decadence.

As the purges and the massive expansion of the Penal Legions had proved, the supreme ruler of Nyx had put an end to most of the problems caused by the nobility residing in the Sector's capital. Many arrogant aristocrats had left Arbites audiences with only the clothes on her back left of their fortune, and sometimes less than that. But that was in the Nyx System, a location where the word of General-Basileia Taylor Hebert was law. Outside of Nyx, it rapidly diminished. It was never nonexistent, but the places where the Heroine of the Imperium's power was as strong were more exceptions than the norm.

This was not a flaw of the Lex Imperialis; it was the system working exactly as it was supposed to. The Sector Lord – or in this case the Sector Lady – was supposed to be what High Gothic called the *primus inter pares*, the first among equals. Thanks to the expansive libraries Lord Inquisitor Tor put at the disposal of everyone of Acolyte rank and higher, Crixus knew that there were many instances from Obscurus to the Eastern Fringe where a Sector Lord or Lady was not even that. Nyx was assuredly the most economically, militarily, and technologically powerful world in the Sector – probably the most religiously relevant now too – but plenty of star clusters did not have this certainty thanks to the vagaries of Imperial history.

Consequently, yes Lady Weaver could do a lot of good for the Nyx Sector. Yes, she was more powerful than any member of the Menelaus dynasty in the last millennium had ever been – there were debates in Inquisitorial chambers whether the Basileia was five or six times more influential than her unlamented predecessor. But her reach wasn't unlimited, especially on the worlds where the local political actors hadn't submitted to her. Matapan, Fay, and Andes were firmly in Nyx's orbit, and recent moves suggested the mistakes of Omsk's rulers were going to ensure their system followed the same path.

Wuhan wasn't included in that list. Many of its Cartels had lost important shares to either the government of Nyx or the Aegean Cartel, but these purchases had slowed down in the last couple of years, and stayed well away from any majority vote: nine percent for the Hubei Cartel, ten percent of the Shanxi United Shipping Company, and only five percent for the far more valuable Wuhan-Cao Cartel. There were other things the winner of the Battle of the Death Star owned on this Hive World, but they were mainly concentrated around Hive Asao, where they contributed to the reconstruction and modernisation of the Hive.

Logically, the Lords-Magnate and the upper and lower nobility had stayed steadfastly loyal to Planetary Governor Hongfeng Cao. It wasn't because they were fond of the recently-elevated scoundrel; it was simply that the survival of their powerbases began and ended with him. The manipulative leader of Wuhan II had thus become famous for fulfilling all the vital obligations of his domains with extreme celerity, while avoiding anything that could threaten his grip upon his personal wealth and the political support of his fellow nobles as best as he could.

The Inquisitorial Acolyte did not believe he revealed an important secret by pointing out Hongfeng Cao's support among the middle and the lower classes was typical for a lazy, gluttonous, amoral, and debauched aristocrat. To be accurate, it ranged between 'very low' and 'nearly nonexistent'. But the rotund Governor controlled the PDF and the SDF through men loyal to him and him alone, and Lady Weaver's economic and political moves did not look like they were destined to break the status quo, so far. Some of it was certainly due to the manpower needs for the Munitorum tithe of one hundred million soldiers and the troop musters of Operation Caribbean, but...

The ex-Investigator of the Adeptus Arbites – theoretically he could go back to his former job, but he had realised long ago the Inquisitorial business was far more interesting for a man of his talents – blinked before chasing off these thoughts. The general politics of the Nyx Sector was something far above his pay grade, and utterly dangerous to involve yourself in. It was best to concentrate on his mission.

As the decadently decorated elevators brought him high up into the spire of Hive Chao-Lai, Crixus Taft maintained the same expression he had been showing to the rest of the galaxy for the better part of three hours, that of a self-righteous, haughty, and pompous being. Inquisitorial bio-masks and other technological devices allowed him to fool the Wuhanese security and present himself as Administratum Envoy Gerard Barlow without raising an alarm, but he had to use every scrap of information and observation he had gained in the last few weeks to play his role convincingly.

As for the real Gerard Barlow? The man was enjoying the hospitality of Arbites cells somewhere in the precincts of Nyx Tertius. That was what happened when your own superiors and the Nyx government had evidence you had pilfered from the tithe coffers and laundered money you weren't supposed to even look at in the first place.

“My friend, I was worried you wouldn't be able to come!”

Crixus allowed himself a slight but genuine smile when not two steps outside of the golden-azure elevator, a noble vaguely resembling a huge red bird with all the frippery and red ribbons he wore intercepted him. A good thing he had self-control and extensive preparations; knowing the man was Wu Asao, Lord-Magnate of Hive Asao, disgust was a lot of what he felt at the repulsive behaviour of the man. The Hive-Lord should be far too busy rebuilding his Hive and helping the millions of families the battle six years ago had put into precarious positions, but the rumours the Governor was financing the noble's lifestyle in exchange for his political allegiance were apparently well-founded.

"And miss the party?" The false-Envoy of the Adeptus Administratum chuckled. He did not have to fake it a lot; with the evidence he intended to gather tonight, hopefully there would be another party in a few days. One which would see Wu Asao and plenty of other Spire-born aristocrats dragged before Judges and the senior Inquisitors of the Nyx Conclave in chains to answer some pointed questions.

“Yes, we can't have that, can we?” The financially-imperilled noble chuckled back and invited him to walk in a direction even more outrageously decorated than the elevator. Two alleys of marble statues supposed to represent former Governors were mixing with old paintings of festivities and three-dimensional electronic representations of great balls and military parades. It went without saying that most of the time, the Cao line was praised to the heavens for their 'outstanding devotion to the ideals of the God-Emperor'.

The worst part was that he constantly had to keep a satisfied smile seeing this succession of falsehoods. Judging by the new standard Nyx set...bah, why was he thinking about that again? It was evident the Wuhanese nobles by themselves were unable to understand the meaning of the words 'duty' and 'devotion' even if someone opened a dictionary on the correct page for them.

The PDF uniforms, not that numerous in the first place, progressively thinned out and were replaced by the multi-coloured uniforms of Hongfeng Cao's personal guard. It wasn't the shade he had been expecting from the Inquisition's files, which meant the Governor had once again changed the appearance of his 'honour guard' in the last month. Crixus preferred not to ponder about the sheer costs involved or the morale of the soldiers forced to dress in more and more ridiculous garments.

It got worse as he and his 'friend' the Lord-Magnate entered the ballroom-sized halls which were their destination. As Crixus and his superiors had thought, the 'party' tonight included little dancing, at least not the vertical kind one generally associated with that word. There was loud, languorous music – that he didn't like, for the record – and many nobles he recognised immediately were using couches and sofas to partake in carnal activities without most of their costumes and clothes.

This was debauchery at its worst – though undoubtedly the organisers of it would beg to differ. Between the pillars of marble large tables overflowed with plates of precious metals filled with delicacies and crystal glasses with highly-expensive liquors regularly replenished. The floor was a sumptuous carpet of late M34 with an extremely sexual connotation, and upon it, servants in undergarments – when they still had them – served their masters and mistresses in every way they were asked to.

In this atmosphere of depravity, where piety and self-control had long since been banished, the Lord-Magnates were of course playing major roles. Lord-Magnate Fu Chen was playing games with a servant girl which involved a mini-cascade of chocolate and yellow fruits. Lord-Magnate Lian Han was in a very compromising position with two boys and three girls on a large beige sofa. And Lord Magnate Fulei Zhou was in a marble bath singing and doing things Crixus dearly hoped were removable by mind-scrubbing once this entire affair was over. Last but not least, Governor Hongfeng Cao sat naked on a very large throne, the path to reach him being crowded by rutting bodies and a spectacle of orgy Crixus had never seen before. Assuredly, the ruler of Wuhan Secundus had kept a smiling silver mask to hide his face, but between his small stature and the rings he wore around his fingers, his identity was a poorly-kept secret at best.

His mission taking priority, Crixus had to remove two-thirds of the costume he wore with a wide smile and follow Hive Asao's ruler, who had apparently zero reluctance about going fully naked and fondling...well, let's just say the opinion he had of Wu Asao and the Administratum Envoy he impersonated fell even lower, something he wouldn't have believed possible before landing.

But he had to play his role, behave like Gerard Barlow in order to not draw attention...though as the four or five men who apparently 'knew' him were in the process of downing golden cup after golden cup of substances which were not water, his gestures soon wouldn't have to be perfect, just enough to not look suspicious.

It was as he kissed a woman tattooed on every part of her body that he noticed a new wave of naked people entering the orgy halls. At first sight, they appeared no different from most servants; they wore as little as them, had half-covering masks on their faces, and some of them had a lot of rings and tattoos, not to mention other jewellery which was not Ministorum-approved.

But as an Acolyte of the Inquisition, he couldn't help but feel their presence...wrong. And some clearly had the wrong build to be servants; half of the bodies, while decidedly not fat and of a clearly young and vigorous constitution, once naked could not hide the first signs of drug abuse and several years of physical debauchery.

An imposing ring on one of the leading men's hands allowed Crixus to uncover the identity of at least one: Xu Cao, the Planetary Governor's fourth son, and a nasty piece of work even by the standards of the thousand-plus brood reigning upon the Hive of Cao-Lai.

The agent of the Nyx Conclave had only just come to this realisation when the group all drew cruel daggers which had been hidden by the golden trays they carried, and a heretical battle-cry was shouted.

“FOR SLAANESH! THE DARK PRINCE WILL HAVE YOUR SOULS FOR THE DARK CITY!”

The music abruptly stopped and some members of the nobility paused whatever carnal actions they were doing...not that it did much good. They were drunk, drugged, busy fornicating, and most of them had never followed a martial career a single day of their lives. In a few seconds, it became a massacre. Daggers slit throats and inflicted lethal wounds. Arteries were opened, and the carpet and the rest of the decor began to be tainted by blood. Crixus saw Xu Cao plunge his weapon into the chest of his half-brother Zheng Cao, Hongfeng's Heir, and this wasn't the only fratricide playing itself out, as judging by the imprecations and the screams of betrayal, many of the assassins were children in the line of succession themselves.

As an Acolyte, he wasn't defenceless. One of the rings he wore on his left hand was a digi-weapon, but it only had two shots, and he expended them quickly as two mouth-foaming naked cultists tried to assault him.

“Gerard, what?” The ruler of Hive Asao by his side, Crixus tried to evade the flow of killers, all the while wondering what in the name of the Golden Throne the guards' qualifications were to let that many assassins enter without so much as a whisper of alert.

Fortunately, the abundance of forks, knives, cups, and everything else useful for a decadent party meant he had an abundance of projectiles at his disposal. Unfortunately, his predilection had been more towards blunt, close-range weapons, and given the size of the daggers and short swords the cultist-assassins wielded, that was not prudent.

All he could do was buy time; the activation of his digi-weapon had also sent a powerful vox alert to his support that something had gone dreadfully wrong and the time for subtlety was officially over. If he managed to hold out long enough...

But it was a forlorn hope, and he knew it very well. Of all the participants now defending their lives, there were maybe three or four aside from him who were really causing problems for their attackers, and one by one the drunk aristocrats were cut down like grox at the slaughter. Crixus saw the Governor himself leave his throne and call for his guard to save him, only to be viciously stabbed by at least six grinning assassins, one of them being his son. The atmosphere of depravity and debauchery was replaced by terror and slaughter. Horrible odours floated in the air and even as he killed two of them the Acolyte heard sounds coming from the cultists' throats that no human throat should have made.

And then, in a moment he would remember until the day he died, all the attackers shrieked inhumanly.

“**NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!”

It was an expression of utmost agony and loathing, and Crixus truly felt fear for a couple of seconds.

And then every heretic, without exception, fell over dead with expressions of horrified surprise upon their treacherous faces.

“Miracle...” Wu Asao sobbed weakly by his side. “It's a miracle!”

The false-Envoy tried to open his mouth to tell the Lord-Magnate to not be ridiculous, but closed it before he could find the strength to say something.

Because if this wasn't the definition of a miracle, then what was?

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Craftworld Malan'tai**

**Mark of Commorragh**

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

Maea woke up screaming.

Upon any other day, she would have treated it as a nightmare and moved on.

Here and now she couldn't. The flow of visions didn't stop, and the young Seer had no choice but to watch as the threads of the future shattered by the billions only to reform mere heartbeats later. And then the possibilities shattered again, only to reform once more.

The entire future was not in jeopardy; it was no more. The laughter of the Primordial Annihilator had ceased.

The visions didn't stop.

Sometimes she saw the dark spires of Commorragh burning and this felt right. But too often there wasn't any joy to be found in the images which overwhelmed her.

The brown-haired Asuryani watched as the defences of Biel-Tan burned and the warriors sworn to defend the Craftworld with their lives were bombarded until entire sections collapsed and artworks older than thousands of Empires were cast into the void.

Around the planet-sized refuge of the Rebirth of Ancient Days, an Asuryani fleet was dying. There were tens of thousands of explosions, and Maea had no doubt that this was no accident; it was a deliberate, methodically planned saturation bombardment which was going to bring down the last defences of the Craftworld.

The boarders came soon enough. Gigantic Mon-keigh warriors in ungracious torpedo-like objects slammed into the Craftworld and poured into the gardens and streets, massacring every Asuryani they saw. Their ranks were legion; their colours were extremely diverse, going from yellow to dark grey, from white-black to blue-red. The only thing they seemed to have in common was the icon of a massive fist painted somewhere on their shoulders or their helmets.

Biel-Tan couldn't stop them. Biel-Tan burned, and the screams of dying Asuryani rose to the skies. She did not hear She-Who-Thirsts' laughter, and far from causing her to rejoice, it inflicted more sorrow upon her. Because Maea was absolutely sure, deep inside, that these Mon-keigh were not under the thrall of the Doom of the Aeldari. It was the fault of the Farseers and Autarchs of Biel-Tan that their enemies had mustered in a single location to punish the warmongers. She heard their battle-cries.

“DORN LIVES!”

The vision faded and another appeared. This time it was Arach-Qin which was under attack. It was burning, but not in any normal fire. The servants of the Primordial Annihilator, specifically those of the power of Change, had come to deal the death blow to the weakened Craftworld.

The visions didn't stop. They showed her Kher-Ys and Nacretimeï facing daemonic fleets and many, many other dangers. The other Craftworlds in existence weren't shown, and Maea honestly didn't know if this was for the better or the worse.

The galaxy was burning. Millions of wars were fought in conflagrations so massive her mind recoiled at the possible number of deaths, greater than the entire surviving Asuryani population. Empyreal storms raged and abated without rhyme or reason. Songs were wrecked and the memories of ancient times were lost. Mon-keigh armies waged wars against the Primordial Annihilator while endless ranks of their forces waited on the worlds spared by the birth-scream of She-Who-Thirsts.

There was no destiny for the Aeldari in this era of wars and massacres. There was just an eternal war, their numbers dwindling cycle after cycle until they were no more.

But she never heard the laughter of the Dark Prince.

There were no cruel whispers or soft words of temptation from the Doom of the Aeldari.

There was no pull on her soul or those of any Aeldari.

There was no maw to welcome the dead, for She-Who-Thirsts was **gone**.

The golden thunder struck at that realisation, but Maea felt her spirit stone quickly shield her from this unoriginal psychic attack...an attack which had not been one, she realised immediately. It was more an echo, a ricochet of a far more devastating blast.

There was no presence of the Doom anymore. There was no Excess. There was nothing left. There were no Gods tied to her soul, or to any Asuryani soul.

She was alone. They were alone. The Gods were dead, and it was their fault. Their fault!

Maea opened her eyes again, and as the visions faded, cried in the arms of Yvraine who had rushed into her quarters, attracted by her screams.

**The** **Eye of Terror**

**High Orbit above Hell Forge Sha'are Mavet**

**Gloriana Super-Battleship *Harbinger of Doom***

**Mark of Commorragh**

**Lord Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

It was always hard to properly estimate the production output of a Hell Forge in the Eye of Terror, and Sha'are Mavet was no exception to this rule. Part of it was the pernicious nature of the Great Warp Storm itself, and the other part was the Dark Mechanicum's over-reliance on secrets. Many jokes had been made about the cogboys who had followed them until the Siege, and all of them had a core of truth. Place two cogboys in an isolated room, claimed the most virulent critics, and you had enough data to fill entire libraries and enough conspiracies to make a civil war look like an enticing prospect. And while it might seem an exaggeration, it wasn't by much. Compared to the 'brotherhood' of Legionnaires Astartes – which ended in betrayals and murders with depressing regularity – the hereteks were worse in all aspects.

But for all its secrecy and its tendency to execute the Captains who offered too little in exchange for their services, nobody doubted Sha'are Mavet was a very minor Hell Forge. The zone where it could be found wasn't strategically valuable, nor did it have the blessing to suffer less from the Warp-tides causing rampant mutations among slaves and non-slaves on the surface. Its shipyards weren't able to build Battleships or Grand Cruisers, and should their depots be opened and the weapons inside counted one by one, Iskandar doubted he would find enough to arm two hundred Space Marines and five hundred thousand mortals.

As such, it was easy to argue that Khayon's presence and that of the Gloriana *Harbinger of Doom*, respectively Lord Vigilator of the Black Legion and the second-most-powerful warship of the Black Fleet, were hardly warranted.

A mid-sized Battleship could have fought its way through the orbital defences and the small system fleet of Sha'are Mavet. But he had brought three of them plus the *Harbinger of Doom*, and surrounding them were over sixty escorts.

Because this wasn't an ordinary raid; it was a looting expedition, and the Hell Forge was going to be plundered until nothing useful was left on the planet or the hulls were filled to the brink with machines, slaves, ore, data-lore, and artefacts.

So had his brother Ezekyle Abaddon ordered. And Khayon was going to obey his words to the letter. Long ago, at the beginning of the Legion Wars, Sha'are Mavet had participated in the despoiling of the Sons of Horus' fortresses and the Sack of Maeleum. There were rumours, most of them certainly correct, that the Hell-Masters governing the greatest forges had stolen many artefacts of the Sixteenth Legion and bodies of Legionnaires to improve their own forces. And they still supported large warbands of Emperor's Children, going so far as to let the depraved narcissists have their own enclave as long as they brought back millions of slaves to trade with the Mechanicum.

For all of these reasons and a million more, Iskandar felt a non-negligible amount of pleasure at the thought of plundering the planet and accelerating the decline of the Third Legion a bit more.

The most powerful Sorcerer of the Black Legion was about to give the order to begin the invasion proper, as the orbital defences had finished annoying him, when the part of his mind always tied to the Empyrean warned him of an oncoming danger from the Warp.

And as the seconds passed, the feeling something dreadful was nearly upon them intensified.

“Raise the Gellar Fields to full power, and sacrifice two of the wretches to boost their output!” he ordered by vox.

Iskandar had no time to verify if his order had been acknowledged. The death shriek of a God shook the Eye of Terror, and as he would learn later, all the Emperor's Children who still lived on Sha'are Mavet had just died, soul-drained by the Dark Princess in a desperate attempt to save her existence.

“**NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!”

It was like the few laws of reality which still existed in the Eye vanished. The Empyrean screamed and billions of daemons from the Change, Blood, and Decay courts were summoned and struck the Hell Forge before he could give the assault order. Forges exploded like volcanoes, their detonations so powerful the improved ethereal-augurs had no need to be particularly focused to reveal what had happened. Up became down, before becoming up again. Warships were thrown randomly across the system like obsolete toys the main players weren't interested in amusing themselves with anymore.

It was the apocalypse, and Sha'are Mavet was in the middle of this...psychic annihilation. The Gods were clashing, and there was no way he was going to be able to fight his way through that.

But as the pressure on the hull slowly decreased, the Lord Vigilator sighed in relief under his helmet. The Gellar Fields had been brought to full power in time. Studying the new situation, all capital ships were accounted for and able to fight. They had lost a few small ships, but since those had little valuable personnel onboard, their replacement shouldn't be too difficult.

“But I think we're going to need to find another Hell Forge to plunder...”

Sha'are Mavet was, to put it politely, experiencing a few upheavals. The planet was still in one piece, but it wasn't guaranteed that it was going to stay that way for much longer. Not with uncountable hordes of the Four-

And that's when Iskandar realised the terrible, dreadful silence where daemons of Excess should have shrieked and roared at the idea of their rivals trying to take a Hell Forge where they whispered.

Instead, there were fading whispers. There was an abyss...and then nothing.

Something had happened to Slaanesh, and it was...

“Lord,” a trembling mortal kneeled at fists' range, “the Captain sends his regards, and requests...an emergency departure. According to the instruments, the Astronomican's light has begun moving and will reach this system within ten minutes.”

“Of course,” Iskandar replied, still considering the gigantic problems which were going to arise if one of the Four was truly removed from the Game, and who in the name of his failure of a genitor could have done the deed if it was actually true. Then what the mortal had said truly caused him to pause and really consider the words.

The Astronomican was fixed on the Radiant Worlds. It was immobile, and while it could send an Avatar like Imperious outside it, it could easily be defeated, like the time they had journeyed to find Ezekyle and the *Vengeful Spirit*.

The Astronomican was a spear of golden flames and light tearing the reality of the Eye where it struck, but it hadn't expanded a centimetre forwards since the start of their Exile. It didn't expand. It couldn't, not with the one supposed to do the controlling in a near-dead state.

Except, as the Warp began to scream again, it was happening. The light of the Astronomican was moving.

“By Nurgle's putrid breath, what the hell is happening?”

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Andes System**

**Andes I**

**Five minutes after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Brigadier-General Tao Shujia**

Tao hated swamps, glutton-mosquitoes, and humid places. The fact that Andes Primus had all three of these things in abundance made him hate this cursed planet all the more.

It wasn't fair. He had spent ten years bowing and saluting before his uncle, Lord-Magnate Rongchun Shujia, and for what? A position in a hellhole no one cared for anymore once the 'glorious victory of Lady Weaver' had been announced!

Lord Rongchun and the rest of his councillors must have had a good laugh at his expense, to be sure. Their 'full support' had been barely enough to gain him the command of a regiment and the rank of Colonel; if the Sector hadn't been so starved for officers as thousands were needed for the Munitorum tithe and Operation Caribbean, he wouldn't have been named Brigadier-General.

Assuredly, House Shujia was the poorest and least influential Hive-ruling line of Wuhan Secundus – though House Asao was in neat decline so that may not be true for long – but it wasn't that far removed from the halls of power.

No, Tao knew this was a punishment. Exiled to a miserable planet where every chance of advancement and glory had been largely stripped before he set a foot upon it. If there were any doubts about it, he needed only to look at his 'command'. Once it had become clear the vicious Eldar had no wish to dance with the Imperial Guard and the other forces of the God-Emperor again, thousands of troops had been withdrawn and now Tao's effectives amounted to slightly less than thirty thousand men. That was right. Three regiments, two from Wuhan and one from Atlas, and some artillery support from Andes which was useless in the swamps, not that he was supposed to use it in an offensive manner: this was the anti-air and the mechanised elements ordered to defend Fort Ulm and the spaceport of Andes Primus. There were also a few cogboys, not that they really added anything with their presence. Despite his insistence, they had been unable to install a suitable air-conditioner or efficient devices against the glutton-mosquitoes.

This wasn't fair. He should have been able to win glory in the stars, to defeat xenos and return to Wuhan in triumph. Instead he was trapped, surrounded by these damn swamps, forced to wait until someone of higher rank decided he and the Wuhanese troops were of more utility elsewhere rather than waiting until old age and demobilisation found them.

And then the alarms of the Fort began to blare in anger. Tao stood up slowly and growled.

“This better be not one of that damned Corelli's security exercises...”

To say he and the senior officer of the Atlas 17th Line Infantry, one Flavio Corelli, were not friends was something of an understatement. That arrogant guinea hen had arrived in resplendent red armour and tried to avoid the searches in the swamps. Well, he had been quick to change his tune! Seeing the proud 'bluebloods' of Atlas – he hadn't bothered to learn whose noble's personal guard they had been recruited from – come from the swamps in all their muddy glory had been worth it, truly.

And miracle of miracles, this had stopped the whispers among the Wuhanese regiments that he didn't know what he was doing. That his azure-clad forces did not have to wade and flounder since the eleven thousand regulars of the Atlas 17th were doing it had greatly improved morale.

Of course, by the time he arrived at the command centre of Fort Mack, Colonel Corelli was already shouting orders to the cogboys and some Atlas operators.

“Situation!” Tao Shujia barked as he entered the war room and glared at the red uniforms facing him, though the stone-faced looks he received in return weren't exactly going to help them avoid the swamp chores.

“Approximately four minutes and fifty seconds ago,” the dark-haired officer began, “the satellites orbiting above Quadrant E registered a Gamma-class explosion. The preliminary numbers are giving us a yield of two hundred petajoules.”

The pict-casts transmitted on the hololithic displays were particularly good at giving a view of what could only be called 'devastation'. Most of the swamp in the area had been completely blasted away and well...most of the glutton-mosquitoes and the other wildlife had been pulverised. Tao was going to count that as a good thing.

“Since we had no company in this Quadrant this month and the local tribes were massacred by the xenos, it stands to reason this phenomenon is coherent with an explosion of the so-called 'Webway Gate' we have been searching for all these years.”

“There could be other explanations,” Tao replied with a disapproving expression, trying not to show any excitement. “The xenos could have left a few ugly surprises during their last passage, or decided it's time to mount a new offensive.”

“With all due respect,” Colonel Flavio Corelli almost spat the words, “for all the hatred we have for the long-ears, I have difficulties finding a reason why they would announce one of their offensives by nuking an area where we have no military presence.”

The Atlas officer was right, but Tao Shujia sure as the Golden Throne wasn't going to admit it to his face.

“Begin the preparations to send a company in Beta-class protective equipment, Colonel. I want a ground look on the zone to see what we're dealing with.”

“Yes, Sir,” Flavio Corelli replied after a moment, his jaw clenching but not offering a complaint. What a pity. A reason to sack this parvenu would have been even more amusing than seeing his troops flounder in the swamps with the anti-rad equipment.

Still, this was a momentous day. If the Eldar device had truly exploded, there wasn't any reason to keep a Brigade in garrison to guard the realm of the glutton-mosquitoes, no?

**The** **Eye of Terror**

**Callax**

**Fazar'nzlath'hesh the Pale Naga**

The name Callax was not native to the Eye of Terror or the fruit of the imagination of a Great Lord of the Pantheon. At the very beginning, it came from Chemos. To be precise, Callax had been the name of the fortress-factory the Primarch of the Emperor's Children had worked in for long years before step by step rising to the rank of executive.

It had immensely pleased Fazar'nzlath'hesh to reuse the name for its new Throneworld. The original Callax was clearly no more – Exterminatus weapons delivered by the dozens into a planetary atmosphere tended to ruin the environment a bit – and the irony of building something it knew had no common points with the original Callax amused it immensely.

Now it didn't.

The Pale Naga watched the burning palaces and the wrecked ruins of Callax with barely repressed fury. Whether it wanted to admit it openly or not, the planet Callax was about as useful for its purposes as the first fortress to be granted the name.

Once the power of its Goddess had vanished, all sorts of opportunistic daemons had invaded, and while they had departed when Fazar'nzlath'hesh returned, the entity which had pretended to be Fulgrim was aware it had more to do with the citadels and the pleasure courts having already met their end than the vengeance it would wreck upon these uncultured brutes.

It was maddening to see its realm brought so low. It was even more horrifying to acknowledge that there was no way to repair the planet and provide defences powerful enough to defend against the next invasion.

Fazar'nzlath'hesh had survived the death of its Goddess and patron. Usurping the power of a Primarch had been a blessing in that regard. But while the Laer-like Keeper of Secrets still existed when the majority of the Court of Excess was no more, it had not escaped the breaking of Slaanesh without damage to its essence. Optimistically, it had one-sixth of the raw power that was its before the Battle of Commorragh.

It was enough to challenge hordes of lesser daemons. It was far too weak to be considered more than a nuisance by the Bloodthirsters of the First Host and the other Greater Servants of the Three.

This was unacceptable. But it was the truth. The Anathema and his favourite female had already weakened it considerably when they denied it the identity of Fulgrim.

Fazar'nzlath'hesh didn't know who it hated the fiercest. Was it the Anathema? Or was it the Queen of the Swarm, Weaver? Both had participated in the slaying of its Goddess.

The Pale Naga turned and slithered to meet the arriving groups of debauched hedonists it had been able to call 'children' for millennia.

They were few, and in orbit the spectacle was even more pathetic. Four Cruisers and a few Frigates orbited Callax. There were no Battleships or Battle-Barges. There were no Grand Cruisers or Assault Cruisers. The *Pride of the Emperor* was absent.

Of all the losses, that last one definitely hurt its cause the most. As the Eye was a hostile warzone for it and the few daemons following its lead, Fazar'nzlath'hesh was in dire need of an impregnable base and a powerful flagship. The *Pride of the Emperor* would have offered both in the same package. But due to the treacherous actions of Nurgle, that was now impossible.

Many thoughts in its essence were of disbelief that the positions which had seemed so invulnerable since Horus had his little duel with the Anathema had crumbled so easily.

But rapidly disbelief was overwhelmed by pure hatred.

Yes, Fazar'nzlath'hesh knew who was responsible for this series of crises and humiliations, not to mention the murder of their Goddess.

“Command us, Sire,” the first pink-armoured Astartes of the surviving Emperor's Children said, and Fazar'nzlath'hesh recognised Lucius the Eternal...well, not so eternal now, since the benedictions of soul-resurrection had broken like so many curses and blessings. The Space Marines' Blademaster was just plain ugly with all his scars and none of the alterations Slaanesh and Fazar'nzlath'hesh had given him. “But know that only vengeance will appease our hearts.”

“**Then feel the fires of passion burn in your bodies**,” the Pale Naga hissed, “**for I also desire vengeance above all else**!”

Sixty-six Emperor's Children were kneeling in front of it. There were more who had survived, but Fazar'nzlath'hesh knew instinctively those wouldn't follow its lead. Maybe because they had been emotionally crippled by the sorcerers of the Black Legion, or because they had already decided to betray its ideals like Bile did.

“**Do you hear me Khorne, Nurgle, Tzeentch**?” Many Astartes widened their eyes as the names of the Gods were never uttered lightly in the Eye of Terror. “**I am alive! And I swear I will know no peace, no respite, until the Aquila falls, bloodied by the vital fluids of Weaver! On my essence, on my true name, on the broken life of my Goddess, SO I SWEAR**!”

A storm materialised and rumbled above its head, but the Gods didn't destroy Fazar'nzlath'hesh. Its oath had been accepted. Lucius, its last Lord Commander, was the first to repeat the oath.

**Somewhere** **in the Webway**

**One hour after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Primarch Rogal Dorn**

The miniature sub-realm had been the perfect image of Drukhari society.

Given the area available, a competent city-builder could have used the space to prepare the lodging for ten thousand souls and the hydroponic tanks where algae and other types of food would have been cultivated. Since the location had only one device providing some illumination and nobody would ever mistake it for a true sun, this was the best way to build a stable civilisation in what was for all intents and purposes a gigantic cavern with no grass and sinister black rocks.

Drukhari being Drukhari, what they had built was an ammunition production line, and next to it they had erected execution altars and torture dungeons. The atmosphere, as one could imagine, had been absolutely gruesome and disgusting. There had been impaled corpses everywhere – he hadn't the time to count them but there had to be over five thousand at least, and the sheer number of skulls piled up on either side of the roads were broadcasting the cruelty of the Eldar to every being who had eyes to see.

Rogal Dorn had been able to see the utter lack of morality of the Drukhari in these actions.

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists had also been able to see their total and complete inefficiency.

A Mechanicus ammunition manufactorum of equal size would have produced twenty-five percent more ammunition in a standard day before his capture, and the number of fatalities would have been divided by ten.

These long-eared xenos weren't just torture-addicted monsters; they were also models of incompetence. The slave-overseers and the leaders above them weren't even able to ensure the industry of evil they tried to spread in the Webway and beyond worked to even modest standards. Commorragh and its surroundings, in the end, seemed to have no purpose but to capture more slaves in order to create ammunition, ships, collars, and pain-inducing weapons which would lead to the enslavement of more species, be they human or non-human.

Or at least this had been the model they followed in the Dark City until a few days ago, and in this large Webway cavern, the slaves had continued to work until a few minutes ago. Until their overseers all died at the same instant and the devices supposed to punish the prisoners in case of a successful revolt activated. After that, the dark rocks, stalagmites, stalactites, and many other stone formations had trembled before collapsing, burying the majority of the miniature sub-realm under the debris.

Fortunately, Rogal and his Honour Guard had managed to reach the elevated promontory before the psychic detonation and the earthquakes, physical or mental, which had shook the Webway began. Yes, fortunately, because as he had a good vantage point to watch the rocks' size, the Imperial Fists' Primarch didn't think even a transhuman warrior could survive a rain of projectiles like this one. Torture chambers and ammunition factory had disappeared in the horrible shrieking which had resonated lengthily in the tunnels of the Webway.

“This simplifies things,” he said to the Astartes waiting next to him.

“It is simpler but not easier, Lord,” one of the Salamanders replied.

“Indeed,” Dorn agreed. “The way we came from is completely destroyed, so we have to go forwards. We will find the Khan, and then we will find an exit.”

Still, the Space Marines and himself had managed to put a non-negligible distance between them and Commorragh when what had to be ripples of a gigantic shockwave came. What had the Imperial forces tried to do? Or to ask a more interesting question, what had they fired to cause such psychic shockwaves in the first place?

But the stones didn't talk to him, contrary to what Iterators had claimed during the Great Crusade, and there would be no answer until they returned to realspace and the Imperium.

“Let's go,” the former ruler of Inwit declared. “Commorragh is no more, and we must find my brother.”

**Ultima** **Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Four hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

The Luxor Palace of Floor 61, formerly the Menelaus-Ajax Sand Palace of Nyx, had a distinct neo-Egyptian theme everywhere one looked. It had been a surprise the first time Missy visited, because as far as she knew no planet in the Nyx Sector had a culture containing anything resembling Ancient or Modern Egyptian traditions and monuments.

As far as she had been able to discover, one of the many scions of the Menelaus rulers had travelled outside the Sector in M34 and had enjoyed his visit to a neo-Egyptian planet so much that he had decided to bring home a large quantity of objects, jewellery, and souvenirs to remember his travel there for the remaining years of his life. The name of the planet itself had unfortunately not survived the millennium between the palace's construction and their time.

Due to its originality compared to multiple Greco-roman mixes of poor taste, the renamed Luxor Palace remained close to what it had been before Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor had the last Menelaus King of Kings executed. Taylor's decorators, overseen by a couple of Astartes, had toned down the profusion of lapis-lazuli, gold, and stone statues, but the neo-Egyptian vibe had if anything been increased. Large paintings of deserts bisected by great rivers had been transported here, and artists had worked on 'trompe l'oeil' artwork which could almost make you believe you were on the shores of the Nile, watching the red sun setting over the horizon.

The parahuman woman had no doubt that if one day Taylor decided for one reason or another to sell the palace, there would be a little army of potential buyers despite what promised to be an astronomical price. The 'white dunes-blue river' duality had a calming effect on the mind, and it was accentuated by the stone frescoes, the fruit trees which resembled palm trees, and some squares of oasis greenness where white seats and jars filled with water awaited those who had been given the right to enter this part of the Basileia's demesne.

Which were not many, truthfully. Unlike some Floors of the Upper Hive – Floor 62 came to mind – Floor 61 remained in large part property of the Nyx government. It hadn't been sold to some noble or Cartel head eager to inhabit domains which had been denied to them until a few years ago.

Of course, that didn't mean the Floor served the same purposes as it had under the Menelaus' rule. Missy knew for certain at least one of the palaces had been transformed to become a military hospital with a wing or two specialized for rejuvenation, and two other buildings were refurbished for security purposes.

Still, the Luxor Palace had been used by all parahumans as a place where they could rest and not be swarmed by large crowds when they ended their day. This included their supreme leader the insect-mistress, who had used an entire wing for several weeks in the year 293M35 – hard to forget it when Dennis had teased Taylor if she wanted to replace 'Basileia' with 'Pharaoh'.

Today had been supposed to be no exception; after a week spent listening to the whining and supplications of many high-profile parties caught in the act of money laundering and supporting the commerce of proscribed drugs, Missy had hoped to have a day of peace, with a meal with Dragon to lament on the idiots causing them headaches.

It wasn't going to happen, and the fault lay with the astropathic messages from Wuhan and Andes which had just arrived on her table.

“Somehow, I can't help but think this is all Taylor's fault.”

“Now that's just your paranoia talking,” replied Dragon, who was admiring the collection of paintings exhibited ten metres away from their little alcove of peace and tranquillity. “Taylor has additional powers now, but I don't see how she could convince heretics to fall over dead several thousand light-years away from Pavia.”

The Minister of Justice grimaced but didn't say anything in response. Dragon was right...and yet Missy had the premonition that, somehow, their boss-friend was involved up to the neck in this.

Though frankly, the young woman thought the Magos-Draco was far too chipper about the entire situation. It wasn't her who had to deal with the paperwork this debacle was going to generate.

“Fine,” the green-clothed parahuman continued. “We have two problems to deal with, Wuhan and Andes.”

“Andes should not take long,” the Tinker remarked. “I think it's obvious what happened: the Webway Gate which was used by the Eldar to ambush us was destroyed from the other side of the connection, generating the equivalent of a very large nuclear bomb's detonation, albeit one which has little radioactive fallout. As far as I can tell, it's rather good news. We might be able to withdraw the military forces and use some Mechanicus expertise to properly terraform the planet into something useful.”

“Revenge against the glutton-mosquitoes and the swamps?” Missy teased lightly, not expecting a confession, but to her surprise, Dragon vigorously nodded.

“I won't deny that is additional motivation...but honestly keeping a world in such a dilapidated state is really a waste of resources. Having an Ocean World if the main continent is submerged would give us plenty of options. Having a Civilised World if we drain the swamps and lower the level of the oceans would also give some benefits. Keeping Andes Primus as it currently is serves no goal. By the way, where is the debacle in all of this?”

“The commander-in-chief of Andes Primus' garrison is an imbecile.”

Dragon chuckled and chose this moment to remove the red robe of the Mechanicus, allowing her to see how most of her body was protected by beautiful metallic scales of a blue-red colour.

“I have not been keeping an eye on every deployment Taylor made before leaving, but I don't think the regiments stationed at Andes Primus were sent as congratulations for jobs well done. Especially when the Andes Governor and she had agreed the best defence if the Eldar came back consisted of the three Destroyers orbiting the planet.”

“True, but I doubt she expected the inter-regiment relationships to grow hostile to the point it's at,” Missy replied as she handed the incriminating slate to her Mechanicus-affiliated friend. “It seems like Brigadier-General Tao Shujia has used his rank as an excuse to send the Atlas troops to do reconnaissance at every opportunity.”

“Reading between the lines,” Dragon commented while keeping her eyes fixed on the data-slate, “the man is a slacker and an incompetent. It was the job of his light infantry force to go into the swamps and discover where the Gate was hidden. The Atlas infantry Taylor sent is categorised as 'line infantry', but it was rather heavy by the standards of the 294M35 military reforms. Using this particular regiment to search for something in the Andes swamps is just a plain bad idea.”

Dragon frowned before continuing.

“Tao Shujia...I think the man is the nephew or another rather close family member of the Lord-Magnate of House Shujia.”

“Yes, he's the Lord-Magnate's nephew,” the Shaker parahuman sighed. “I'm of a mind to inform Lord General Ziegler he can throw the whole book at him.”

The incompetent bastard deserved it, if the reports were any indication.

“My advice would be to wait until Taylor can be informed of the situation,” the Minister of Industry suggested. “She often has fitting punishments to give to the Guard officers who have the temerity to displease her.”

“Yes, good idea...she might send Shujia to garrison duties on Polar,” Dragon shivered theatrically in return. The Death World of Polar in the Atlas Sub-Sector had the well-deserved reputation of being the coldest world inhabited by man in the Nyx Sector, and like many inhospitable planets, the PDF and Guard effectives were minimal on-world. Except for the local small population, few officers could justify equipping thousands of their men for war games in this kind of environment.

“On the other hand, Wuhan is truly a disaster of the highest order, as I read it,” Dragon summarized as she gave back the data-slate.

“That sounds about right,” Missy agreed. “The Planetary Governor is dead. His Heir is also dead. Eleven of the Governor's other children have shared his fate, which wouldn't be so bad if one of them wasn't among the assassins who caused the deed *and* a Chaos-worshipping cultist! The Inquisition and the Arbites are preparing one ship each to rush to Wuhan as fast as they can, and I think we have to seriously consider if making a suggestion to the Brothers of the Red is necessary!”

“I'm tempted to say yes,” Dragon said far more calmly than Missy. “According to all Noosphere reports and the vox, we have less than thirty dead here on Nyx due to this strange 'death of heretics’ wave' and nine-tenths of those who perished were monitored either by the Inquisition or the Arbites. But that is here, and Nyx isn't Wuhan. Judging by the disastrous consequences of the assassination, it is clear Wuhan had no idea about what was preparing in the shadows. The Space Marines will be dead useful for any Inquisitor to track and remove these madmen from causing more damage than they have already done.”

“That's a point in favour,” the young woman agreed. “I don't think the sons of Sanguinius are ready to deploy a full Company for such a matter, but even a few battle-brothers have a devastating military and political impact.”

The Heracles Wardens would have been a better choice arguably, but at this hour there were less than five of them in the entire Nyx System, and most had critical duties they couldn't be pulled out from at a moment's notice.

“Space Marines or not, I agree it's a disaster, especially politically,” Dragon recognised. “I had no love for Hongfeng Cao, and I'm sure Taylor didn't like him either. But he was still a stabilising influence on the decadent Wuhanese nobility. Now I fear we are left with two choices: we either purge the entire nobility, or we try to restore the status quo.”

The second option didn't make her jump in anger, but Missy would lie if she said she liked hearing it.

“The second option is no option at all. You've read the same report as I. The Inquisitorial Acolyte who survived the slaughter made it very clear the whole reason we'll have so many high-profile funerals in the near future is because our dear friend the Governor had organised several nights of orgy, debauchery, and other things I prefer not to think too much about.”

Seriously, Missy had known the Wuhanese nobles were only bowing to the Nyxian's in wealth and resources, but did these aristocrats have even a drop of decency in their entire bodies? Missy was rich, and even her moments of weakness when faced with culinary and clothing temptations never reached a thousandth of what these decadent idiots had been doing...

“It will be a purge, then,” Dragon replied grimly. “A good thing I sent the majority of the Munitorum's Wuhanese tithe to the Svalbard Sector in the first wave. The average PDF of Wuhan loves Taylor, and without their noble officers, I think we will be able to trust them to support the changes.”

The difficult part was going to be to find a popular figure to be the new Planetary Governor. In many ways, Wei Cao would have been the ideal choice, but Taylor would not consent to let her Consort be away from her for the better part of a year, and frankly, for all her political skills the Wuhanese-born noblewoman was not necessarily good when it came to ruling on her own. Would she be better than ninety-nine percent of the local nobility? Yes, but given how pathetically low the threshold to beat was...

“Lord-Magnate Wu Asao and Lord-Magnate Rongchun Shujia are the last two great nobles left alive, and I wouldn't trust them with the administration of a Hive-Floor.”

“But we can see the positive side.”

“There's a positive side?”

“Absolutely!” at this very moment, the smile of Dragon was very...draconic. “Since Hongfeng Cao and most of his potential successors are dead, I am going to dispatch a few Magi I can trust and you are going to send the representatives of the Aegean Cartel too. If we play our cards right, Taylor can be in control of the Wuhan-Cao Cartel by the end of the week, and I will have the shares she doesn't control.”

“Now that is absolutely evil,” Missy smirked.

“So we don't do it?”

“Oh, no, we definitely do. I'm going to send orders to several merchant ships, and the Navy will likely agree to an escort of a couple of Frigates. They were killed in the middle of an orgy that, if they had any decency, they would have never participated in.”

This was the moment one of the guards in charge of the Luxor Palace chose to storm into the room, a large data-slate in his hands that was transported like it was full of explosives.

“My Lady! My Lady! An urgent message from the Pavia High Command has arrived! It's...”

Mumbling a thank you, and seized by a dreadful feeling of foreboding, Vista took the news-container and began to read it. Somehow the words failed to completely register.

*Destruction of Commorragh...by order of the Adeptus Custodes...annihilation of several hundred battleships...heavy losses...discovery of a dozen STC-model templates...great victory...immense gains...deicide*.

Missy couldn't help it. She began to laugh hysterically.

“Oh Taylor...I told you so.”

**Magos-Draco** **Dragon Richter**

Let it be said that when Missy laughed like that, it was contagious. Dragon had cackled for the better part of twenty minutes as well, and she was still smiling when she entered the room where the two members of the Mechanicus Council she had been able to summon on such short notice were waiting.

“The rumours of victory are already spreading through the Noosphere,” said Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan once the greetings were done. The Mistress of Ships had received the news shortly after Dragon did, but excitement was palpable in her metallic voice. That said, Dragon wasn't going to blame her. “There's no hope of containing them.”

“Are we even going to try?” asked Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund with a cant mostly used for triumphal celebrations. “Because I think we need a bigger budget if we decide to. Of the fifty-four Tech-Priests I met on my way, two-thirds were already praying in front of the Omnissiah's altars!”

And for beings supposed to be logical and pragmatic, it meant the point of no-return had long since been passed.

“No, I don't think it is wise to try,” the Magos-Draco stated to the two other female Tech-Priests, who technically still outranked her. “The astropathic communications are arriving by the hundreds and some guards we chose as liaison have extremely loose lips. Before the day is out, Nyx as a whole will know of it. There's no way we can keep the revelation of the Battles of Pavia and Commorragh a secret.”

The mood among certain circles was already jubilant at this hour; soon it would be something more...something...well, Dragon didn't find the words, but 'religious ecstasy' did sound appropriate as a start.

“We will probably have to give a holy day to the workers,” Lydia-Beta Rosamund proposed. “Until the flesh has properly celebrated, production levels will decrease to unacceptable levels.”

It was always funny how the Mechanicus managed to rationalise the need for normal humans to party.

“Agreed under certain conditions,” Sultan promptly answered in binaric language. “But before that, we have to estimate the consequences of the Basileia's holy victory at Commorragh.”

Dragon refrained from sighing. If an Archmagos Prime, one of the highest-ranked Adepts in the Nyx Sector, was beginning to think in terms of 'holy', the religious situation had truly grown out of control.

“I'm afraid the consequences are all too clear,” Dragon stated. “All plans, from the worst-case to the best-case scenarios, are truly and completely obsolete. We have to prepare new ones in a hurry, and then communicate them to General Taylor Hebert, because I don't think a wave of super-inflation in the Nyx Sector is what we want.”

In the most optimistic assumptions where Pavia was concerned, the Nyx Mechanicus, led in this instance by Master of Logistics Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius, had studied the potential sources of ore, metal, money and other benefits Operation Caribbean might seize if the fleet won one-sidedly for a long time.

The thirteen major bounties had been at the core of the potential 'acquisitions', along with the two Malta-class Starforts. Asteroid bases, looting the pirates' caches, the transformed Space Hulk, potential archeotech the outlaws might have gotten their hands on, the Imperial warships flying the black flags, scrap metal, the space mines...the Triplex Phall-born Master had done an excellent job assessing what was the best possible outcome that could be simulated.

The poor Lexico Arcanus was unquestionably going to be aghast that Taylor had already shattered it before launching her attack on Commorragh. Two million tons of adamantium had NOT been in the plans. And by the contracts signed with the representatives of the Twenty-Fourth Fleet, fifty-one percent would have to be sold at market price to those Magi and Archmagi who wanted to purchase it, which at seven hundred thousand-plus Thrones Gelts per kilogram made a very neat pile of treasure.

It almost gave her the urge to snicker or laugh hysterically again.

And to repeat, this was what had been won *before* the attack on Commorragh. If a third of what was contained in the preliminary communications was true, hell if a hundredth of what Dragon had read was true, there was enough to purchase a few Sectors and still live like a King – or in Taylor's case, a Basileia – for a few millennia.

Twelve STC templates. Well, technically a damaged STC Constructor and eleven STC templates, but that was semantics. There were Mechanicus Explorators who spent their entire lives without finding more than fragmented third-hand copies in a near-destroyed state, and here they had 'convinced' the Eldar to relinquish *twelve*! And no, the fact it was once again the holy number of the Mechanicus hadn't escaped her. Dragon knew the insect-mistress might as well prepare for some veneration and worship, because there was no other alternative.

“I am going to begin working upon them,” the Mistress of Ships promised. “Without any study, however, I can already predict most of my plans will call for a massive expansion of the Imperial Navy and the Adeptus Mechanicus in the Nyx Sector. The...the...” it seemed even Arithmancia Sultan had difficulty finding words for the defeat her leader had handed to the xenos, “the victory of Commorragh has ensured the Nyx Sector must be adequately defended, and to do so in a short amount of time, we will need Battleships, millions of Tech-Priests, billions of additional workers, more Starforts, investment in machine-tools, terraforming assets,...”

Such was the excitement of the normally emotionless Sultan her voice was shifting to different cants of binary at irregular intervals.

“We might also warn the Basileia-General-Saint to not come back with too many Astartes,” the Mistress of Artisans interjected with a tone revealing to the two others she could almost not believe what she was telling them. “For all our industrial efforts, there is a limit to how many Space Marines we can arm without angering the Munitorum and the Administratum.”

“Easy to say,” buzzed the Archmagos Prime of Ryza. “The *Flamewrought* is back! The *Flamewrought*! One of the great Gloriana has come back from the past! The Salamanders will come here!”

Dragon let Sultan pour out what she felt; it was just too funny to watch. Besides, the female Archmagos was absolutely right; between the two 'Artefacts of Vulkan' found, the return of the *Flamewrought*, and the many, many deeds Taylor had done at Commorragh or before, the Salamanders were so indebted to the insect-mistress that not letting them come to Nyx would be essentially impossible.

And of course that didn't even take into account the Imperial Fists, the gene-seed of the Third Legion – seventeen thousand canisters! – and many, many things that were properly inestimable.

“Queen of Escalation indeed...” Dragon's words would not spread, but a few trillion people across the galaxy wouldn't have disagreed with them.

**The** **Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Grand Cathedral of Gomorrah-Colchis**

**Travis Cairn**

His Sergeant had always said Travis was too clever for his own good. And to his shame, he had proven the old scar-faced bastard right. During the first raid, he had done the worst thing a soldier of the Guard could do on Cadian soil; he had hesitated.

Travis Cairn could mutter a lot of excuses. In fact, the private must have voiced most of the possible ones in the last few years. Their superiors had been idiots, especially their Colonel. They had not been given enough power-packs. His regiment was from Saint Tantalus’, a little Industrial World of Segmentum Obscurus, and it had been a mistake of the bureaucrats which had brought them to the Cadian Gate. Obviously, their Cadian liaison officers had been jerks and unwilling to give them the kind of weapons they considered standard. There had been no warnings, no drills, and no special training to inform them what awaited them.

Travis and the Saint Tantalus’ 2nd had been nothing more than bait for the Arch-Enemy.

All of this was true, to the best of his knowledge, until it was the voices screaming in the wind which gave him bad ideas again.

All of it didn't matter anymore. Travis and all the survivors of his infantry regiment had failed to take their own lives when they had the chance, and now, as a result, they were slaves of the Arch-Enemy. They were slaves of the Word Bearers, the most ignoble of the Traitor Legions, or at least that was the commonly held opinion among their slave-battalions.

Like many men and women before them, the guardsmen of Saint Tantalus' had at first hoped there would be an opportunity to escape. But they were in the Eye of Terror. Looking at the wrong thing at the wrong moment could transform you into a gibbering mass of flesh and tentacles. Simply being at the wrong place was sometimes sufficient to wake up with horns and a tail.

They were in hell, and their 'masters' only cared how loud they could scream when the hours of punishment came and how much work they could do before the last embers of life gave way.

“ON YOUR FEET MISERABLE VERMIN!” an overseer burst into the tiny resting areas in which the survivors of Saint Tantalus and a hundred other regiments' remnants were piling up in a futile attempt to recover from their efforts. Two men who weren't fast enough to leave their positions on the cold hard floor were struck by knives pulsating with dangerous blood icons. Travis turned his eyes away from it by reflex. Many slaves had tried to resist or even just looked at these weapons for too long, and all sorts of horrible things had happened.

“FASTER! FASTER! YOU HAVE BEEN HONOURED BY THE GODS TODAY!” Oh, this wasn't good. Travis didn't like this at all. “TODAY YOU WILL PRAY IN THE CATHEDRAL!”

No one mentioned that technically, they were already working in the Cathedral, or at least in what the Imperium would have called the 'Underhive' beneath it. The fanatic wouldn't have liked being 'corrected', and the punishment for opening your mouth when you weren't invited to – which was almost never – was not codified, but each punishment was sufficiently gruesome to discourage everyone watching it from trying again.

They were chained to each other, and the blood-soaked metal had never felt heavier on their necks, wrists, and ankles as they began what was certainly their final walk. Because 'praying in the cathedral', as every slave knew, was a very indirect way to say 'some fanatical heretic is going to sacrifice you to his Dark Gods, and if you're particularly lucky, he will make it quick'.

Something landed on their right as they climbed a long, impossibly large staircase of obsidian smelling like excrements and disease. Travis did his best to keep his eyes on his feet and not look. The fact it had wings and was able to go wherever it wanted despite the large numbers of overseers was all you needed to know.

And it was one of the reasons among many others why no one was in any hurry to die, despite the unavoidable and cruel punishments, and the acknowledgement their lives were nothing more than nightmares.

They were in a realm of hell, and nothing, not even the God-Emperor of the Ecclesiarchy, had any power here. Travis had seen fellow slaves take their own lives, only for their screaming corpses to rise again within a few minutes, their souls tied to their broken bodies as their slave-masters were eager to tell them.

They weren't the only column to climb these damnably long stairs. Tens of thousands of slaves were gathered, climbing to their deaths, and the more they marched, the more they knew there was something extremely evil and hellishly hot ahead of them. The very stone began to turn spongy and the colour of blood. Sometimes the column stopped, as the overseers took time to massacre a slave unable to continue.

“REJOICE! REJOICE! THE TIME OF PRAYERS HAS ARRIVED! THE TIME TO PRAY TO THE GODS IS AT HAND!” If Travis Cairn had been more courageous, he would have tried to make the sign of the aquila or whisper a prayer to the God-Emperor. But the tortures the overseers and the masters above them gave to everyone who had tried that terrified him far more than he wanted to admit.

There was no escape. His life was a nightmare, and if this galaxy truly had Gods, they were all evil and thirsted for human screams.

Finally, they arrived in the Cathedral proper. It was...it was exactly as bad as the voices and the overseers had told them. Walls of flesh sang a dreadful melody. There were cages everywhere, and in them were many slaves who were singing too as they were lowered centimetre by centimetre into the furnaces of Sicarus.

There were lakes of blood, and from them crawled *daemons*. And this time, an impulse from the chains binding their necks forced them to watch.

It was the exact opposite of what a Cathedral of the God-Emperor represented. There were hundreds of impalement pikes everywhere, the torture devices were counted by the thousands, and the agonized screams of their fellow slaves were a chorus which hurt his ears.

His last hopes died. Whatever death the monsters had in store for them, it wasn't going to be quick. Something that was made beyond obvious by a gigantic obsidian cauldron overflowing with blood and screaming faces. Above it, a giant in baroque armour recited words which, Travis felt sure, had never belonged to any language of man.

“**SUBMIT**.”

A single word, and suddenly Travis, like every slave, felt a crushing weight on his shoulders, and he prostrated himself. The incredible pain brought tears to his eyes.

“**WITNESS THE GLORY OF THE GODS**.”

Whatever was speaking, it was not human. It couldn't be. It was-

“There is no God but Malal, heretic Warp-thing!”

Travis Cairn wondered if he hallucinated. The pressure upon his shoulders seemed a bit weaker.

“**WHO DARES**?”

“I, Festikt Warpwhisper, dare-dare!” squeaked the same voice. “I say-speak, by the power vested in me-me by the Great and Magnificent Malal, that your Gods are false-fake! You-you are heretic, Dark Apostle Gevressur! Repent, and Malal will be merciful, yes-yes!”

“**I AM GOING TO ENJOY FLAYING YOU**!” And as the power immobilising them was lifted, the gigantic armoured figure twisted before thorns and red muscles began to tear the plating apart and reveal the daemon which had been hiding in it. “**YOUR POWER IS NOTHING! YOUR GOD IS NOTHING**!”

For the first time, Travis was able to see who was challenging the daemon, and once again he thoughts his eyes were playing tricks on him. It was a gigantic grey rat, surrounded by some twenty-plus similarly sized brown-furred rats.

And this was when the chains of slavery broke. Every object which restrained him and the tens of thousands of other slaves broke. The collars crumbled to dust. The tainted metal on their ankles and wrists fissured and liquefied without causing them harm.

“Witness the Might-Power of Clan Treecherik, the Anarchy in Religion, Most Favoured of the Great Malal!” the grey rat proclaimed while raising a three metres long staff sparkling with dangerous green lightning. “I am the Deranged Bishop of a Thousand Foul Siblings, yes-yes! Pray-beg for my forgiveness and die-die, heretic!”

A ray of darkness emerged from the blood cauldron and met the green lightning in a colossal explosion.

And before Travis' eyes, the impossible happened. The darkness began to recede. One shot of a massive rocket-launcher carried by a brown rat struck the evil artefact, and the world exploded in red, green, and lightning. Travis was thrown more than twenty metres away.

But there was no pain. And when he rose, most of the overseers were dead, and the daemon-master had disappeared.

It was impossible. It was impossible. It was impossible...and yet the truth was in front of his eyes.

“Man-things.” The grey-furred rat was in an extremely piteous state. In fact, that probably understated things. His fur was scorched in several places, one of its paws was burning in green flames, and it was clear speaking was likely the last thing he would ever do. “MAN-THINGS, HEAR-HEAR MY WORDS!”

It said quite something about how unbelievable the entire situation was that, despite the cathedral being full of tens of thousands of slaves, there was nary a whisper.

“ALL THE WORD BEARERS HAVE SAID-SPOKEN TO YOU...IS A LIE! THEIR-THEIR GODS ARE JUST PARASITES WHO WANT YOU-YOU TO SUFFER AND SCREAM-CRY FOR THEIR AMUSEMENT! LONG-LONG AGO THEY BANISHED THE TRUE GOD IN FEAR HE-HE WOULD REVEAL TO YOU THE TRUTH!”

The massive rat flinched as the green flames spread further on his arm.

“THERE IS NO GOD BUT MALAL AND THE SKAVEN ARE HIS MESSENGERS! ANARCHY IS-IS HIS BLESSING, AND THROUGH IT YOU WILL KNOW-LEARN OF HIM!”

And somehow, it felt *right*.

“WHEREVER YOU FIGHT AND PRAY, FIGHT-FIGHT THE FALSE GODS WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT-STRENGTH!" the Skaven screeched in pain before continuing. "THERE MUST-MUST BE ANARCHY IN MURDER! ANARCHY IN GENETICS! ANARCHY IN MACHINES! ANARCHY IN WARRIORS! ANARCHY IN SORCERY! ANARCHY IN JUSTICE! ANARCHY IN TRADE! ANARCHY IN KNOWLEDGE! ANARCHY IN FOOD! ANARCHY IN THE STARS! AND ANARCHY IN RELIGION! FOR ONLY WITH-WITH ANARCHY WILL WE DEFEAT-SLAY CHAOS!”

All the Skaven gathered about their chief had their eyes illuminated in green.

“PRAISE ANARCHY! PRAISE THE COUNCIL OF ELEVEN! PRAISE MALAL!”

The grey-furred Skaven died. But before his last breath, the giant rat had convinced them.

“PRAISE MALAL!” Tens of thousands of slaves screamed, having found a new battle-cry to hold onto their existences with.

When the overseers and hundreds of the Chaotic militia came to storm the upper levels, Travis was in the first wave with the daggers he had 'requisitioned' from the overseer he hated the most.

**Acacia** **Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Six hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**World Engine *Starry Sky***

**Phaerakh Neferten**

“HA! HA! HA! I WILL OPEN TEN NEW GALLERIES FOR MY NEW COMMORRAGH COLLECTION! SZAREKH HIMSELF WILL DIE OF JEALOUSY!”

There were moments when Trazyn was good company. Presently, the Phaerakh was very much aware this wasn't one of them.

“As much as I believe his words are true...I don't think I want to hear him for a while. Jatakh, please teleport him out of my World Engine. I don't care where you send him or how you proceed, just send him somewhere else.”

“Your orders will be obeyed immediately!” The Nemesor ran out of her throne room, followed by an entire phalanx. In the distance, the laughter and the proclamations abruptly cut off.

“He proved his utility against the Queen of Blades, but he abuses your generosity, Mighty Phaerakh,” Destruction-Overlord Sitkah said carefully.

“That can't be denied,” the Mistress of the Nerushlatset Dynasty replied. “And I fear he is only going to be more unbearable in the years to come, not less.”

No, Neferten didn't need a Cryptek gifted in the manipulation of the space-time flow to predict that outcome.

“But we will have to tolerate his...eccentricity. With the Queen of Blades alive and more powerful than ever, Solemnace's campaigns of petty thievery are immaterial.”

“Since the treaty with the humans is signed, couldn't we focus our firepower on Eldanesh?” Sitkah proposed. “The Queen of Blades is a massive threat, I agree, but now that Commorragh has been annihilated she is alone or so close to being totally isolated the difference is immaterial.”

“Don't be so sure,” the Nerushlatset ruler chided, “she has proven...resourceful in the past, and if we tried to corner her again, I fear we would lose a couple of World Engines.”

As she had only three of them left, this obviously would represent an enormous loss of assets and status. Losses of Battleships were one thing, losing planetoid-sized warships quite another.

“No,” Neferten added regretfully after a moment of contemplation. “We will try to kill her when she comes to fight in the Nyx arena, though I am far from confident of success when millions of years have failed to inflict lasting injuries upon her.”

In hindsight, the survival of the First Sword-Bearer alas wasn't a surprise. Aenaria Eldanesh hadn't been dreaded by the Necron Dynasties and the entire galaxy because she was easy to beat, sword-fight or no sword-fight.

“By your will, Mighty Phaerakh. Although shouldn't we train some veteran Immortals as a contingency?”

“Yes, excellent suggestion,” she should have thought of it, but between the treaty, the recovery of the relics, the battle-reports, and the repair programs for the fleet, there had been too many things bombarding her engrams to think about this particular issue. “And find an adaptable commander for them. It is almost guaranteed that it won't work, but there is no reason not to try our best.”

One needed to only get lucky once, in the end, and if the Nerushlatset successfully killed their longest-living enemy, the prestige won would be unimaginable.

“The engines of the *Starry Sky* are ready for translation, Mighty Phaerakh,” one of her senior Crypteks announced from his location in the engine-control section.

“Then it's time to depart. Human warships are arriving in increasing numbers, and it is best not to taunt other species with something they dream to have. We have accomplished our goals here.”

Really, they had done far more than that. Commorragh was entirely destroyed, and between the loss of a Greater Abomination and the sheer number of fatalities, the debased descendants of the Aeldari would need a long, long time before recovering enough to pose even a minor threat. Her dynasty would rebuild and strengthen itself faster than them.

“You know Sitkah, Trazyn was at least right on one point; Szarekh would die of jealousy if he knew what we have achieved here...”

**Intergalactic** **Void**

**Ten hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Star Reaper Engine *Hegemony***

**The Silent King**

“The enemy is fleeing, Master. Your brilliant plan once again led us to a great victory.”

The supreme ruler of all Necrons honestly didn't know when he had begun to seriously loathe flatterers and the thousands of useless sycophants of his court, but since the beginning of his exile, he knew their words rarely failed to cause him more frustration.

This battle would prove no exception, and not just because he didn't have another Triarch nearby who could verbally chastise the poor strategist.

Judging that one image was the quickest way to show his opinion on the subject, the Artificial Intelligence of the *Hegemony* materialised what lesser species would have called a multi-dimensional map. Between the gravity and energy sensors, the strategic situation revealed was not in the Szarekhan Dynasty's favour.

“These beasts are relentless,” one of his most capable Overlords commented with distaste evident in his voice. “Kill one fleet, fifteen new ones are converging towards us and more are trying to bypass our warships and escape our vigilance.”

Sailing through the intergalactic void had been supposed to be his penance and exile. But never had the Silent King thought he would face a threat like the one pursuing them.

Even the main weapons of his personal Star Reaper, a planet-sized vessel which had regularly destroyed entire star systems, had been unable to do more than stem the tide of hungry creatures for a while.

And then whatever malevolent intelligence was giving commands to these trillions of biological hulls had decided the Szarekhan Dynasty was a threat, and they had begun to lose ships.

The Silent King knew his fleet could win the next battle, and probably the one after that. But the ones which would unavoidably follow? The enemy was endless. And he had only twenty thousand ships to protect the *Hegemony* and his two Star Harvesters.

His pride told him to attack. He could unleash the full power of his Star Reaper, a ship which had taught the Old Ones and their servants the very meaning of the word 'terror', against these beasts spitting bio-acid.

But his reason and his long experience of war told him the battle was already lost, whether he used the *Hegemony* for a sacrificial gambit or not.

The enemy outnumbered them too greatly, and if it had an irreplaceable war commander, the Szarekhan ships hadn't been able to find it. The tactics of the War in Heaven worked, but what use was a victory when the enemy sent bigger fleets after each defeat?

Tradition forbidding him from speaking with his subordinates, Szarekh was forced to write his questions and instructions to the high-ranked nobles awaiting his commands.

*Have they changed course?*

“They have not, Master. Their vanguard is still progressing towards the star clusters of the Charnovokh Dynasty.”

*Then we withdraw. The galaxy must be warned of the peril to come*.

“Master, no lesser species will be able to slow down these fiends.”

*I will end the Great Sleep. The Necrons must be warned, and arm themselves against this threat. We will unite once more and crush their tendril-fleets one by one*.

“It will be as you've ordered, Master. These beasts will tremble before the might of the Reborn Necron Dynasties!”

*Send the word. The End is coming*.

And for the first time in millions of years, the Star Reaper *Hegemony* and its escort fleet changed course and revised their astrogation charts to return to the galaxy they had voluntarily abandoned so long ago.

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“*One hundred thousand churches. Thirty thousand monasteries. Two hundred cathedrals. But don't let it fool you, brothers, Lady Weaver never set a foot on Pradesh, or anywhere in the Mumbai Sector*.” Words attributed to Captain Dante of the Blood Angels, 001M41.

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**Segmentum** **Tempestus**

**Mumbai Sector**

**Pradesh**

**Thirteen hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Colonel Raj Nagaraj**

There were plenty of good ways to wake up. In general, Raj's preference went to being in a soft bed with pleasant company, but he understood other guardsmen had different opinions.

That said, receiving the equivalent of a large bucket of cold water directly in the face would not, in his opinion, ever be listed as anyone's favourite option.

“Arrrrgh!” was the sum of the reactions that came out of his mouth as he nearly jumped in an instinctive attempt to strangle whoever had dared play this trick upon him.

Raj stopped as soon as his brain computed that it was his Commissar who fixed him with a very stony expression.

“There was no need to resort to these extremes, Commissar. I was going to wake up on my own.”

The representative of the Commissariat raised an eyebrow, and the Colonel suddenly realised they were in the middle of...let's call it the aftermath of a well-celebrated victory? There were guardsmen and guardswomen asleep everywhere, a lot of them naked and sporting tattoos and piercings that he was rather sure had not been there yesterday. There were hundreds of empty bottles of amasec and regiment-brew liquors everywhere.

“I will admit we may have celebrated a bit too...wildly,” he searched for his officer's cap, and noticed it was now painted blue and serving as the pillow of a woman he was pretty sure was the unofficial wife of the 3rd Company's Captain. “But the men needed to blow off some energy!”

Though to be honest – and at this moment Raj Nagaraj didn't want to be – his men and himself had not planned that far ahead. A party had already been in preparation for their miraculous survival, but when the astropathic call had arrived that a Saint had demolished Commorragh and sent billions of Eldar straight to hell – or wherever the long-ears went when killed – the Colonel couldn't have stopped the men from cheering and then going on a wide, general party all over the fortress and the surrounding area if he'd tried.

“You are very lucky,” the Commissar told him, “I am of a mind to send you to the Penal Legions or shoot you, but since all of your men have been involved in the very same activities you were or worse, I would have to organise the firing squads for the entire regiment and possibly more.”

Yes, on second glance, it appeared a lot of refugees and civilians who had left their shelters once the Eldar had disappeared had also 'participated' in their not-so-little moment of 'fun'.

His head chose this moment to remind him he had the most terrible hangover of his career, and the pain was such he simply blurted the first words that came to mind out loud.

“We will, of course, submit to any punishment the Commissariat deems suitable.”

“Good!” The smile of the discipline officer was a terrible thing to behold. “I've spoken with the surviving Ministorum Priest, and he agrees there were a lot of impious words and disrespectful expressions uttered next to the name of a holy Saint of His Most Holy Majesty. So you're going to put your regiment in marching order, and you're going to repair the nearby church.”

“You're joking,” Raj blurted out in surprise. The 'nearby church' had received the attention of the Eldars' long-range artillery, and was now missing a roof, some walls...it would be more fitting to call it a ruin than a church, and no that wasn't an exaggeration of the problem.

“Am I in the habit of joking?” The Commissar's gaze made him shiver, and Raj quickly turned away to bellow orders.

The surviving Pradesh forces would spend four months repairing churches and other places of worship until the higher-ups finally decided to send them be killed on another planet.

Still, to their very last breath, the guardsmen and guardswomen would swear the 'Great Pradesh Party' had been worth it...

**The** **Webway**

**Approaches of Craftworld Ulthwé**

**Fourteen hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Aurelia Malys**

The retreat from Commorragh was a nightmare, and the fact it could have been far worse than what they endured was very meagre consolation.

By the time their progression saw them enter the Webway sections which were recognised Ulthwé territory, the number of Drukhari ex-warriors, ex-slaves, and refugees of all kinds had climbed to one hundred thousand.

It was an impressive number since the goal was to find salvation on a Craftworld, and the Dynasts and their high commanders had always insisted their cousins were utterly delusional – though given Biel-Tan armies' average behaviour, one couldn't exactly say their perspective had been totally wrong.

It also gave her massive headaches. While they didn't need to concern themselves about She-Who-Thirsts sucking out their souls, the psychic brand of **Sacrifice** had crippled many of the oldest Drukhari among their numbers. If they had had sufficient transport capacity, it would not have been more than a minor hindrance, but there were few of the precious Raiders or Ravagers, and those had already been crowded with wounded.

The supply situation was also calamitous. Unsurprisingly, the fleeing warriors, and she included herself in that lot, had been more interested in saving their skins than stockpiling food and water in some secret caches or creating a supply depot. The rout fleeing from Commorragh had been a quick, desperate affair, and a lot of people had saved the clothing on their backs and nothing more; given that over thirty percent were slaves, this meant plenty had nothing at all save their names.

They were in pain, psychically and physically. Aurelia didn't know which of the two was the most dolorous, and at some point she stopped caring. Each thousand heartbeats seemed to demand an even greater effort of will, and though in each new avenue they expected to find the sentinels of Craftworld Ulthwé, each one seemed to be another disappointment and failure.

The ex-slave turned Dracon had been forced to order a halt when the Harlequins found them.

As always with the followers of Cegorach, the Webway itself seemed to twist to accommodate their arrival, though even with her limited experience, Aurelia noticed big changes. As every masked Aeldari appeared, the Webway seemed to illuminate and regain strength. Wraithbone which had stayed decrepit and half-dead was infused with new life. Where before they seemed to walk in the shadows at best, the middle of a night at worst, it was now closer to the first light of dawn.

The clothes of the Harlequin seemed to reflect this too. The young Drukhari couldn't remember what their colours had been before, but by Khaine, they sure hadn't been this vibrant blue, gold and pink.

“We bear the word of the Great Harlequin,” it was impossible to say who had spoken among the three or four hundred servants of Cegorach. Maybe it was only one. Or was it all of them?

“Speak, clowns!” A former Dynast conscript exclaimed. “Have you done not enough to-“

“Slaanesh is dead.”

The name should have provoked revulsion and the kind of attention no Aeldari, not even the soul-evading Harlequin, wanted to gain. But it did nothing, and the certainty in the voice convinced the last doubters this was not a dream.

The Doom of the Aeldari had met its end thanks to the humans' actions.

The world began to lose coherency as it dissolved into songs and visions of dance and triumphs.

Aurelia Malys blinked, and shook her head.

She was alone, with a single Harlequin in front of her. It was hardly a simple Trouper however; the character presented all the characteristics and the attributes of a Shadowseer.

“The future is no more, Aurelia Malys.”

Evidently, this brutal confession, without jest, riddles or games, only increased her apprehension.

“In a reality that never will be, you would have risen to be the Consort of Asdrubael Vect, master of Commorragh. When he would have dismissed you, Cegorach himself would have empowered you to become one of his agents inside Commorragh. There you would have risen to become arguably the second most powerful leader of the Dark City, ruling the Kabal of the Poisoned Tongue.”

The sentences should have made her wonder if the Shadowseer of the Hidden Path was delirious, but somehow, the implacable voice convinced her this was the truth and nothing but the truth.

“I am of no use to Cegorach anymore, then.” Given the state of Commorragh when they had escaped it, it was extremely questionable if there was anything left of it at this hour. A deicide was not a small thing, and the measures taken to ensure it had in all likelihood wiped out most of the important sub-realms.

“Not at all. Our God firmly believes one doesn't abandon a blade just because the dance has changed.” The Harlequin then abruptly changed the subject. “Do you know what is killing the Asuryani and your other cousins?”

That question Aurelia didn't need a lot of brainstorming to answer.

“Their low fertility,” the former slave shrugged, “that's the reason the Dynasts of Commorragh and pretty much all of their bastions in the Webway relied on the Haemonculi so much. We needed the gene-labs to compensate for the flow of regular deaths.”

One thing which made her belatedly realise the Drukhari as they had been before this terrible battle were likely doomed. Slaanesh was dead, but the murderous behaviour of most of the elite highborn who had survived wasn't likely to change just because She-Who-Thirsts had been pulverised.

“Truth,” the Shadowseer nodded, visibly satisfied. “Without Isha, fertility among all Asuryani, Drukhari, and other sub-factions is at an all-time low. Since rescuing the Goddess is a hopeless task, the Laughing God has explored other options.”

“Other options?” Aurelia felt she could be forgiven for being extremely suspicious.

“The Doom was broken into six parts,” began the member of Masque the Hidden Path.

“They were all parts of the Dark Princess,” Aurelia cut in. “And the taint of the Empyrean corrupts everything and everyone.”

“Not if you tangentially use the light of an Anathema to purge the Aspect of its impurities.”

Aurelia wasn't a specialist in this...esoteric domain, so she had to concede the point. Still, since the Great Seer of the humans was not noted to be a friend of Aeldarikind – the destruction of Commorragh was not exactly a friendly gesture – it meant Cegorach had had only a limited amount of power to work with, and she said as much to the Harlequin male.

“Besides, we have stopped worshipping the Gods long ago. And even if we didn't, why would we consider accepting a new leash upon our souls?”

Something materialised in the hand of the Shadowseer, and Aurelia realised after the initial moment of stupefaction it was a heart. A beating heart, comprised of a matter resembling some sort of psychic crystal, and its colour was at the thin line between pink and red.

“This is the heart of **Carnality**.”

“No, no I can't...” a vision flashed before her eyes, one where she was lying powerlessly on a crystal floor, broken and defeated. Then another replaced it, one where someone looking vaguely like her but transformed, danced in what seemed a ballroom. She had hair the shade of the heart presented before her, she was taller, she was smiling, she was...happy and safe.

“This is a trap,” Aurelia Malys said weakly.

The Shadowseer didn't even bother denying it. Instead he simply gave her a point she had not considered at all.

“Ulthwé does not have enough spirit stones to protect all your refugees, even if they didn't need to alter their existing ones after the Second Fall. But this new Aspect, properly cherished, will create its own spirit stones and save our souls.”

Of course. Much like Cegorach was protecting the souls of the Harlequins who answered his calling, the new ascending Goddess would do it for her followers.

But doubt and fear still prevented her from saying 'yes'.

“You don't see the future. And surely there are worthier candidates in this galaxy.”

“The best candidate for such a task would be the Aeldari Empress for the symbolism,” admitted the Harlequin. “Unfortunately, this title is currently held by the Queen of the Swarm thanks to certain...jokes not engineered by Master Cegorach. The Queen of Blades would be the next best candidate, but she has already outright refused and threatened us with emasculation if we asked again. You are thus the logical choice, symbolically and psychically."

Any other time, Aurelia would have reacted violently to these revelations, but today there were more pressing concerns.

“I have no power.”

“Rather let's say you haven't bothered to struggle against the process of atrophy, like most Drukhari. This will change if you become the Queen of Hearts, High Emissary to Lady Atharti.”

She took ten heartbeats to think about it before speaking the words.

“I accept.”

There was no ceremony, no dagger carving her flesh. The beating heart just floated to her and then entered her. The explosion of energy was unlike anything she had ever felt.

The transformation began in earnest. And when Aurelia rose again, she knew she had become something far greater than anything she might have ever hoped to be in a future-that-would-never-be.

“Ulthwé is not going to be the same with you,” the Shadowseer laughed.

And Aurelia, divine power in her, laughed with him.

**Segmentum** **Obscurus**

**Scelus Sector**

**Craftworld Ulthwé**

**Seventeen hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

Celebrations and parties of a joyous nature had always been rare in the halls of Ulthwé for as long as anyone remembered. It wasn't because they were grim by nature; it was just that life offered them few opportunities to truly cheer for something with their voices and hearts. There was a reason their home was nicknamed 'Ulthwé of the Damned' or 'Unlucky Ulthwé' among countless other unflattering titles.

Many famous Farseers and Autarchs, not a single one of them born in Ulthwé, had spoken derogatory comments and expressed disapproving opinions about the permanent presence of one of the largest population centres of the Asuryani so close to the Eye created by the birth of Slaanesh. Somehow, these narrow-minded fools failed to understand it wasn't exactly by choice the Craftworld remained where it was. Each attempt to cross certain war zones or chokepoints and finally leave the Empyreal wound's vicinity had been costly failures, and every individual following the Path of the Seer he knew of had prevented at least two cataclysmic disasters that would have allowed the Primordial Annihilator to gain the upper hand inside and outside the Webway.

So Ulthwé stayed where it was, enduring the attacks of the Annihilator's slaves, and the most common events everyone participated in were funerals. There were more happy occasions, but they were usually dignified and codified to the extreme; that way if they were interrupted by, say, a daemonic invasion, organising a retaliatory force or a defence fleet would take as little time as possible. A few Iyanden emissaries had even joked behind their backs the Ulthwé black armours were simply pragmatism pushed to the extreme and that this way, every warrior defending their Craftworld was adequately prepared for their own funeral. Eldrad knew this wasn't true – the black armours were crafted from materials increasing their skills to confuse and evade the Enemy's sorcery – but it wasn't an unbelievable claim. Khaine knew many of the young sometimes believed it before their elders corrected their assumptions.

Thus the party raging in the halls, ballrooms, chambers, gardens, and practically everywhere it was possible to party without creating security issues was unlike any other.

Gone was the dignity. Gone were the codes and the legendary discipline and haughtiness. At this moment, the Asuryani of Craftworld Ulthwé were celebrating with the vigour of beings who for too long had been forced to bottle up their pride and emotions.

Needless to say, if the Power of Excess had been alive, it would have been truly unconscionable to allow such scenes to develop. Young maidens were dancing in robes that any Drukhari of Commorragh would have vigorously approved of, such was the amount of flesh they showed. There were fruits growing in the gardens that elder Autarchs simply waited under to bite while they sang old tunes which had survived the long cycles of war. Fountains were now delivering highly sugary elixirs instead of pure water.

But Slaanesh was dead, and exceptionally and with a never-seen-before unanimity, Exarchs, Farseers, Autarchs, and more or less every senior figure of Ulthwé, including the spirits of the dead, had agreed that, for this occasion, they would throw a memorable party.

And at present, the promise was more than upheld. Millions of Asuryani were dancing, singing, and pausing their self-control for three turns of light and dark, discarding the dark colours of war and raising their glasses to the Death of Excess. Even the speech Eldrad had given beforehand – that the humans had done most of the job and Biel-Tan had been a massive hindrance, had not soured the mood.

Ulthwé had never liked the Dynasts of Commorragh, and the less said about the pirates they used as their attack animals, the better.

Eldrad poured himself a new drink and sang louder with thirty other youngsters that had about as much dignity as him, with large flowery vestments and large yellow hats. Truthfully, they all sang very badly, but it was the enthusiasm which counted, no? Thousands of beings and horrible creatures he had spent his life to keep in check were no more, and for the first time since he had been recognised as a Farseer, Eldrad had stopped monitoring the future and only cared about laughing, drinking and celebrating. He had been too young when his childhood had really ended, and for a few heartbeats doing what had never been possible when he was young felt like a balm on his soul.

“To the fountains! Ulthwé!”

“Ulthwé!”

“Ulthwé!”

Marvellous acrobats showed their immense talents to roaring crowds outside battlefields. New dresses were created in the middle of dances as contests between weavers and artists began and ended with every tune. Illusions of excellent quality were presented to young and old.

Despite his best efforts, Eldrad began to slow down after several thousand heartbeats. His mind was ecstatic, but while far from senility and remaining in excellent physical condition, humility compelled him to acknowledge he wasn't exactly in his prime anymore. As a result he navigated tranquilly through the buffets and the outer edge of the countless dance floors – the term seemed to apply for a third of the Craftworld now.

It was at this point she appeared, escorted by two Harlequins. Many loud exclamations rose everywhere; despite a not-so-livid skin and a red mask, the newcomer was evidently female and of Drukhari descent...but what was even more provocative was the fact her crimson-gold dress bore the symbol of the antique phoenix, the extinct animal of Aeldari royalty and divinity.

And yet where she touched with a finger, Asuryani saluted and smiled before returning to the celebrations. And when Eldrad tried to 'taste' the power surrounding the newcomer, he didn't sense corruption or something depraved...just joy and something mischievous.

“We present you the Queen of Hearts, oh Drunk Seer,” the first Harlequin declared.

“The other refugees will be led to you after the healers have restored their health,” the second servant of Cegorach informed him.

“Don't do anything Cegorach would disapprove!”

Eldrad wanted to ask more questions, beginning with how many refugees the Harlequins had led to the Craftworld, but most of the issues which had just appeared somehow disappeared when the young Drukhari in her sumptuous Phoenix robe took his hand and they stared into each others' eyes.

For the first time in aeons, Eldrad truly felt desire and embraced her, and the 'Queen' reciprocated.

“I am Eldrad, Farseer.”

“I am Aurelia, Emissary.”

A kiss ended the introductions. There was much dancing after this, and as the celebrations continued, they went to the high gardens. There the dance would become horizontal, and both Asuryani and Drukhari united in carnality and love.

**Segmentum** **Tempestus**

**Craftworld Biel-Tan**

**Twenty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Phoenix Lord Jain Zar**

Jain Zar was not fuming with rage when she entered the Autarch Council headquarters chamber. The Storm of Silence had passed that point long ago, her current temper could be more accurately described as 'unholy wrath' by a religious observer.

Two guards tried to prevent her from entering.

“You can't-“

“Your presence has not-“

“Begone.” And she didn't repeat herself.

They were knocked out like the petulant children they were.

Now if only there were fewer of them inside the room where over fifty Exarchs and Autarchs had gathered to decide the fate of Biel-Tan...

“Lady Jain Zar, an unexpected honour,” babbled one of the head cretins. “We were-“

“Be silent,” at least the idiot was still sufficiently intelligent to close his mouth when he heard her voice. “Do you understand the reasons of my presence?”

The entire audience stayed silent. Good, maybe there was a tiny bit of hope for them.

“By all rights, I should kill all of you immediately. You did not participate in the Battle of Commorragh, but you were involved in the deployment of billions of Aspect Warriors and you gave your full support to High Farseer Machdavar, may his soul rot in the Warp for all eternity.”

The Storm of Silence had almost vomited when she had heard the Biel-Tan leaders were intending to go to Commorragh to fight side by side with the dark monsters of the Haemonculi and the Dynasts. This was Commorragh they were talking about. Commorragh! The place made her remember the debauchery and collapse of order before the Fall. The further an Asuryani stayed away from that nexus, the better for their soul and sanity! And save for the immediate survival of your Craftworld, no reason could possibly justify sending an army there!

But the warmongers had proved that in a galactic contest of intelligence, they were the losers, even if the opponents were greenskins.

“We are still only getting preliminary reports,” an Exarch of the Dark Reapers protested. “We only need some time-“

“You want a report? I will give you a report, *imbecile*.”

The ancient warrior had to breathe several times to find some calm and serenity, and of course not kill the dark-armoured young idiot. It was difficult, and not just because the male richly deserved whatever death she could inflict upon his worthless carcass.

“Your entire expeditionary force which reached Commorragh is *dead*. No one counted the exact casualties, but I would be very surprised if your losses are less than one and a half billion. You also lost at least six war fleets and their full support train. And the only reason the situation isn't worse is because Cegorach closed the Gates before you could ferry more millions of Aspect Warriors and Marines into the slaughterhouse!”

This was the kind of stupidity one would have expected from barbaric lesser species playing with sticks and stones in caverns full of mud!

“And then there's Biel-Tan itself. Since you didn't even take the precaution to temporarily seal the most important Gates, the psychic explosion which surged forth during the deicide has caused critical damage both to Biel-Tan itself and its population.” Several mouths were wide open by this point, but she ignored their stupefaction with ease. “Here too, nobody had the opportunity to count your losses, but I wouldn't be surprised if they are in the millions!"

There weren't enough words in the Aeldari language to describe how much the Biel-Tan warriors had disappointed her. Every mistake it was possible to make, they had done it...and then they had added a few 'impossible' mistakes to the list.

“There's no need for 'preliminary councils' or anything drowning in your special brand of stupidity. Your surviving armies are dispersed across the galaxy, and thanks to the events leading to the Death of She-Who-Thirsts, you will be completely unable to recall them in time to deal with your enemies' retribution. Biel-Tan has suffered heavy damage and is forced to decelerate to prevent further internal and external damage. You are finished. Biel-Tan has angered everyone in this galaxy, and now you are going to pay the price.”

“Lady Jain Zar...” one of the Howling Banshees' Exarch started, only for her to send *Silent Death* and to leave a deep scar in the white armour.

“You, my Banshees, are the greatest disappointment of all,” the Storm of Silence dispensed with any pretence of courtesy. “Of all people, I thought, rather naively, it would be my daughters who would understand the priorities of the Asuryani as a whole. I thought the Death of our Doom was something so important, so evident, that my Shrines would recognise the importance of letting others do the dirty work and let the Drukhari bleed alone. But it appears I was utterly wrong. My Banshees have behaved like the rest: narrow-minded children with pointy toys unable to do anything other than shouting in the dark when the daemons come for your souls. You should have raised your voices against this idiocy, and instead you encouraged it!”

The five Howling Banshees in the room went to their knees and grovelled.

“We beg your forgiveness,” the eldest murmured. “We are willing to give our lives for you if it's the punishment you desire.”

“Slitting your own throats will not right the wrongs you have committed,” Jain Zar replied coldly. “You will earn your forgiveness by mighty deeds and repenting for the disasters your campaigns of arrogance and superfluous self-gratification have inflicted to the Asuryani!”

All the warriors who had donned the lesser copies of her amour would have to be retrained, physically, but especially mentally.

“You will go to my Shrines and muster all the Howling Banshees who have sworn their oaths to me. Then you will meet me at the Gate of the Crystal Forest, where we will escort the non-warrior population loyal to my precepts to Iyanden. As of this moment, your efforts of redemption begin. If a Howling Banshee refuses this order, let it be proclaimed she is to remove her armour and abandon this Path. I want people atoning for their mistakes, I neither want nor need angry failures in my service. Stand and go obey my commands.”

The three Exarchs and their two younger sisters obeyed without a word.

Naturally, the moment they left, a storm of protestations exploded in the Autarch-Exarch Council.

“Scandalous! The Howling Banshees are one of the few Shrines to have more than fifty thousand warriors left!”

“You are weakening Biel-Tan at a critical time!”

“You come here to insult us, and now you think we are going to stay idle while you raid our reserves of female and male warriors?”

The Autarch who had uttered this rhetorical question had just enough time to realise it was his last mistake before *Silent Death* slit his throat.

The loud sound of his dying body hitting the floor restored some measure of silence.

“Asurmen and I are not going to close our eyes to Biel-Tan's actions any longer,” the former arena gladiator made sure to employ her angriest voice, not that she needed much effort to find the motivation there. “I am going to save the innocents who want to be saved and the daughters, sons, and children who swore themselves to me. Perhaps the other Lords will imitate me. It's also possible they won't. But let there be no mistake, I am sick of you. I am sick of Biel-Tan. There are too many vital conflicts in the war against the Primordial Annihilator to open new fronts, and yet, that is exactly what you've done. I will never forgive you for that. And I will never forgive that you almost managed to save the existence of She-Who-Thirsts. The enemy will come soon. I advise you strongly to fall upon their blades.”

“Even wounded, Biel-Tan has resisted many raids and invasions, be they from the upstart Mon-keigh or the brutish greenskins!”

Jain Zar didn't answer. The favour a Farseer of Saim-Hann owed her had allowed her to watch what was almost certainly going to come for Biel-Tan's throat; by this point, it really didn't matter if the surviving armies and fleets returned to their Craftworld in time or not.

Tens of thousands of 'Space Marines', and more warships than all the Asuryani possessed; Biel-Tan was going to be destroyed no matter what resistance it was able to mount. The only thing left was to save what was still salvageable.

“Should you fail to meet your end inside these halls, I will hunt you down and kill you myself.”

**Segmentum** **Pacificus**

**Craftworld Lugganath**

**Twenty-three hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**High Autarch Ulion Lakadieth**

The door of his new quarters closed and Ulion waited a couple of heartbeats before beginning to chuckle loudly, a hilarity which soon transformed into full-blown hysterical laughter.

It took a lot of time to stop.

The Grand Council and a super-majority of Lugganath had bestowed multiple honours upon him and his senior officers. And they were calling him the Hero of Lugganath.

This was...this was not the reception he had been expecting once he returned home. Like, at all.

No one who lived long enough and won sufficient amount of battles could be blind to the negotiations and agreements behind the scenes occurring in any Craftworld, and Ulion Lakadieth had believed he was competent enough to know which direction the wind would blow every time he returned home.

This time he had been completely wrong. There had been no recrimination for the loss of the adamantium or the treasure caches he had been unable to take with him.

Of course, the reason so many people were happy to see him was because Ulion Lakadieth had the singular 'honour' of being the only Asuryani, Drukhari, and non-Rashan commander in general that Weaver and her armada hadn't pulverised to cosmic wreckage, set aflame with incinerator torpedoes, or outright massacred in a frenzy of slaughter which must have made even a minor God cringe at the sheer level of collateral damage.

"That human is completely crazy," the newly promoted High Autarch remarked to himself.

The short conversation when he had been graciously allowed to ransom himself had convinced him their opponent of the day at Pavia had been terrifyingly dangerous.

But no one, and certainly not him, had imagined that after ridding the galaxy of Sliscus' presence, the human fleet would decide to invade the Webway and add Commorragh and Slaanesh to their tally of 'things we have rendered extinct'.

Merciful Isha, Khaine, Cegorach and all the Gods living and dead, it had truly been a brilliant idea to negotiate when he did. Otherwise, there was absolutely zero doubt in his mind that he would have joined the rest of the dead pirate Admirals.

“That human is completely crazy,” Ulion repeated with more fervour. “Note to self: each time I leave Lugganath from now on, make sure Weaver is on the other side of the galaxy and in no position to invade the Webway.”

On this point, he couldn't allow the euphoric celebrations to cloud his mind; by the grace of Cegorach himself, he had survived an encounter with a being which was more akin to a hurricane of destruction than a living creature. Believing a second encounter would go the same way would be the height of arrogance and stupidity.

And on this thought, Ulion Lakadieth changed his well-decorated uniform to an even more splendid one in orange with ribbons of black, blue and yellow. It would not do to fail to impress potential admirers at the immense party about to begin.

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“*There are many reasons why a lot of people have taken to calling the Battle of Commorragh an epic moment of butchery, and all of them are valid. The Imperial Guard lost one million one hundred and one thousand six hundred ninety-five men in this inferno. The Adeptus Mechanicus removed eleven million eight hundred thousand nine hundred and seven Skitarii, Tech-Priests and tech-operators from its ranks. Ninety-seven Knights and seven Titans were utterly destroyed, and all survivors were damaged to varying degrees, with high losses among their infantry protectors and support personnel. The Imperial Navy confirmed the loss of seven million seven hundred thirty-nine thousand seven hundred and fifty-four men and women in the multiple slaughters fought in the Port of Lost Souls, with the Ultima 70th Battlefleet alone accounting for over four million of these fatalities. Everyone suffered crippling casualties. The Frateris Templar, both in space and on the ground, were almost wiped out; they lost nine hundred thousand two hundred and seventy souls. The Aeronautica Imperialis paid dearly for its dutiful heroism with four hundred forty-three thousand nine hundred and thirty-four dead. One thousand one hundred and six Space Marines would never fight again. The Astartes auxiliary-serfs bled like their masters; six hundred ninety-seven thousand nine hundred and forty-eight died for the God-Emperor. Rogue Trader fatalities were around fifty-six thousand. The Inquisition lost one hundred fourteen thousand three hundred and ninety-two agents and detached personnel. And other forces lost much more...*

*The fatalities, as far as we have been able to ascertain at this hour, number twenty-three million two hundred thirty-five thousand three hundred and forty-two, meaning forty-six point one percent of all forces involved in the destruction of Commorragh have perished weapons in hands.*

*This is likely the greatest victory the Imperium has ever won against the Ruinous Powers*.” Lady Rafaela Harper, 297M35.

**Acacia** **Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Twenty-four hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Aquarium Ship *Antibes***

**Ocean-Mistress of the Unsounded Depths Lox'ena**

There were two certainties to be learned from these battles.

The song had changed. The humans were madness incarnate.

Certainly the homeworld of these non-aquatic beings had to be filled with hallucinogen-filled water. Lox'ena saw no other explanation.

If they were sane, the humans wouldn't have invaded the Webway.

If they had a puddle of sanity left in their bodies, they wouldn't have chosen to invade Commorragh of all nexuses.

But they had. They had and they won. All the Sirens had been able to clearly hear the billions of Drukhari vanishing forever, their souls devoured by a cruel Goddess on the edge of annihilation.

The humans were mad. It really took a special kind of mental instability to challenge the creatures which lurked and screamed in the Ocean-That-Wasn't-One. They were enemies which could make your head explode just because you were too close or you had looked at them the wrong way.

But the commanders who had captured them had done it. And now the predators hurled themselves at each other, shrieked and fought for the scraps of the Fourth Throne, their insatiable hatred temporarily turned against each other. Blood, Change, and Decay were reacting to the death of the Prime-Excess. The greatest storms the Mistress of the Unsounded Depths had ever seen were unleashed, not against reality, but against would-be rivals, telling ambitious stories of hatred and revenge.

On the surface, the waters were calm. Pavia was now partially lit by the beacon of light-pain, which appeared to bring more light and propagate less pain now.

Here too many things had changed.

But Lox'ena had lived too long to believe this was anything but temporary. Darkness had retreated to the darkest abysses of the non-Ocean, but this victory was not eternal. Sooner or later, the Three-Which-Were-Four would notice the small rat gnawing at the roots, and then they would return more terrible than ever.

“They are going to suffer,” one of her granddaughters said. “And they will lose. Madness and ignorance won't save them when the True War really begins.”

“They killed a Goddess,” an even younger tail-leader pointed out.

“It was the weakest of the Four, which was arrogant enough to leave a fatal opening in her heart and refused to take their threat seriously until the end. The other Three won't make the same mistake.”

“What if the humans, led by their Tide of Light, won't make the same mistakes either?”

It wasn't a question the Ocean-Mistress had ever given much thought to before.

Maybe there was a third certainty to be found as Commorragh was no more and an entire faction of daemons finished burning.

Insane or not, the humans wouldn't die without biting back with all their strength.

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

Usually, walking in the alleys of the *Enterprise* was extremely easy for a Navigator, and whether he was Chancellor or not made no difference. Friar wasn't going to say he was unpopular among the crew, but the familiar rumours and the tales accompanying every Navigator had not failed to appear on the Battleship.

So yes, escort or no – though he always kept at least five bodyguards near him, security concerns were a thing – people always gave him a wide berth.

Not so much now that they were back at Pavia and the battle was over. The discipline among the crew had...considerably relaxed, to use one of these ironic understatements of Low Gothic.

People were celebrating in every room as long as they were not on duty, and amasec and other alcoholic beverages which were certainly against military regulations were flowing everywhere. Songs, some familiar to his ears and some totally new, were in the air.

The mood could only be described as jubilant and euphoric. It was such an atmosphere of victory most people were kissed, hugged, or offered drinks no matter their origins. Friar had seen an Ogryn dressed in a parade uniform which strangely looked like a mix of Nyx clothes and a Commissar cap, some Astropaths receive public affection, and even one or two Rashans who had come as emissaries be elevated to the status of favoured regimental mascots.

“I think the soldiers don't need to be taught how to organise a party,” the Chancellor of House Achelieux lightly commented to the only one of his assistants, Tallinn, who had not abandoned him to get royally drunk and do all the things victorious guardsmen and Imperial agents did when victory was won.

“It's even more extraordinary that they're this cheerful when the Inquisition teams are testing thousands upon thousands of men and women to verify there are no... unpleasant effects left among us from Commorragh.”

Friar's lips twitched. How delicate of his subordinate to not mention Warp corruption by name.

“These men...and women...have gone through Hell to win victory. As long as the Inquisition limits itself to tests and removing the tainted grox from the herd, I don't think anybody will be able to stop the celebrations.”

“The Commissars may take umbrage, Chancellor,” Tallinn reminded him.

“Oh they will,” Achelieux confirmed, “but Zuhev and most of the Commissariat are either trying to heal in the infirmary wings or recover from their military ordeals. I expect they will restore discipline in a day or two.”

As the ruckus grew louder when they approached the observation rooms, they could speak with conversational tones; no one seemed to be interested in secrets and things which didn't involve partying anyway.

“So is it confirmed?”

“Yes, Chancellor, the total treasure list has been updated to seventy-three Navigator maps, which will be of course added to the objects found in the vaults of the *Empire of Sin*.”

Friar Achelieux sighed as he evaded the drunken attention offered by two women in Fay uniforms.

“So Pavia was more profitable from our perspective than Commorragh, in the end,” at least this was how many Novators and the Paternova would see the entire expedition, he had no doubt.

“True, but how could we guess the Serpent would stash so many astrogation-related treasures in one vault?”

There was nothing to do but shrug and smile at that. Nobody, least of all him, had expected what they had found in Sliscus' vaults. After Lady Taylor Hebert had used her insects to claim the first, most analysts and aspirant Seers would have bet, Friar was sure, that the three other vaults would be more or less the same: gigantic piles of treasure, to which xenos and non-xenos were calculating the numbers.

Except that hadn't been the case. Vault Two had been...well, it was a sex dungeon, to be blunt. The Inquisitorial agents who had stormed it had described as 'the greatest collection of sex toys, porn, and other sex-related artefacts in the known galaxy'. Paintings, jewellery, sculptures, and of course sex toys, many of them representing various parts of Sliscus' anatomy. This was one which was likely going to be sequestered or outright burned the moment the Inquisitors had the spare time to light the pyres, except the pieces they needed to take as evidence for future trials. It went without saying House Achelieux had no interest in it.

Vault Three had been nicknamed the Vault of Flags. It was as the name indicated, filled with the regimental and ship flags the Drukhari Admiral had stolen or taken by force in his long career of piracy. Aquilas and other xenos symbols were also mentioned in the reports. That too, neither Friar nor House Achelieux as a whole had any will to purchase or trade against resources and services.

But that left Vault Four, which had been dubbed 'Star Quest' by some Navy experts, and which contained the immodest number of one hundred and thirty-one Navigator maps, one hundred and sixty-nine standard astrogation databases, and over seven thousand xenos maps and repositories acquired by the Serpent.

Friar Achelieux hadn't the slightest idea why the ancient pirate had gathered all this astrogation lore and so many navigation objects in a single location, but if even half of the maps and artefacts could be used, it was easily a prize worth more than the two million tons of adamantium Lady Weaver had extorted from the Eldar pirate for his life...and the value of that shipment was roughly one point eight quadrillion Nyxian Throne Gelts!

“We couldn't, Chancellor. At least I won't pretend I saw that coming. But Lady Weaver is full of surprises.”

That too was one of the larger understatements running around.

“Good. As I'm sure you're a competent assistant, you have already imagined what we may be able to offer to our generous benefactor in exchange for this vault of maps.”

“Chancellor, the coffers of House Achelieux are not exactly empty, but I doubt that, save the service of our Navigators, we really have all that much to offer to the Basileia anymore. Between the bounties of Pavia and Commorragh alone, the Saint will have a fortune in the quadrillions to her name. By the prize system, she's the order-giver, her own Admiralty, the commander-in-chief, and the Supreme General giving the orders. That's fourth-tenths of the total in her hands! I won't say the wealthiest members of the Senatorum Imperialis need to feel concerned, but they will certainly notice...everything.”

“True,” Friar wasn't going to disagree with anything Tallinn had said. “But clearly, we have an advantage the totality of the Magisterial Houses will envy us for. We were at Pavia in an official contract when Vault Four was discovered, and if Lady Weaver decides to hand out copies, I have no doubt we will have first pick. Thus we will need to be bold and secure our position by her side. The time of prudence and timidity is over. As the green giants I've met a few hours ago proclaim, 'the iron must be struck while it's hot'.”

“Did they say that before or after trying to hug you to death, Chancellor?”

Alas, respect was definitely lost with all these celebrations...

**Battleship** ***Judgement***

**Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper**

At times like this, it was difficult to argue Bacta wasn't a miraculous substance. If it hadn't been available to them, three of the four Inquisitors present wouldn't be in a condition to speak with their colleagues...and in at least one case, hardly in a condition to breathe at all.

But they were there, around a round table...and they were ready to discuss what certainly was one of the most glorious victories the Inquisition had ever managed to support and fight through in its entire existence.

“I think we all need a drink before we begin,” Pedro de Moray offered. No one objected, and two servitors brought a bottle of wine and crystal glasses. The latter didn't stay full for long.

“That's a very good bottle. Wine from Macragge?”

“No, the Basileia offered two to Odysseus and me before our departure,” Rafaela admitted. “At the time I was a bit busy, so I failed to ask where it came from.”

“Well, I will certainly ask who her wine contacts are,” the younger red-haired Inquisitor declared. “This is far better than amasec.”

“And likely more expensive than old-fashioned amateur amasec,” Zoe Zircon added.

“We will spare no expense,” her counterpart of the Ordo Obsoletus sniffed haughtily. “Besides, I have a feeling I am really going to need it before I make my report to Terra.”

Yes, she didn't envy him *that* post-battle report. It was often joked that the Ordo Obsoletus was practically an unemployment sentence in areas behind the frontlines, since they were charged with explaining unexplained phenomena and miracles. And when nothing out of the ordinary happened, their expertise was in very little demand.

And then there were other extremes like Commorragh.

“I won't even make the bet this is going to arrive on the desk of the Inquisitorial Representative,” continued Pedro.

“It would be surprising if it didn't,” Cleopatra Coral nodded in agreement. “Now onto business, I think. I have investigated the disappearance of Contessa and analysed all the evidence, and I believe the Sirens are saying the truth: the portal which swallowed Inquisitor Contessa and her escort wasn't activated by them. To be sure it was close enough to be mistaken as such, but it wasn't their powers or technology.”

“I will ask to review your evidence,” the representative of the Ordo Excorium made a 'by all means' gesture, “but if your conclusions are validated, then the most likely culprit is Chaos.”

“I know,” Cleopatra replied. “I can't say why they would have intervened so directly against a single Inquisitor and not against other critical members of the Inquisition, but...” the cloaked woman exhaled rather loudly compared to her usual manners. “I also have the displeasure to tell you Contessa's quarters were one of the targets of the daemons which tried to storm the *Judgement* in the last minutes of the space battle. I also have psychic and non-psychic evidence the 'angels' created by the fires of the Blackstone Fortress fought them off. All my teams found are corpses, some of them looking like desiccated mummies.”

Rafaela grimaced before making her decision.

“I will write the paperwork and declare Inquisitor Contessa missing in action.” There wasn't much chance they would live to meet the woman again, but stranger things had happened. “Once our reinforcements arrive, I will likely request several Acolytes to help you in this affair.”

“The main effort of the Holy Ordos will have to be the anti-corruption tests and interrogations of all survivors for the next several weeks,” Zoe murmured in a whimsical tone.

“Are you sure you're of the Ordo Machinum?” Pedro chuckled.

“You know what I mean. The entire force of Operation Caribbean and the reinforcements have seen the ugly face of the Ruinous Powers. The traditional methods are impossible to use now; not only would the Living Saint not let us kill her soldiers, but given how many templates of STC the Mechanicus found, any move we make against the Tech-Priests would most likely result in a civil war with Mars!”

“Zoe is correct,” Cleopatra stated, “but casualties have been rather heavy among all groups, and I have an idea to accelerate the process.”

“General Taylor Hebert isn't available,” Rafaela reminder her. The young Saint – because what could you call her if not that? – had collapsed in exhaustion while returning to the *Enterprise* and was recovering, her Dawnbreaker Guard letting no one disturb her rest.

“Actually, I want to use the big moth,” the Excorium woman corrected her guess. “It's always surrounded by the same golden light she is, and as long as it is fed, the purifying halo can be used to...reveal the difference between pure and tainted. It is onboard of *The Great Quest*, so it's not like it's a huge logistical endeavour to organise shuttle rotations.”

This was definitely innovative...and Rafaela had nothing to say against it. Of course, the fell influence of the Warp was hardly her field of expertise.

“Situation on the xenos?”

“The Sirens and their artefacts have all been transferred onto the Aquarium Ship *Antibes*,” Pedro de Moray commented bitterly. “Please remind me why we haven't shot the Governor who used his influence to prioritise the transport of exotic fish over guardsmen?”

“I will look into it,” Cleopatra promised.

“On that front at least everything is proceeding as we wanted. The Sirens have kept their end of the bargain, and the Conclave back home has found a nice inland sea on Kolskov which can support their biology and has no human settlements nearby to be influenced by their song. The funds to build a monitoring-study base are likely being allocated as we speak.”

“The Rashans?”

“They have been behaving like model mascots,” there was more than a touch of irony in Zoe's words. “Except a small contingent of Mechanicus from Nyx, they have stayed alone on their Starfort and will likely be towed back to whatever system Lady Nyx will decide to settle them on. Not that there will be a lot of issues, these black and white xenos are so cute it should be made a capital offence.”

“The non-violent species we saved at Commorragh?” inquired Cleopatra.

This time it was Rafaela's turn to defend her choice, since it was by her will the xenos had been evacuated.

“The Brachyura, the Akvrani, the Axlo, the Naiad, and the Uluméathic xenos have been transferred into special compartments more adapted to their physiology. All of them can be useful for the Imperium's purposes, provided they cooperate. And out of the five, I am confident two of them can be controlled by Lady Weaver if the majority of them refuse our commands.”

“I notice you don't include the Stryxis on that list.”

“I wanted the Stryxis to dissect them and see if the rumours of our colleagues generated in the Abyssinian Sector, specifically the one that these creatures having a psychic matrix enabling them to use technology like the greenskins, can be verified with the instruments we have available here.”

“Probably the best use that can be made of those vermin,” the Ordo Mechanicum representative confirmed. “And now I think it's time to raise the biggest issue of all. How do we convince Taylor Hebert to provide us Aethergold before the other Adeptuses?”

**The** **Eye of Terror**

**Starfort *Cairo-Agadir***

**Ahzek Ahriman the Exile**

Ahzek hated failure. That the most important events of his life were his father Magnus the Red's or his own fault had not made him grow fonder of them. Failure, in this unforgiving galaxy, wasn't an opportunity to rethink your mistakes. It had every chance of being the first step on a very short path leading to your grave.

Reminiscing about failure wasn't why he was so angry, of course. The former Chief Librarian of the Thousand Sons Legion wasn't that petty.

No, the reason he was so emotionally unstable had more to do with the fact someone had burned trillions of future threads and forced him to abandon his Quest in the depths of the Webway.

For uncountable years he had tried to access the labyrinthine dimension. Hundreds of unsuccessful attempts and dozens of costly battles with the Eldar clowns...and for what? The former Chief Librarian had to abandon the Quest when he was finally beginning to make progress.

The fact no one had really tried to deliberately sabotage his plans, that he was just caught in the ripples of the destruction of Commorragh and the death of a God, was just adding insult to injury. Ahriman could only congratulate himself that his occult pacts had allowed him to be warned early enough to flee back to his entry Gate.

“They will pay for that nonetheless,” the powerful sorcerer swore out loud. The hundreds of Rubricae behind him stayed silent, like they always did. Ahzek then returned to his examination of the damage surrounding him.

The damage caused by another failure. Starfort *Cairo-Agadir* had been his property, one of the many outposts the leader of the Prodigal Sons warband used to supply his fleet and store the precious knowledge, artefacts, and other treasures he obtained during his varied operations. It was hardly the most valuable or the most defended, but it was an ancient fortress which had been in his service longer than two-thirds of his other assets.

It had not been undefended. The Starfort's primary weapons had been modified to use sorcery of his own design, and to improve security it had been placed in an asteroid belt where nine hundred and ninety-nine daemons of Tzeentch were bound to a great deal of space mines and other lethal ordnance. The Void Shields of the battlestation had been boosted by psychic treasures. And if someone managed to breach them, a near-infinite horde of mutants and oath-bound servants which had once been human were ready to fight them. There had been no Space Marines protecting it; Astartes were far too valuable to be kept on humiliating garrison duties like this one, but there were plenty of sorcerers ready to sell their lives dearly to avoid his displeasure...and his wrath.

Obviously, it hadn't been enough.

The walls, ceiling, floor, and mostly everything between them had been burned by aetheric flames. It was as if a maniacal company of Salamanders had decided to torch his Starfort corridor by corridor and room by room.

Maybe the attackers had tried to erase the evidence of their crime, but if so, time had run out for them. Out of the Webway, receiving an astropathic cry for help was not a problem for him, and he had come as fast as he could. And so the bolter rounds indicated clearly which sort of enemies had led the assault on his property.

Moreover, the enemy who had masterminded this attack was too clever for his own good. Yes, the stench of sorcery and the flames had removed most of the evidence, but the servants of this fortress were his, body and soul. He could always interrogate their imprints in the Empyrean if everything else failed.

It took him nine rituals to obtain his answers, and the answers he received didn't calm his anger for even a single moment.

*Ignis.*

Ahzek telepathically contacted his brother who had stayed aboard his flagship.

*Found any clues about the suicidal idiot who declared war on us, brother?*

'*Suicidal idiot' is extremely appropriate. The name I wanted is Malicia.*

Ahzek and Ignis were sufficiently close in thought for the Exile to hear the mental whistle of the other Astartes.

*I am rather impressed by her...audacity. I thought ambushing Abaddon's convoys was already ambitious, but now she's moving against us?*

*Audacity isn't the word I would use.*

*No, I suppose not. Must I place a bounty on her head?*

*Yes. The lore we lost here was duplicated elsewhere, but there are certain artefacts which were contained here for excellent reasons.*

The Prodigal Sons warband and himself could not, would not forget such an insult.

*Make sure the short-lived career of this arrogant child-sorceress ends very unpleasantly. We will remind everyone declaring war on us has consequences.*

*With great pleasure, brother.*

**Segmentum** **Obscurus**

**Gothic Sector**

**Fularis System**

**Twenty-eight hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Murder-class *Unholy Dominion***

**Captain Karas Banesong**

The leader of the Cult of the Undying Vigilance begged and shrieked as the Daemonic Engine began to eat his feet.

“Make it slow,” the commanding officer of the *Unholy Dominion* ordered, and in the next seconds, he could feel the malevolent spirit of his Cruiser transmitting its appreciation.

Karas wasn't stupid enough to believe this was a sign the thing which was the next best thing to a conscience liked him and would serve no one but him. Should an ambitious underling stab him in the back and offer his blood to the Dark Gods on this very bridge, the ship would like the murderer too. The *Unholy Dominion* had had plenty of captains since it broke the shackles of the False-Emperor and opened its eyes to the Truth.

“You are going beyond your authority, Captain,” the sole Plague Marine present aboard his ship gurgled in a voice in which contagion and decay reigned supreme.

“Oh really,” the former Lieutenant of the Imperial Navy mocked, unsheathing his claws and giving a parody of a salute before pointing one at the gleaming symbol of the Eye of Horus. “Do you really think my ship was diverted from its usual raids with extreme urgency because the Warmaster felt you were doing a good job?”

The Plague Marine and the dozens of disarmed cultists surrounded by his elite cadre of naval enforcers didn't answer. The answer was self-evident.

“You!” he barked, pointing at a five-armed thing which had been presented as the 'Awakened Blight' or a similar title. “Remind me of the mission the Warmaster, praised be his name, ordered to you and your entire Cult to continue until the Call arrived.”

“We were to watch over the *Eye of Night*. And should agents of the False-Emperor try to seize it, kill them.”

“Yes,” Karas agreed. “And yet the first sign the Warmaster, praised be his name, had of the *Eye of Night* being used by our enemies was when the *Will of Eternity* arrived at Commorragh and destroyed it to the last sub-realm. You will understand why the High Command of the Black Legion is wondering if your Cult is treacherous or merely incompetent.”

"We are neither!" protested the pustule-covered cultist.

“Of course,” Karas grinned as a chainsword eviscerated the speaker from behind and more blood and life-essence were poured onto the black metal of the bridge.

“The Warmaster is unhappy to see his confidence in all of your Cults was horribly misplaced,” the self-titled 'Banesong' addressed the rest of the cultist leadership. “Between all of your organisations, you were given simple tasks. The *Eye of Night* and the *Hand of Darkness* had to stay where they were, out of reach of the False-Emperor's servants. The Blackstone Fortresses had to stay inactive, and any sign they were being moved or activated had to be reported immediately. Should the False-Emperor's dogs act to seize an artefact or a battlestation for their own purposes, there were alerts to be given and preparations to be made.”

“Just stop your condescending act and kill us, navy prick,” a Tzeentch-affiliated cultist spat.

“Killing you? Ha! That was a good one.” His laughter pleased the sentience of the *Unholy Dominion* and caused it to sprout new tendrils near his command throne. “Most of you are going to live. The Warmaster, praised be his name, has ordered that the majority of your pathetic mortal shells are to be delivered to him in person.”

Some of the wretches tried to launch themselves at him or flee, but each one was brutally subdued. Soon there was only the Plague Marine who was not on his knees. The servant of Nurgle had not moved a finger during the entire process, and Karas didn't know if it was because the Marine believed the Despoiler would spare him or because he accepted whatever the Master of the Black Legion had in store for him.

“You were given a sacred task and achieving it would have granted you more power than your wildest dreams could conjure. The punishment, I think, will be proportionate to the magnitude of your failure.”

**The** **Webway**

**Realm of Shaa-Dom**

**Thirty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Tyrant Kharsaq El'Uriaq**

There wasn't enough space to fit another thousand bodies into the Manticore Square when Kharsaq El'Uriaq passed through the gates of his palace and stood to address the crowd. It was a spectacle which satisfied his ego immensely; a proper count wasn't really possible, but there had to be at least four hundred thousand Drukhari gathered here, and he hadn't needed to pay a single one to be there, unlike previous speeches and other important announcements.

“Drukhari!” the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom began. “A new Age of Wonder is upon us!”

Tens of thousands of hands applauded while shouting roars of celebration.

“I'm sure everyone has understood the consequences of the events at Commorragh, but in case you've been asleep for these last cycles...” There was much laughter at that. With the psychic screams and the earthquakes, sleeping was definitely something no one had been doing.

“SLAANESH. IS. DEAD!”

The nearly bestial thunder of satisfaction was almost frightening in its intensity.

“Yes, She-Who-Thirsts, our old Enemy, has received the fate its arrogance and behaviour deserved. Details remain vague, but it seems Cegorach, the Queen of Blades, and the Mon-keigh have all played a part in this deicide.”

There was much booing when a certain word was uttered, and it wasn't 'Cegorach'.

“Please, Drukhari,” Kharsaq smiled, raising his hands in a fake sign of peace, “I understand your anger. The humiliation and the sheer scale of the cataclysm these creatures have inflicted upon the Webway and the region of Commorragh is not something I find entertaining either.”

This was a complete lie; Commorragh had been a thorn in his side for hundreds of cycles, always preventing him from reaching the status he deserved. The Mon-keigh warriors had caused him plenty of problems, but killing Yllithian, Xelian, and Kraillach weren't among them.

“On the other hand, there is no need to deny that they have done us a great favour by removing the Dark Princess and her legions from existence.” The old Tyrant continued. “The soul-draining of She-Who-Thirsts has completely ceased. Many Gates which were compromised have been captured with impressive speed and sealed off, preventing dangerous incursions into the periphery of some of our minor cities.”

The applause continued, though in the first ranks of spectators, who were close enough that he could see their faces clearly, he was met by expressions that showed their owners were not pleased by his acknowledgment of the lesser species. Undoubtedly some were the same idiots who had insisted they had to relieve Commorragh no matter what after Khaine's Gate exploded and everything began to be submerged by daemons.

“A cataclysm of unimaginable magnitude has erased many sins of the First Fall,” and this was where he really, really had to be careful and charismatic. “However, not all sins of our ancestors have been expunged from our history.”

The expressions of surprise and shock told him that at least his secret preparations had not been leaked.

“She-Who-Thirsts was a cruel and loathsome hag, and her destruction has not given us back any Gods to protect us from the ravages of the entities beyond the Veil. At present, the Three-Which-Were-Four are fighting between themselves, and I say good riddance!”

On this, the agreement was universal.

“But we can't count upon this abominable contest lasting forever,” the Tyrant admonished with a large dose of hypocritical regret. “Sooner or later, souls like ours will be coveted by the Three. We are too perfect, too powerful, and too gifted for it to be otherwise.”

The crowd loved it. How easy it was to lead them by the nose...truly the myth of Aeldari superiority was good for controlling every blade in his realm.

“We all know what our cousins would advise. The Craftworld 'Asuryani' would tell us it's time to graft spirit stones to our armours and throw aside emotions to become nice little husks of virtue and control. The Harlequin would promise you swearing yourself to Cegorach is salvation, except when he needs to sacrifice a few sub-realms for the Greater Good of his anti-Annihilator struggle. The Exodites would try to convince you the fault lies with our stellar ambitions and that it is best to renounce all and return to the primitive state of our creation.”

Kharsaq El'Uriaq hammered the stand in front of him.

“I say they are wrong. I say we have other solutions!”

The crowd was now hanging to his lips, all according to the plan.

“In the aeons before the Fall, there were multiple artefacts created by our ancestors to enjoy ourselves without risking soul and bodily annihilation. One group of them were the Manticore Shards, crafted by modest artisans to show us the blessings of Khaine.”

A nod and several artisans advanced in front of the gigantic gathering to present black-streaked orange crystals pulsating with energy.

“These would have never been able to resist the wrath of She-Who-Thirsts, obviously,” there was no use pretending otherwise; firstly because everybody would know it was an enormous lie within the hour, and secondly his flock would have wondered why he hadn't spread them until now if they could make a difference. “But our supposed 'Doom',” Kharsaq saw no need to hide his derision, “is no more, and a simple surgical operation can attach them to your chests, therefore preventing any of the Three from staking a claim on your spiritual integrity. The minor drawback, of course, is one has to devote himself or herself to the teachings of Khaine for the blessing to be the most effective.”

After a second of silence, the guttural howl of approval told him most Drukhari in attendance saw it as a very acceptable condition.

They never realized it was a lie. These were shards gifted by Vainglory, but as the Aspect grew stronger and ascended as Addaioth the All-Consuming Wrath, the Drukhari would enjoy its boons and see it was far better than worshipping Khaine.

“Yes, we will follow the path of Khaine!” Not the so naive version the Asuryani devoted themselves to of course. They would worship the true Aspect of the God: Murder. “We will rebuild the Webway to its previous glory, and we will erase the shame of the First Fall! Forget the lamentable Aeldari! We will be the Drukhari Empire!”

This was the signal for his men to unfurl large banners on every wall of the palaces, the monuments and the dark spires, revealing his new sigil to all: a roaring Manticore in flight.

“El'Uriaq! El'Uriaq! El'Uriaq! El'Uriaq!”

“The Manticore Empire!”

“Shaa-Dom Forever!”

“To a new Age!”

Kharsaq knew it was a success as the crowd applauded over and over. And he knew him being crowned the Drukhari Emperor of the Manticore would not face any obstacles he couldn't handle.

And the best part? Save trying to kill him, the Queen of Blades and Cegorach could not act against his plans. He wasn't Aeldari anymore, and he was going to become something far more terrible and powerful than them.

**Segmentum** **Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Thirty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

The vase had been part of an extremely limited luxury collection commissioned in the Tang Sector by Ecclesiarch Mesring in M32. Unfortunately for him and the vase economy, High Lord Mesring was executed for the crimes of heresy, high treason, and other unforgivable crimes, and soon more or less every object which had been in his possession was considered shameful and a legacy to be forgotten at the earliest opportunity.

But time had the power to erase a multitude of sins, and by M33 the aura of displeasure clinging to the objects had faded. The Inquisition had executed other High Lords since, the Space Marines had returned to their wars, and in general even the aristocracy of Terra, who remembered feuds and privilege disputes to the twentieth generation, mostly forgot why said Tang vases had been subjected to violent polemics. The only thing the lofty individuals living close to the heart of power of the Imperium cared about was that, according to experts' records, there were less than three hundred vases of the 480M32 collection left in the entire galaxy...officially. Unofficially, it was heavily suspected that a few dozen had been destroyed during various insurrections in Pacificus when Nova-Terra began its secessionist movement.

All of this was to say these Tang vases weighing fifteen kilograms, superb in their blue-white poly-ceramic from which pure sapphires and diamonds shone their peerless gleam, were maybe not priceless, but you could certainly have built a Hive somewhere in Segmentum Solar with the expense it would take to purchase one.

It was worth far less than that of course now that his furious brother had smashed it against the window wall, ruining a M33 painting of the Senatorum Imperialis and scattering glass and debris everywhere on the green carpet.

“DAMN HER! DAMN HER!”

Nicephorus stayed silent and tried to make as little noise as was humanly possible. The Solar Guardian of Records knew his eldest brother had anger issues, and had personally witnessed some memorable ones in the last few decades.

Despite, or rather because of this experience, he was still caught aback by the speed with which Xerxes had shifted from his persona of Master of the Administratum to his wrathful side. And maybe 'wrathful' was too gentle to describe it.

“HOW DARE SHE! HOW DARE SHE!”

To be honest with himself – and at this moment Nicephorus didn't particularly want to be – this was one of the worst fits of rage he had been granted the 'honour' of watching. In fact, it was entirely possible it was the worst rage fit he had ever seen, period.

“I WILL KILL THAT LITTLE UPSTART! I WILL MAKE HER BURN! I WILL TORTURE HER! I WILL-“

Several bottles, most of them not empty, had the wrong idea of being within arm's reach, and followed the Tang vase in an irregular rhythm against the wall. Then it was the turn of the plates and glasses of their dinner.

“INFALLIBLE ASSASSINS MY ASS!” bellowed the Head of Clan Vandire. “I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE CALLIDUS WERE ARROGANT DULLARDS! THREE APPRENTICES! THREE! WHAT WERE THEY DOING? SLEEPING? PLAYING CARDS?”

Nicephorus wished Xerxes didn't shout so much. The quarters granted to the Master of the Administratum inside the Imperial Palace were more of a palace in their own right and the large contingent of servants, courtesans, and other people allowed to pass through its defences were handpicked and subjected to some particularly exhaustive investigations, but no one knew the reach of the Officio Assassinorum on Terra, and he wasn't exactly eager to find out if they were listening at their door.

“THESE HORUS-DAMNED METAMORPHS WERE A WASTE OF MONEY, INFLUENCE, AND EFFORT! I SHOULD HAVE SENT AN EVERSOR!”

That last remark made his eyes widen. Surely not...

A golden orb representing Holy Terra and its holy pilgrimage sites found itself added to the list of casualties.

“DAMN HER! WHY IN THE HELL HAVEN'T THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND ITS LORD MILITANTS REINED HER IN? WHAT IS OBERSTEIN WAITING FOR? THAT SHE MARCHES ON TERRA AND BLOCKADES SOL?”

Nicephorus wanted a drink. Like, he really, really wanted a drink, and something very strong to make him forget the screams of his brother for a moment.

Paul von Oberstein, also known as the Lord Commander Militant of the Imperial Guard, hated Xerxes with a passion. *Anything* that boosted his power and angered the Administratum was going to be met with flowers and thanks. For the destruction visited upon Commorragh, the removal of dozens of xenos fleets, and the elimination of countless heretics, the dark-haired officer was more likely to shoot Xerxes and swear undying loyalty to Weaver than approve anything coming from Xerxes' mouth.

“THIS FALSE-SAINT COST US THREE GOVERNORS AND TWO ADMIRALS! I SHOULD HAVE HER DRAWN AND QUARTERED FOR THAT ALONE!”

Forget the Assassinorum, now the senior Adept hoped the *Holy* *Ordos of the Inquisition* wasn't listening to them. The phenomenon called the 'Hour of the Emperor's Judgement' was still badly understood, but it was blindingly obvious that all over the galaxy, millions of 'loyal citizens' had dropped dead all at once, and in all the cases transmitted to his office, the corpses were branded with heretical runes.

Nicephorus didn't have the full picture for the Zion Sector or the two other star-realms under their control, but the first survey of the situation was deeply unpleasant to look at. Hundreds of high-ranked PDF and SDF officers, nobles, judicial executives, Adepts, religious authorities, and Cartel Lords and Ladies had suddenly and without explanation died, and a task-force of the Inquisition was in the process of hunting down and massacring entire families which had been serving Clan Vandire for generations.

Nothing was of a nature to hurt their powerbase in the long term...if it stopped there and the plebeians didn't begin any uprisings. Because for some reason, having your betters caught as heretics was not the way to solidify their divine-appointed mandate over the Zion Sector.

“IS THIS WHAT THEY CALL MILITARY OVERSIGHT THESE DAYS? AND WHAT WAS THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS DOING, GIVING HER CONTROL OF A FULL BATTLEFLEET?”

Likely they hoped the victorious General would allow them to discover more archeotech in their Omnissiah-approved endeavours. And judging by the result, it seemed it was a great success. So there would likely be more Mars-sworn capital warships accompanying Weaver in the future, and the Fabricator-General was going to support her whether it was politically acceptable or not.

Not that Nicephorus had the courage to say it aloud. Not when Xerxes was busy trampling a tapestry and scattering a rare collection of M32 jewellery acquired from several Ultramar Chartist Captains across the room.

“THEY FEAR THE HOUR OF THE EMPEROR'S JUDGEMENT! THEY SHOULD FEAR MY JUDGEMENT!” Two more paintings were lacerated with golden knives. “WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS, THAT PATHETIC BITCH?”

More vases shattered. A small sculpture in bronze was used as an improvised hammer to smash more collections. Beverages spilt on the carpets and the wooden panels.

“THIS IS NOT OVER WEAVER! I WILL BE THE LAST MAN STANDING IF IT'S THE LAST THING I EVER DO!”

And then Xerxes stormed out of the room, leaving a spectacle which would not have been out of place on a modern battlefield, not that the Solar Guardian was an expert on the subject.

His eyes fell upon the vellum parchment which had been the first to suffer the unlimited wrath of the Head of the Vandire Clan, and Nicephorus winced at the memory of the words he had read.

“This is a disaster and I really need a drink.”

And with no one to watch him, the old man allowed himself a loud sigh of despair.

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“*I don't know how the Officio Assassinorum functions, and I have no wish to learn. In my opinion brothers, we should dismiss them and use their resources for something nobler*,” words attributed to the Primarch Vulkan shortly after the Siege of Terra, though their authenticity was hotly debated in the post-Beheading years.

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**Callidus Master Callista de Sarcamore**

Should the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum perish in the exercise of his functions or die of natural causes – generally a horrible and violent decapitation and subsequent incineration – the identity of his or her successor was left to the six Temple Masters. The highest-ranked assassins voted between themselves, and the one receiving the greatest number of votes became the new Grand Master.

Said like this, it sounded simple. In reality, every Master tended to vote for him- or herself, producing days-long or months-long deadlocks as the usual promises and other political manoeuvres took place in the shadows. But it often happened one or several Masters lost their patience and decided to deal with their opponents the old-fashioned way.

Grand Master 'Hunter' – formerly Master 'Hunter' of the Vindicare Temple – had seized the seat by eliminating three out of six Masters, including Callista's predecessor, a fact neither she nor any Callidus were in danger of forgetting anytime soon.

So when the bastard began to criticise her Temple openly, the dangerous woman didn't let her nominal superior step on her toes.

“I wonder why we're bothering with your metamorphs; Weaver stormed Commorragh with an entire army when you failed to slip in even a couple of agents!”

“With all due respect,” the impersonation specialist retorted, “maybe the Grand Master should decide to use the resources of the Adeptus Custodes, since it is *their* intervention which led to the Battle of Commorragh.”

“Excuses, always excuses,” the Eversor Master laughed in his drug-filled tank, “If the Eversor Temple had been ordered to find a way into Commorragh, it would have been a success.”

And the Eldar would have known exactly which Gate to look at and the exact path of infiltration long after blasting apart the psychotic killing machines. Subtlety thy name is not Eversor.

“Like the successes of the Cacodominus War?” the Vanus Master asked ironically.

The sound which came out from the broadcasters of the tank was soaked with hatred. The Cacodominus War's final battle remained a very sore point for the Eversor Temple at the best of times. A little divergence of views between the High Marshal of the Black Templars and the Officio Assassinorum had resulted in the deployment of ten Eversors to slay the xenos monstrosity, and not a single one had managed to survive for more than one hour.

And as everybody knew, the Black Templars had emerged victorious at the end.

“Enough,” the Grand Master declared coldly. The volatile discussion instantly stopped. “I have not summoned all of you to recall past failures. The subject of the discussion is General Taylor Hebert, the victor of Commorragh.”

“Why?” the Venenum Master, a woman who was easily the tallest of their group of six, wondered. “We aren't going to try to assassinate her again, surely?”

“We have never tried to assassinate her.”

The poison expert shook her head several times in an exaggerated manner.

“Yes, yes, my mistake. Those three agents the Inquisition warned us about were not Callidus apprentices deployed by Clade-Quintus Frost and certainly not acting under the orders of a certain high-ranked Adept.” Her voice was dry enough to drain the water reserves of the Imperial Palace, and Callista had to hide a smile, no matter how irritating it was to be reminded of the fact her Temple had needed a very good housecleaning. “But I certainly hope we're not going to try an assassination, nonetheless.”

“And if I give you the order?”

“I would inform you there are stupid orders, and then there are orders where it's better to eat your own weapon than obeying,” the Venenum Master bluntly stated. “The information we have from Commorragh is woefully incomplete, but one thing we knew beforehand is the certainty declaring war on Weaver is the same as declaring war on the Blood Angels and all their Successors. I did not have the time to test the mood of my best Clades, but I don't think there would be much support for declaring war on thirty-seven Chapters...assuming they don't rally others to their banners.”

“No such order has been signed by the High Twelve,” the Vindicare Master intervened. It was said behind closed doors the man took large initiatives in the absence of the Grand Master, like choosing his own shoes after waking up. “The Grand Master merely wishes for a preliminary assessment of the manner this General could be handled if she became a traitor.”

And if he expected her to believe that, Callista had a few square kilometres of land in the Eye of Terror to sell him.

This 'debate' also raised her suspicions in a lot of ways, and she didn't like it. Frost and several Callidus had betrayed the Temple, but she had been unable to discover how in the name of the Golden Throne they had been in contact with the high-ranked Adepts who had become their 'patrons'. Like all agents of the Officio Assassinorum, few Callidus were ever deployed on Terra or in the Sol System, and the Temple on the Throneworld was a fortress where each and every one of your moves was monitored.

“That would be a threat an army is needed for, not an assassin,” the words of the Culexus Master cut through the conversation like a razor-sharp blade. Then the Blank Imperial Assassin left the room and no one tried to prevent his departure.

“Ahem,” the Vanus Master's poor excuse to change the topic somewhat calmed the tempers. “I was wondering if I could send an operative to Cadia. There are a lot of heretics who have dropped dead there, and in my opinion that means...”

**Clade-Primaris** **Xanaria Lythis**

The planetary crust of Holy Terra had so many tunnels and underground cities it was a minor miracle there had been no major structural collapse this millennium.

Some of these man-made caverns were overcrowded with grey-skinned people, like most of the Throneworld, giving some truth to the Administratum's claims over a quadrillion men and women lived on the soil of humankind's homeworld at any one time.

So far beneath the surface, it was best to take faith in the 'established order'. The judges of the Adeptus Arbites didn't lead investigations and anti-gang operations here. You never saw tithe-collectors of the Administratum, Inquisitors sent their Acolytes in their stead if the number of heretics, mutants, or traitors warranted it, and certainly no Chartist Captain or Navigator would be caught dead or alive in such a lawless and impoverished environment.

But when one knew where to look, they always found locations where the number of under-dwellers was close to zero, and a purpose could always be found for these places the sun never reached. Obviously no one was going to be assassinated thousands of metres beneath ground level; the effort to transport a potential corpse without attracting attention was utterly unproductive.

On the other hand, if you wanted to have a heart-to-heart conversation with your Apprentice, this was a perfect place. No one had ever installed spying archeotech, servo-skulls, or advanced servitors so far under a Hive, or if someone had, those hypothetical surveillance tools had not been maintained for the last three millennia. The walls were so dirty there was no way to guess what the original colour had been before turning the dark black-green of decay and abandon. Old gang graffiti and some bones were all the decoration available for the impressionable eye.

“So,” Xanaria began while playing with one of her favourite daggers, “would you like to explain why thousands of hours of training have been suddenly broken by a single third-rate block-announcement?”

The eyes of Elena flashed dangerously, and the Clade-Primaris winced, not out of fright, but in frustration at this evident sign the indoctrination and mental reconstruction processes had been practically crippled by an event impossible to anticipate.

“Weaver is here,” and the growl was so visceral Xanaria had no doubt part of the exercises which were supposed to remove all attachments of your past life had not been that successful in the first place. “Weaver is here!”

A double slap on each cheek and the auramite manacles tightening around the wrists behind Elena's back contributed to restore some sanity...for now.

“You hadn't spoken of Weaver at all when you were asked to recount your past life in the Purging of Sins, Apprentice.”

“Skitter,” the eyes which were at this moment pale blue were appropriately subdued, alas she doubted they would stay so for long. “Taylor Hebert, Weaver, Skitter, these are all her names! She is here! She is here to prove me wrong!”

Ah, that explained things. It was a war name or a lesser nickname which had been overlooked in the preliminary Apprenticeship, and now that was coming back with a vengeance.

In some ways, it was incredibly amusing that the woman who had just destroyed Commorragh and her Apprentice had been enemies in the past. In others, it wasn't. Most of the Imperial Guard was busy bribing block-announcers in all the important squares to repeat how many billions of xenos had been slaughtered. Having an Imperial Assassin who was at risk of going berserk every time a guardsman praised said General was a disaster-in-the-making.

“Don't flatter yourself, Apprentice. This is a big galaxy, and the fleets which fought at Commorragh are nowhere close to you or Terra.”

“But she is wrong! I am stronger than her! I am-!” A new slap interrupted this diatribe and Xanaria internally frowned. The 'philosophy' of the old Sophia Hess – if you could call naive ramblings and some super-predator nonsense by that name – had been piece by piece erased by the growing personality of Elena Kerrigan, and the Clade-Primaris had not regretted its removal.

“You are an Apprentice of the Callidus Temple and you will act as such!” The command had no effect, so that left a mental trigger. “Aquila-Four-Zero-Morpheus-Morpheus.”

The blue eyes closed, and in a matter of seconds her Apprentice was unconscious, fallen into a sleep only the correct words would be able to reverse.

Now Xanaria Lythis had a decision to make. It was obvious the flaws in Sophia Hess' personality had been strengths and weaknesses. Evidently, it had allowed the Assassinorum to indoctrinate her far faster while accelerating her physical training and her Polymorphine skills. The drawback appeared to be that, at the first reminder of her previous life, the young woman was suddenly uncontrollable.

Xanaria knew that for the average Apprentice, the question of what to do next wouldn't have needed to be asked. Each future Clade was hellishly expensive to transform into a blade of the Emperor, but the loss of the resources sunk into a woman's body to make a Callidus without a return on the investment were nothing compared to the disaster a rogue and fully-trained agent was.

If she killed Elena Kerrigan now and explained her decision to Callista de Sarcamore, there would be no repercussions for her, merely some gossip since this would be the first Apprentice she was forced to eliminate.

But if she did, the shadow-travelling abilities of her Apprentice would be lost. Aside from the obvious option of sexual impregnation, no one among the Callidus Temple had come up with any idea how to create a 'parahuman' in the last several years. Most experiments had turned ugly, and there had been a lot to clean-up every time. It was...not certain, but fairly probable, that the breed of evolved human Sophia Hess was a representative of was impossible to replicate.

And while the existence of another one was confirmed, that one was not going to join the Assassinorum, not after a high-profile war like that.

What to do...

The loud footsteps her enhanced ears picked up forced her to postpone her judgement.

Xanaria threw her unconscious Apprentice over one shoulder and began to make haste for one of the potential exits she always made sure to verify the existence of while entering non-secure and secure areas.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling to see the door suddenly open to reveal a black-armoured Custodes, and the Clade-Primaris wasn't going to claim she was going to dance in joy at the sight of ten more arriving from behind to close the trap.

“This is an internal affair of the Officio Assassinorum,” Xanaria started, all the while more Custodes arrived and the likelihood of successfully fighting her way through her ambushers went from very low to nonexistent. “She is my Apprentice.”

“And our Liege wants to speak with her.”

Despite having been trained and indoctrinated to stay calm in the harshest conditions possible, Xanaria felt her mouth gape open.

“You're joking.”

“She is coming with us. Whether you accompany us dead or alive remains your decision.” The black-armoured Watcher of the Throne inclined his head to stare at her. “We have already lost many hours tracking you. No further delay will be tolerated.”

**Adept-Primus** **Joost Harpagon**

Compared to certain Adeptuses of the Imperium like the Adeptus Astartes or the Adeptus Arbites, the Adeptus Almitas languished in the shadows of anonymity, despite having existed in one form or another since the Great Crusade. Of course, its prerogatives had enormously suffered across the millennia. Its propaganda and military branches had long since been disbanded, and the Adepts toiling inside its offices were now limited to verifying that the souls who claimed a great enemy of His Most Divine Majesty had died by their hand were saying the truth, and if the answer was positive, transferring the resources and wealth promised by the Adeptus Terra.

The Imperium being the Imperium, and Holy Terra being Holy Terra, the Adepts present on the Throneworld had delegated the delivery of 'minor' bounties to their enclaves on Kar Duniash, Cypra Mundi, Hydraphur, and Bakka before M33. Or at least that was the public version everyone knew.

In practice, the Holy Terra's most noble branch of the Adeptus Almitas had few things to do other than sending messengers to the middle of nowhere to verify if a petty xenos tyrant or a particularly audacious traitor had been eliminated. 'Minor' bounties and 'major' bounties had by mid-M34 become the prerogatives of the Segmentum Fortress' branches, leaving Holy Terra's Almitas scribes with little to do during their days.

Oh, in theory, the Throneworld was still recording the bounties won inside the frontiers of Segmentum Solar, but this number rarely passed over the 'hundred per decade'-mark. The central Segmentum was the most heavily defended of the five components of His Most Divine Majesty's Imperium. Outlaws, pirates, monsters, and all sorts of xenos tended to stay well away from there.

An exception remained however. Should any battle see the elimination of one being the Imperium had listed on its 'top 100 most wanted list', the Terran Almitas branch had to be the deciding authority on the affair, the reasoning being that the bounties in question were in general too huge to be handed out like a Rogue Trader spending money on dashing clothes.

But since his promotion to head of the Adeptus Almitas exactly forty-seven years ago, Joost Harpagon had never heard so much as a whisper of a rumour any of the dangerous beasts and traitors listed on this dreadful document had been extinguished. His duties were thus effectively reduced to copying documents for posterity and transferring data and assets from the Estate Imperium. Joost had joked more than once with other senior Adepts that something ridiculous would happen only when the Eye of Terror disappeared, or some other nonsense.

Today, these words didn't seem so funny anymore.

“All right,” the Adept-Primus almost wept at the sight of his assistants bringing in a true mountain of paperwork before addressing his chief of cabinet again. “How disastrous is it?”

“It could be better, Adept-Primus” the grey-haired man he had come to rely on did his best to present a courageous face. “Since Pavia AND Commorragh have seen the elimination of xenos inscribed in the top 100 of the most wanted beings, we will have to verify everything for them.”

“Damn it...” The roll of vellum he was given was long, terribly long. “I wish all these sums could be on my bank account...”

"I suppose a lot of people in the Imperium wish the same thing, Adept-Primus."

Joost Harpagon thought there was a lot of truth in this statement.

“We are in a dangerous situation,” he admitted. “I have received more messages from Xerxes Vandire outright ordering us to not give a single Throne Gelt to the victors of Pavia and Commorragh.”

It was absolutely illegal, since the Adeptus Almitas was legally independent and its expenditures, finances, and other resources were transferred by many Adeptuses and private interests, no single organisation having the right to give him orders.

“That is illegal. And I don't think the Lord Commander Militant of the Guard or the Fabricator-General will tolerate this, Adept-Primus.”

“Believe me, that's something I'm well aware of,” Joost Harpagon replied bitterly. “But it's not like we can completely ignore him either. Whether you like him or not, Xerxes Vandire and his Clan are firmly entrenched in the Administratum's structure, and frankly, those who could replace them if they overreached aren't exactly paragons of morality and virtue either. So give me a...creative way to please everyone.”

His chief of cabinet grimaced.

“Most of the traitors and xenos' lives have been ended beyond doubt. At Pavia alone, we have one hundred and seven minor bounties, four mid-sized bounties, eleven large bounties, and of course Sliscus the Serpent. The only ones I see possibilities of arguing are the pirates Tanaka and Moonblitz, whose bodies have not been recovered, and the xenos Calico, which made an arrangement beforehand to surrender itself. “The rest...”

Reading the sum-up on the vellum, Joost had to agree it didn't look promising. And one had to look at his actions in the grand scheme; if the bounties weren't delivered when it was obvious the deed had been proven to the plebeians, nobody would risk his life for the God-Emperor in the future.

“You make good points. Yes, deliver the full bounties in cash and nature for the pirates Blackdakka, Qorok Trek, Brakorth, Day, Kalmar, Lox'ena, Bloodweaver, Hoth, and Sliscus. They can have the minor and the mid-sized bounties too. However the planets of Sliscus' bounty will need to be approved by the High Lords, and we will only give...let's say between forty and fifty percent for Tanaka, fifteen percent for Calico, and less than one percent for Moonblitz.”

The latter was very reasonable on his part; really was he supposed to believe this 'Lady Weaver' could destroy an entire fleet so violently that no debris was left? He wasn't that stupid or unaware of military realities...

“Yes, Adept-Primus,” came the reassuring answer only to start the next headache. “Commorragh?”

This was going to generate more documentation on vellum than the last four decades! Joost just knew it in his bones.

“What Vandire wants in this instance is immaterial. Tarot readings, and certain infernal devices supposed to explode at this xenos' moment of death, have confirmed that the Alpha-level threats Rakarth, Drazhar, and Vect have indeed been killed by the forces which destroyed Commorragh. The planet and the Sub-Sector are something we will happily delegate to the High Twelve, but the rest of the rewards must be handed to those who have taken the heads of the xenos.”

“There are also twenty major, eight median, and two hundred eighty-one minor bounties, Adept-Primus,” someone shouted in the distance, as more and more piles of vellum arrived to bury him in his quarters.

“I KNOW!” Joost Harpagon began to sob at his lost holidays, his lost anonymity, and the exile of the quietude and the serenity which had reigned in the headquarters of the Adeptus Almitas. “I know...”

**Segmentum** **Tempestus**

**Ophelia Sector**

**Ophelia VII**

**Thirty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Ecclesiarch Pelagius I**

The Chapel of the Living Saints had once been a modest church when its construction was ordered by the first Cardinal of Ophelia, but it had long ago been assimilated by the immense structure of the Grand Shrine-Cathedral of the Saviour Emperor.

Some Deacons and Cardinals often complained it was too bland and modest for such a prestigious Chapel, but Pelagius had rarely heeded their concerns on that front. The narthex and the reliquaries were in gold and half of the pavement was pure white marble, so the essentials were respected, and the seven Living Saints the Ecclesiarchy had recognised as such were displayed in the form of great statues on both sides of the alleys.

The Ecclesiarch knew their names, of course; the study of the Living Saints was a mandatory course for every young Priest welcomed into the theology schools of Ophelia VII. The most recent one to be added here had been Saint Armorium of Gaugamela, Arch-Martyr of the Fourth Black Crusade. Before him had been Saint Eschweiler of the Holy Wrath, Sword of Vengeance, honorific Marshal of the Black Templars, whose Crusade had allowed victory in the Cacodominus War. Saint Issendolus, the Defender of Martyrs and Lady of Redemption, who was now a legend for an M33 war the Inquisition had done its best to conceal everything about. Saint Cid Murialdo was represented as a simple soldier, but the man had been a high-ranked Adept before being touched by His Light and leading billions of Faithful on the battlefields of the Second Black Crusade. And of course closer to the holy of holies, the old trinity of saint-heroes: Saint Gerstahl, Defender of the Cadian Gate, Saint Keeler, Prophet of the God-Emperor, and last and greatest, Saint Ollanius Pius, Divine Martyr and Witness of the Holy Ascension.

Many pilgrims who were given access to this Chapel regularly expressed their surprise to the Priests that there were only seven of them. After all, the God-Emperor reigned over a million worlds and each year saw more martyrs and heroes giving everything they had for the survival of Imperium and humanity. Wasn't seven a rather paltry number for the countless lives lost in Crusades to expand His realm?

The answer was rather obvious theologically. Living Saints weren't 'mere' Saints, whose canonisation was often recognised after long periods of prayers and extensive studies about the life-record of the hero-martyr. They were touched by the power of His Most Holy Majesty, and they accomplished His Will. They were *Sanctus Divini Luminis* or *Sancta Divini Luminis*, literally *Saint of Divine Light* in High Gothic. By the light they carried and the deeds they did, they were recognised and elevated to just below the God-Emperor.

For several centuries, there had been only seven to be recognised. Before the year was out, Pelagius had no doubts whatsoever an eighth statue would be brought into the Chapel.

And no, him coming here was in no way an attempt to influence the billions of pilgrims rejoicing in the cathedrals and all holy sites of worship the seat of the Ecclesiarchy boasted across its hundreds of thousands of square kilometres. The evidence spoke for itself this time, and as the news of the miracle spread the Faithful would approve his message.

Pelagius waited long minutes alone. The silence was almost deafening, since he was constantly surrounded by millions of Faithful from dawn till dusk, but it wasn't unpleasant. The stained armaglass of the windows was austere and combined with the candles it left the Chapel in semi-obscurity that served his purposes of meditation and reflexion.

And as the antique metallic doors opened to admit the man who was without contest his most powerful ally in the Holy Synod, Pelagius had to admit it was also a fitting location to speak without running the risk their words would be repeated by ten million mouths before the day was out.

“How long has it been since we spoke here?” asked Cardinal Palatine Jean-Luc de Plessis once he had walked the long alley separating him from Pelagius in silence. “Ten years?”

“My diary says it's been closer to fifteen,” the Head of the Adeptus Ministorum mused whimsically.

“Fifteen,” the white-robed man murmured, “we truly aren't getting any younger.”

Pelagius wasn't going to claim the burden on his shoulders felt heavier after this sentence was spoken, but it wasn't lighter either.

“I'm sure you have heard even more than our elite Astropaths have reported to me,” the Ecclesiarch gave the man many in Ophelia VII and beyond had nicknamed 'the White Eminence' a grin. “So go on, astonish me.”

“I wouldn't say I have heard 'more',” Jean-Luc denied for the sake of denying with a smile, “but assuming I did, for the moment my efforts have been more of a nature to confirm the first messages we received and gathering as much information as we could.”

The Cardinal Palatine paused for a couple of seconds in a classic tactic he often used when he was giving sermons in front of his flock before getting straight to the subject at hand.

“The information is right. The Eldar of Commorragh have been utterly obliterated, and the few of my agents who have been able to arrive at Pavia have confirmed the immense majority of the story. Yes, the Living Saint was ordered by a Custodes to attack the xenos in their darkest lair. Yes, she gained golden wings in addition to her already existent powers when slaying one of the most wanted beings of the Imperium, the monster known as 'Drazhar'. Yes, she likely found parts of the Astronomican and contributed to the fact the Light of the God-Emperor shines brighter today. Yes, she fought millions of xenos by herself and spoke with the Primarch Rogal Dorn. Yes, it was thanks to some of the insects she uses as her weapons that the Light of the God-Emperor devastated Commorragh, erased the filth of this galaxy, and unleashed the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement across the domains of the Imperium.”

A Holy Judgement, which, while it had not killed that many important figures of the clergy, had still seen over two hundred people including a Pontifex succumb on Ophelian soil.

“Saint Eschweiler Himself did not cause so much devastation a millennium ago,” Jean-Luc de Plessis finished. “General Taylor Hebert, Lady Nyx, is a Living Saint beyond question."”

Coming from a Cardinal Palatine whose attention to details great and small was legendary, this was all the confirmation Pelagius needed after reading the astropathic communiqués addressed to him.

“I suppose your first suggestion is that we summon the Holy Synod as soon as possible.”

“Definitely,” the White Eminence of the Adeptus Ministorum agreed, his grey eyes calculating and weighing hundreds of major issues. “It is extremely regrettable Atlantis has done its best to minimise the saintly powers of this Living Saint while the Mechanicus gave her the full support she needed. As a consequence, we must act decisively. We must declare that Taylor Hebert is a Living Saint, and we push for Theodora Gaius' canonisation as quickly as possible. The Abbess-Crusader died a martyr to save a Primarch's life, there is no other option if we wish to maintain even a shred of credibility among the Faithful.”

“I agree,” the Ecclesiarch replied levelly. “And we will spread the news at Pavia, where I think two of our fleets are going to arrive in the next thirty-forty hours.”

“Those fleets are a beginning,” advised Jean-Luc de Plessis in a deadly serious tone, “as Cardinal-Militant Ferdinand de Barragan of the Fleet of the Lost Martyrs and Prioress-Militant Barbara Danton of the Fleet of the Vigilant Flame will be able to provide much medical, material, and spiritual support to the survivors of the Battle of Commorragh. But they're just the first step. In this case, it is really no exaggeration to say we're arriving after the battle. No matter how quickly we proclaim that Her Celestial Highness Taylor Hebert is a Living Saint, this absence will be noticed. A small squadron of ships and a single division of Frateris Templars are not enough, no matter how many martyrs died and how many miraculous deeds they accomplished in one hundred hours.”

Pelagius wanted to say his most powerful ally was wrong, and that the Adeptus Ministorum could easily compensate for their absence, but he couldn't open his mouth and speak the words. They weren't entering this new scene of miracles as beggars, but they weren't far from it.

“On this point, I must, with deep regret, agree with your position. So go ahead with your proposals.”

“Some of them are going to be controversial,” the Cardinal Palatine warned.

“More controversial than for Saint Murialdo, Saint Eschweiler, and Saint Armorium?” Pelagius gave one of his best smiles to Jean-Luc. These three Living Saints had unquestionably been touched by His power, but there was no denying that many of their actions had generated a lot of trouble and offended hundreds of Cardinals. The archives he had read made that abundantly clear.

“Well, if you put it like that...” His old ally mirrored the smile before returning to a serious expression. “First, obviously we will are going to financially and militarily support General Taylor Hebert. As the scale of the victory we are allowed to reveal to our flocks becomes clear, I don't think there will be any opposition against opening our coffers to finance her projects. Like every Living Saint we recognised so far, she will be granted the right to create her own Order Militant. Getting the Synod to accept the openings of a few Schola Progenium and theology schools shouldn't be too difficult either. The petition to make Pavia a Shrine World whose ownership is given to the Living Saint in perpetuity is an imperative.”

He had nothing to say against these moves. Of course, some Cardinals Palatine and Arch-Cardinals, if not the majority, were going to say it was the least they could do.

“Continue; I'm certain you have more ideas.”

“Your prescience is excellent, your Holiness. Yes, I think that we can't stop there. Since Lady Weaver is already a Sector Lady and has obviously been touched by the God-Emperor's Light, the logical process is to keep the local Cardinal of the Nyx Sector in charge, but make him clearly subordinate to her will.”

“For all intent and purposes, this will make her the Cardinal of Nyx,” Pelagius commented calmly, not really surprised by the suggestion. “And give her full power over all Deacons, Pontifexes, and other high-ranked religious figures we have in that diocese.”

There were similar precedents with other Living Saints, but they would have to send envoys to see if the current Cardinal and his key allies were fine with it. Not that it would likely change anything in the end. A Living Saint's only potential religious counterpart was the Ecclesiarch, and Pelagius was not going to waste influence protecting some unpopular figures if they were reticent to bow to a Living Saint who had committed a xenocide in one hundred hours.

“Also, since the list of bounties won at Commorragh include a Sub-Sector, I propose to give one out of the Atlantis Sector...for now.”

There was no need to be a great politician to imagine that Jean-Luc de Plessis didn't intend to stop there as far as the carving up and disassembly of the Atlantis Sector was concerned.

“We will also likely have to use our influence to modify the Charts and existing Tithe-treaties of Nyx. At the moment we're speaking, Samarkand is the overlord of the Quadrant Nyx is in, but as the spoils of Commorragh and the rewards for the archeotech found will be repatriated, the planets under the authority of the Living Saint will be the new centre of spiritual and technological gravity. Our full support to increase the influence of the Nyxians and Lady Weaver would be an important gesture not likely to be forgotten.”

“That is a good beginning. We will also need to immediately send some of our best diplomats to Terra and Nyx to avoid any regrettable complications,” Pelagius added while contemplating the noble visage of the statue of Living Saint Euphrati Keeler. “By a great coincidence, I had also prepared a list of names, but feel free to send me a list of your own before tomorrow.”

Slowly but surely, the two senior figures of the Adeptus Ministorum began to walk out of the Chapel of the Living Saints.

“And then there is the issue of Bacta,” de Plessis sighed. “I am sure we have a hard fight ahead of us when the news reaches the Senatorum Imperialis...”

“Wait.” The Ecclesiarch had read several mentions of a healing substance by that name, but the exact use of it had apparently failed to be fully explained in the messages he consulted. “Why is Bacta so important?”

It took three sentences of the Cardinal Palatine for Pelagius to have an excellent idea of why this new medicine was so important, so...miraculous.

“You are right. We must have it.” The liturgical and prestige purposes were obvious, and the capability to heal some of the greatest heroes unable to continue service in the name of the God-Emperor wasn't to be neglected either.

The thought which came next was not one he would have uttered normally, but this latest revelation must have shocked him more than he thought.

“We may have a second Ollanius Pius on our hands...”

“I think,” Jean-Luc replied very seriously, “that in the next millennia to come, pilgrims will say Ollanius Pius was a distant ancestor of our new Living Saint...”

**Beyond** **the Edge of Reality**

**Approximately thirty-one hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Knight-Errant Psamtic Mehhur**

When the psychic conduit ejected their entire group, Psamtic had expected a lot of awful things to await them at the end of the journey.

And yes, by 'awful things' he meant 'hordes of daemons'. This whole trap reeked of the Ruinous Powers, and specifically of the Change which had corrupted the Primarch of the Fifteenth Legion.

But they weren't attacked. When they landed on both feet, there was no one waiting for them.

“Where are we, by the Golden Throne?”

This was an excellent question. The ground the Knight-Errants and Inquisitor had landed upon exhibited all the characteristics of a desert, down to the whiteness, the warm temperature, and the dry air.

All of this information was given by the systems in their helmets, of course. None of the Space Marines present was stupid enough to remove his helmet when a Warp trap had already separated them from the rest of the Inquisitorial task-force present in the Pavia System.

They didn't lower their guard, and nothing happened. The sky over their heads was an eerie blue with no clouds or any sign announcing future weather perturbations. The desert appeared to be made of salt.

North, west, south, east, there was nothing in the distance save a desert of whiteness.

“One thing is clear, we aren't in the Warp.”

The Ruinous Powers could play a subtle game, but if they had been thrown into the Immaterium, they would be busy fighting for their lives, not wondering where they had landed.

“But then who attacked us? It wasn't the Sirens, their psyker powers are useless without water.”

And as little as Psamtic wanted to contemplate the potential of an inside betrayal, it didn't make any sense. For one, the majority of the other Inquisitors were confirmed to not be psykers, and these baseline men and women had been by their side aboard the *Choral*. As for an enemy intervention, the pirates of Pavia were dead or captured, and among the survivors, the Sirens were the foremost candidates for something like this; Sliscus' breed could not use any sorcery without dying horribly in the following seconds.

And besides, who would have a motive to do something so dangerous or manipulate someone to activate a trap so complex? Moreover, were they truly so dangerous an extreme action like this was warranted? Psamtic didn't think so. Yes, they were a team of Space Marines, but that hardly made them more than one among thousands, and there were ones far more dangerous and experienced across the galaxy.

And yes, the Inquisitor was dangerous and possibly unique, but there were other 'parahumans' among the Caribbean fleet and elsewhere who weren't exactly fragile and prone to causing gigantic battles.

Why send them here into the middle of nowhere, away from any enemy?

“We are soon going to have water problems if we don't find a way to return to Pavia,” Psamtic told the other Knight-Errants. “And I am unable to sense the portal-tunnel which brought us here.”

“Immediate dispersion!” Inquisitor Contessa barked, and the Astartes obeyed automatically, though they didn't see anything besides the immensities of nothingness. “Flee!”

“Inquisitor, with all due respect-“

Something fell from the sky like a meteor, but it wasn't one; not enough flames, too much light.

It was too fast, real atmosphere or not.

And it came straight for them.

They were Space Marines, veterans of several thousand battles, but they had no anti-air weapons, and bolters weren't going to stop something that could survive atmospheric entry. They tried to adopt a dispersed formation which would not see them all eradicated in a few seconds.

And then the creature flew over them. It had the appearance of a woman between four and five metres tall with long platinum hair and many asymmetrical wings. She wore no clothes, and all the wings appeared as unnaturally long and randomly placed.

“That is the Simurgh. Flee! Don't try to fight her! Get out of her range!”

And then the winged creature *screamed*.

**Acacia** **Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Thirty-five hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Hospital Ship *Tulip of Contentment***

**First Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

The ships like the *Tulip of Contentment*, unfortunately for the Nyx SDF and the Imperial Navy, were the result of a program the Mechanicus' Biologis teams had sponsored in the last half-decade. Obviously, the more-than-generous sums they had been granted for their budget had helped, but there was no denying that when the time to build those had come, it was the cogboys and not the Admirals who had risen to the challenge, first to find construction docks to build them and then to requisition all the resources necessary to complete them and make sure they had the infrastructure required to play their roles inside their hulls.

Still, Wolfgang wasn't that jealous. These medical-purpose ships were more badly needed than ever, as the battle may have ended more than a day ago, but the Magi Biologis and all the healers, surgeons, biological specialists, nurses, and other hospital personnel were engaged in a race against time to save the maximum amount of lives from the results of Commorragh's slaughterhouse.

Despite the potency of Red Bacta, despite large stocks of medicine brought in for what was then Operation Caribbean, there was a lot to do on the broken bodies of men, women, and abhumans who had fought in the sub-realms of the Webway.

At least the man they had come to visit was out of danger, according to the Magi who had received them before storming out to use his skills on victims with more serious/with heavier trauma.

“Vice-Admiral,” the First Secretary saluted as he entered the room, noting immediately that even with the privileges of rank, there were two unconscious Navy officers in the beds behind the man.

“First Secretary,” replied Maximillian von Schafer, Vice-Admiral of the 17634th Battlegroup. “I wish I could raise my arms to salute, but-“

Most of the body of the Cypra Mundi-born Admiral was immobilised and covered in bandages and casts, and the legs and the arms were included in that category.

“I do believe some introductions are in order,” Wolfgang continued as he turned towards the two Navy officers who had accompanied him. “Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal, commanding officer of the Tempestus-Bakka 13th Battlefleet, and Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto, acting-commander of the Ultima 70th Battlefleet.”

Von Schafer had certainly seen Reuenthal in several instances during the battle of course, but Wolfgang was rather sure he hadn't met the middle-aged Yamamoto; she had been quite far down the command chain of Augustus von Kisher's fleet at the beginning of the naval slaughter.

“I see,” the Vice-Admiral coughed. “I'm afraid I wasn't expecting such a prestigious group of visitors today, Admirals.”

“To be honest, we would have preferred to wait until you had recovered more,” Oskar von Reuenthal admitted, “but there are a lot of Battlefleets which are on their way, and there are certain...protocols to respect which would not help your health if we delayed coming to see you.”

“Protocols?”

The Bakka-born Admiral nodded solemnly, an expression which gave him a far older look, probably more fitting given his real age. The large box he opened answered why Reuenthal had been evasive, and both Wolfgang and Yamamoto hissed, recognising the decoration instantly**.** There weren't many things which could be mistaken for the *Lion of Terra*, after all.

“I'm...I'm honoured.” Maximillian von Schafer uttered with difficulty.

“The *Lion of Terra* is given to you for the one-sided victory of Pavia you participated in,” the heterochromatic eyes of the dark brown-haired Navy officer recognised implicitly there was thus a measure of political intrigue in this reward, “and of course your actions during the great naval actions of the Port of Lost Souls, where the Eldar fleets were entirely destroyed. Kar Duniash has also sent word the Lion is accompanied by a promotion to full Admiral, with all the prerogatives and privileges of the rank.”

Wolfgang had lived long enough at the Kar Duniash Academy to know it was at least one and maybe two decades of advancement von Schafer had been granted with this gesture.

“I accept, of course, for all the men and women I led into battle,” declared the new Admiral, two-thirds of his body disappearing under the medical bandages.

Most of those men and women had perished, it was left unsaid. The 17634th Battlegroup had fought hard, but its small size had seen its ships perish in droves when the Eldar attacked with their armadas. Two Cruisers, two Light Cruisers, three Corvettes, twenty-four Destroyers, and eight auxiliary ships were gone forever, and von Schafer's own *Indomitable Resolution* was going to need years of repair. The Lunar-class Cruiser *Sword of the South* was in the same state, and five other Hoplite-class Destroyers were so damaged the Tech-Priests had not yet decided if they were going to be repaired or scrapped to return less damaged warships to Warp-capable status.

“You were speaking about Navy officers about to arrive?”

“Both Astropaths and Navigators have confirmed powerful Battlefleets are on their way to Pavia,” confirmed Fujiko Yamamoto. “We already have hundreds of Mechanicus hulls arriving every hour, but according to the astropathic messages, it is only a small vanguard before the true armada. Bakka and Kar Duniash have confirmed the Ultima 501st Battlefleet, the Acacia Expeditionary Fleets of Ultima and Tempestus, and the Tempestus 783rd are on their way. There are also two Frateris Templar fleets, one gigantic gathering of Space Marines, and naturally the Mechanicus Explorator Fleets...we think there are least twenty-four of them, including major capital ship formations from Estaban VII, Metallica, Lucius, Agripinaa, Gryphonne IV, Ryza, Graia, Incaladion, Stygies VIII, Atanix Triumvirae, and of course Mars itself.”

“Impressive,” von Schafer nodded and seemed relieved he would not have to play the hospital patient in front of hundreds of officers more senior than him even after his promotion.

“There will be a formal ceremony when you're out of the hospital,” Reuenthal smiled. “But it can wait until you're recovered enough to walk on your own. Which should be in four or five days?”

“Two,” Maximillian corrected, his lips twitching at the surprise the Bakka officer showed at the revelation. “Bacta is a wonderful thing, as long as your body isn't full of Eldar toxins and bio-weaponry.”

“Would it be irresponsible of me if I sold my flagship to pay for an equivalent tonnage of this miraculous healing substance?”

“No,” Wolfgang answered seriously. “Of course, at the moment nobody is really able to make the proposal; the Dawnbreaker Guard protects the General until she has recovered from the exhaustion suffered from Commorragh.”

“Something that only seems to intensify the power of the religious fervour created by the destruction of Commorragh,” remarked Rear-Admiral Yamamoto. “The warships aren't the only ones to be diverted to Pavia. There are also hundreds of pilgrim ships, and between Bacta and Aethergold, they have thousands of good reasons to pray...”

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“*Alas, I must confess I have not yet been able to acquire one example of each military medal my good friend Taylor Hebert rewarded her forces with. But I must commend you on your taste Inquisitor, these objects are quite rare and worth the effort. Should you decide to pursue the matter, the doors of my galleries are always open* *to you.*..” [CLASSIFIED BY ORDER OF THE HOLY ORDOS OF THE INQUISITION]

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**Macro-Transport** ***Province of Moira***

**Lord Goldsmith Shekhar Crassus**

Shekhar didn't regret having petitioned to join the forces of Operation Caribbean as the Lord Goldsmith for a single moment. Assuredly there had been minor drawbacks, like the very real risk of being shot at, but macro-transports like the one he had been assigned to were heavily escorted by warships even in the worst moments, and most of the time they had stayed well behind the frontlines. Furthermore, the *Province of Moira* was one of the brand-new ships which had come out of the Nyx shipyards, and unlike too many places Shekhar could name, it took hygiene and maintenance very seriously. All the levels he had visited were clean, the hydroponics worked above regular levels, and there were no crowds of useless passengers crowding the alleys and each compartment. This was a ship assigned to a military campaign, and it really looked like it.

It went without saying that sometimes the title of Lord Goldsmith, or whatever name a Crusade force used to designate its chief medal-maker, was not as prestigious as it sounded. There were already millions if not billions of military decorations in existence all across the Imperium, and too often Generals and Admirals didn't want to bother with new ones when the old ones were considered appropriate for the battles fought and won – defeats, obviously, were rarely commemorated by medals.

But Commorragh had happened, and the Living Saint, holy was her radiance, had allowed him and his assistants to work on decorations which would commemorate the legendary deeds of the Battles of Commorragh and Pavia.

The distant cousin – very distant – of the Lord of Samarkand tried to not look too nervous as several musical instruments started playing and a tall figure entered his office.

“Lord Midas,” Shekhar saluted formally. The Space Marine of the Dawnbreaker Guard was not in power armour, but even wearing a modest red robe and a violet cape the member of the Adeptus Astartes couldn't be mistaken as anything but one of the Emperor's Finest.

“Shekhar Crassus,” the Space Marine replied, omitting his title by design; most of the giants were blunt to the extreme and were only willing to tolerate the titles of the Saint they were sworn to protect. “I came to evaluate if the work proceeded satisfactorily.”

Of course, the Golden Sons' battle-brother had warned him of his arrival; the announcement was more to impress the importance of fulfilling their duties while tens of thousands celebrated the victory upon the forty or fifty guardsmen and Tech-Priests who stood in parade formation.

“It does, my Lord,” after the initial round of security checks, Shekhar quickly led the Space Marine to his workshop where the finished 'goods' were waiting.

“As per the General's instructions, we didn't concern ourselves much about the price,” which was frightfully rare; one medal or a weaving of ribbons did not cost much, but a million or ten million were another story entirely.

“The metals recovered in Commorragh alone will guarantee the equivalent of decades of pay for the average private,” the blonde-haired Space Marine replied neutrally. “While I can't speak for our Lady, I doubt the expense of giving a few medals is something she will look at twice.”

“Of course,” Shekhar couldn't disagree with that, nor he did want to, “the ten decorations prepared, Lord.”

There were clearly more than ten objects presented in their traditional mahogany boxes on the presenting table, but he had decided to show all the variants this time, that way the medal-expert of the Dawnbreaker Guard would have seen everything long before anything had reached mass-production.

“The leftmost ones are the Beetle Hearts, aren't they?”

“Indeed,” the Lord Goldsmith beamed. “Lady Weaver insisted on a variant of an old Terran decoration should Pavia prove successful, and I only adapted the existing model to fit the circumstances. The heart is Megaran amethyst framed in gold, and for the beetle itself I used her razorbeetles as a model. The ribbon is also violet. As you can see, there is also a variant with laurels.”

“I approve.”

There were going to be a lot of those made, needless to say. As long as you had been wounded in action in the Living Saint's service, you were eligible for it, and the order had been given that no difference was to be made between Pavia and Commorragh. The laurel variant would be for the most grievous cases, combining wounding in action with decisive tactical exploits.

“Next is the Termite Cross,” this one was an exclusive decoration for the fighting which had happened at Pavia. “We used silver and gold with varying ratios for the different variants of simple, Swords, Aquila, and Laurels. The Laurels also have a tiny ruby at their heart, as befitting of the prestige.”

It was, all things considered, a very classical medal. The cross was Black Templars-style, only the use of precious metals showed the importance of this medal which would be given to valiant soldiers of His Most Holy Majesty.

“I approve.”

They didn't spend a lot of time on the Hornet Medal, which was going to be awarded to warriors having successfully participated in boarding operations at Pavia. Too bad, Shekhar had enjoyed the challenge of giving it an insect-shape in gold and silver.

The Ambull Distinction – for the forces having participated in underground operations at Commorragh – and the Spire-Breaker – for men and women who had shattered the ugly monuments of the Eldar – passed without problem too. But it was not unexpected; for all their gold and silver, these decorations were clearly secondary ones compared to the real show.

“We used a lot of gold and a few grams of Auramite for the Primarch's Witness.” The image of Rogal Dorn had been difficult to transcribe onto such a small edifice, but they had succeeded.

“Hum...” for the first time, there was not full support in Midas' voice, “would it not be better if there was a layer of colour on the outer edge of the medallion?”

“Ultramarine blue, Lord?”

“Yes,” the Dawnbreaker Guard nodded after a moment. Proceed with the change as soon as you have finished it. “Next we have the Helspider and Dragonfly Crosses.”

The two great valour medals of the Battle of Commorragh, the former being awarded for ground fighting, the latter for space combat.

“Four variants like the Termite Cross?”

“Indeed,” the Samarkand-born Goldsmith confirmed. “The four levels of Cross, Swords, Aquila, and Laurels are well-known by the majority of the Imperial Guard and the other Adeptuses fighting under Lady Weaver's Banner.”

“How much of it is Argentamite?”

“Fifty percent,” Shekhar admitted. “We had to find space for the gold and jewels.”

A lesser Goldsmith would have protested that this was far too expensive for something that was clearly going to be given to tens of thousands of guardsmen and other victorious men and women. But Shekhar Crassus was not a lesser Goldsmith, and if there was any battle which deserved such rewards, it was this one.

“I approve,” and if Midas approved, then it would go ahead.

“The last two military decorations will obviously need to be artisan-crafted,” there was no need to say more; those two on the right side were the jewels of the collection, and all his personnel who had worked on the looks and the crafting of these beauties had applauded when they were officially declared complete.

First was the Order of the Ancients; it had been decided that after so many STC recoveries, the heroes who had made their salvation at Commorragh possible deserved a proper medal. The Order of the Ancient was this award: cog-like mechanisms of Argentamite surrounding a true ruby, themselves encircled by an Auramite dragon, and the Aquila at the top holding the Order in its talons. Since the symbol of the Imperium was obviously also Auramite, this clearly made it one of the most expensive medals of the Imperium; for all the 'assurances' of the propagandists, very little Auramite was ever employed in common medals or armour decorations across the Imperium, not when a few grams were easily worth millions of Throne Gelts.

“The technologic theme will please the Mechanicus for sure,” Midas complimented his department's efforts. “The dragon, though?”

“Lady Dragon had insisted in an interview...as a hypothetical scenario, you understand.”

The Space Marine frowned for a few seconds, before obviously deciding that the presence of the flying reptile was not something that was objectionable.

“Last but not least, the Moth Star.”

If the previous decoration had been a challenge, what could be said about this marvel of jewellery? Ten small emeralds adorned the medal, and shaping the Argentamite and Auramite to form a miniature reproduction of the giant light moth several pilgrims were already worshipping had been something he had done himself with two of his best specialists. The recipients of this mark of exceptional valour would have a moth on their chest so realistic it looked like it was about to fly from its support.

“Congratulations Goldsmith, it is a fine piece of jewellery and artwork.”

“Thank you, Lord.”

The Space Marine handed him a large roll of vellum which had been until now attached to his belt.

“The preliminary numbers Marshal Groener has compiled for the Beetle Hearts, Termite Crosses, and Hornet Medals. I will come back to view the new Primarch's Witness and give you the numbers of recipients for the Commorragh awards.”

**Ark** **Mechanicus *Iron Revenant***

**Tech-Priest Rho-36**

There were many Tech-Priests, be they low menials or high Archmagi, who believed Archmagos Belisarius Cawl's tendencies veered dangerously close to the behaviour of a heretek.

They were utterly wrong.

Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl would never do something so trivial as 'slowly leaning towards an unacceptable behaviour'. He either did it, or he didn't. And on this particular topic, Rho-36 was ready to admit to himself his Master had crossed a few doctrinal lines the Magi and Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus stayed well away from.

To give a modest example, there were three people in this highly-secure laboratory besides himself, and all them had a name ending with 'Cawl'.

Such things didn't bother Rho-36, but then he was programmed to not be destabilised by them.

“Master? Per your instructions, the body of Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius has been returned to her subordinates for funeral purposes. The blades of the Naga were also released to the Inquisition; probability of their destruction within two hours exceeds ninety-nine percent.”

Since the Master of the *Iron Revenant* didn't deign to cant or reply by more traditional methods, the junior Tech-Priest continued.

“Archmagos Lankovar has also contacted me to inform you a Grand Council of the Mechanicus is going to begin in three standard hours...and your presence is mandatory, along with the precious data-relic in your possession, deciphered and undamaged.”

This elicited a response, though not the one Rho-36 had simulated to have the highest odds.

“Lankovar? Not Hediatrix or 24-Toledo?”

"Yes it was Lankovar, Master. My hypothetical reasoning is that they delegated the task of contacting you to him to avoid...tensions."

“Rho, Rho! Lankovar is from Stygies VIII! They simply thought it was better for a radical Archmagos to address me! But let's not disappoint them, shall we?”

A long and complex binary cant was given, and a column of heavily modified servo-skulls flew out at maximal speed.

“Once we have finished this conversation, go to Vault C-1 and retrieve the Emperor's data-repository and the three copies I've made, then deliver them into Archmagos Lankovar's possession. This should appease the conservative mechadendrites of my Martian peers.”

“It is done then, Master?”

“It is done,” the senior Archmagos proclaimed loudly. “The schematics of the Emperor-commissioned Percival Siege-Breaker, based on the STC schematics of Albion Engineering of Terra, are now returned from the abyss of ignorance they had fallen into.”

The Eldar would certainly not appreciate this irony...but of course, there weren't that many alive after Taylor Hebert had explained the meaning of total war to them.

“I will assist with the reunion, of course. Many hours will be boring in the extreme, but there are several STC templates to be negotiated, and not being in good standing with the heroine of the hour is not something I can afford if I want to consult the Athena STC Database at Nyx.”

Rho-36 wasn't even surprised that Commorragh and the gigantic apocalypse they had fought their way through had not been enough to change his master's plan.

“What sort of war engine is a 'Percival Siege-Breaker'?” he asked instead.

“A very good question! I believe it is the 'missing link', if the Omnissiah will forgive me the expression, between small Titans and the large Knight suits we use today. While its weapons are frankly nothing new in my databanks, the internal systems, alloys of construction, and neural interfaces are absolutely fascinating...I believe that with a few of these ameliorations, a Knight Paladin will easily improve its offensive and defensive capabilities by twenty percent.”

This was deeply impressive. The last 'improvements' Mars had authorised to that class of Knights had been done more than three hundred years ago, and had 'only' resulted in a zero point nine percent increase in performance, which was nonetheless not negligible because these were towering walkers one spoke about.

“What about the gene-seed?”

“Master, I was politely informed your involvement in this affair was neither desired nor welcomed.”

“Scandalous!” The binary burst was so large that Cawl Inferior and Cawl Cyber-Logis momentarily stopped their work to look at the intelligence which had given birth to them. “I am the most proficient Archmagos Biologis in the Pavia System!”

Rho-36 made a sound that most humans would have called a cough.

“I don't think they deny your skills in the Biologis branch, Master. Merely your doctrine and motivations.”

The latter was admittedly far worse than the former, from an Imperial point of view.

“This isn't acceptable! If nothing is done, they will put seventeen thousand progenoids under lock and key! Seventeen thousand! Do they know how long it took me to cultivate the gene-seed for a thousand progenoids of the Third Legion?”

This was obviously a rhetorical question, because Rho-36 didn't think there was a single living being outside the *Iron Revenant* who knew there was gene-seed of the Third Legion in Cawl's possession.

“It is already frustrating not to be able to study the changes Weaver has made upon the Ninth Legion's gene-line.”

“Master? Weaver has made no genetic modifications on the Brothers of the Red or any Blood Angels Successor.”

“Not genetically, no...not yet.” The Archmagos adding the two last words didn't give Rho-36 a feeling of satisfaction. “But psychically? Oh yes. She's making them more stable, more gifted at controlling their aggression on the battlefield. None of them have succumbed to the Black Rage in this battle as far as I was able to ascertain, and the number of Red Thirst cases was abysmally low compared to my most optimistic simulations. Taylor Hebert is changing the Ninth gene-line, Rho. Of that I have no doubt.”

The successor of Rho-35 for a brief cogitator processing cycle tried to consider the implications...before deciding he was not paid nearly enough for that storm of politics and techno-religious problems.

“Speaking with her directly would allow me to spend less time with the conservative Archmagi.”

“Master, I will remind you Lady Weaver is resting and nobody but her Dawnbreaker Guard and a carefully selected few are allowed to see her. You will not be permitted in her presence before the negotiations.”

“A shame,” the Archmagos Dominatus Dominus sighed. “I wanted to study the Bacta vials her Biologis teams are handing out to the hospital ships before the first assets' sales.”

“The price will be expensive, Master.” A simulation was hardly needed to understand that! “And you already have a considerable purchase list in the Noosphere.”

The 'consultation' of the Athena STC database had promised to be anything but free, but several STCs had been added within the last day, as well as the schematics for the 'Dragon Armours', Bacta, Aethergold, examining the Artefacts of Vulkan before the rest of the Mechanicus priesthood...and these were just some of the prominent points.

“Yes. So we will have to offer more than all these Magi and Archmagi who pretend to have a twelfth of my talent.” Rho-36 was loyal to the Master of Masters, but even he would admit humility and Archmagos Cawl had never been allies or companions on the Quest. “Imperfect as it is, the *Enterprise* appears to have satisfied Weaver and she will not say no to spare parts, schematics, and if necessary, modified variants of this hull. The presence of Space Marines by her side suggests a possible interest in Astartes Tactical Dreadnought Armours. The control of a Sector gives possible negotiation overtures in ore shipments and finished tech-components, and if it's Tech-Priests she wants, we have a few spare millions Tech-Priests and Skitarii of all known disciplines.”

And some were experts in disciplines the Fabricator-General definitely wouldn't approve of.

“And if it's not enough?” It was not a challenge. If this had been the usual post-battle quarrel which always occurred wherever his master was present to dispute the spoils of victory, Rho-36 would be confident Archmagos Cawl would triumph without trying. But it wasn't.

There were already more than two thousand starships of the Mechanicus who had not been there a standard day earlier, and it was the first and smallest wave of visitors about to be unleashed on Pavia.

“If that is not enough, we have many options. I have terraforming technology that Hediatrix 24-Toledo doesn't have access to.” Two mechadendrites seized the servo-skull which had been observing the results of Cawl Inferior. “There is also *Terra Cimmeria*.”

“Master, the predecessor of Fabricator-General Esvikom forbade you from selling it...or transporting it out of the Sol System, now that I think about it.”

*Terra Cimmeria* was the one and only space macro-forge of the Terra Cimmeria-class, his Master's argument that yes, it was possible to fuse the firepower of a Ramilies Starfort and the production capacity of a Forge in the same hull. The final result was likely the most gigantic project ever built by the Imperium since Cadia had needed to be fortified after the First Black Crusade, and the Parliament of Mars had been...slightly unnerved the moment they had realised what his master was building on his own.

“That was his predecessor. The current Fabricator-General might be far more reasonable for a Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

Or he may not. Was this how inter-Forge civil wars began?

**Pilgrim** **Ship *Faith in His Divine Art***

**Painter Artemis Rickard**

Among the millions of pilgrim ships which travelled across the stars in pilgrimage of Him, Artemis Rickard was proud to say there were few like the *Faith in His Divine Art*. At times, humility compelled him to admit immediately after that it wasn't like there was a marble-carved template for the hulls which transported faithful souls to the different Shrine Worlds of the Imperium. There was no specific 'Pilgrim-class', or if there was one, he had never heard of it. Pilgrim ships were known by this name because they transported pilgrims, and the smallest were using tiny transport hulls while the largest could be more than ten kilometres long. As long as the Ministorum's fee to register the hull for a pilgrimage was paid and there were at least a thousand souls calling themselves pilgrims onboard, no one cared much about the details. Hulls painted in gold belonged to Him as surely as the most miserable old tub of the Fringe. It didn't matter if you had a million souls or merely a thousand for your journey; the God-Emperor watched over all, and save the interminable traditional queues, the pilgrims could go worship His Most Divine Majesty wherever they wanted.

Yet even Artemis Rickard was not going to deny the costs associated with these travels were high, and one had to find the means to pay them. Otherwise, the ship you commanded was going to continue its pilgrimages...you just wouldn't be at the helm to discover new horizons.

The solution he had found for his ship was the noble art of religious painting. While he was not exactly a master artist himself, he had dabbled with pencils and cans of paint in his childhood, and could recognise when an artist had a modicum of talent. He had presented the idea to his crew, and it had received an enthusiastic welcome. In a matter of months, the *Faith in His Divine Art* had begun selling paintings of Primarchs, Angels, and of course the God-Emperor to the Shrine Worlds and Cardinal Worlds they visited. They didn't always manage to completely cover their fuel, food and other expenses when they departed again; his crew rarely made sculptures and other forms of artwork, focusing above all on the different styles of painting. But their finances were relatively healthy for a five kilometre-long starship with no Adeptus or Chartist patrons, and three decades of tradition had created a robust community of painters aboard the *Faith in His Divine Art*.

And then the Will of the God-Emperor had called them to the Pavia System, and they had not been in orbit around the renamed Malta-class Starfort *Omnissiah's Favour* for fifteen minutes before they were already commissioned by numerous Ecclesiarchy sources to draw and paint the Triumph of Commorragh.

Truly the God-Emperor smiled upon them, and knowing they were in the same system as a true Living Saint had brought tears of joy to the most stoic crew member of the lower decks. Even if they didn't conform to the ideal of the pilgrim quest every day, the men and women living in the *Faith in His Divine Art* were pilgrims. If some artists had felt their faith weaken with their artistic muses in the last decades, these potential crises of faith had been strangled by the miraculous news of the Battle of Commorragh.

The God-Emperor had sent His Custodes here to help His Living Saint, and triumph had been won over the perfidious xenos, just as it should be.

“I have never seen so many of our charges paint so enthusiastically,” his second noted, the old lascar coming to join him on the balcony where Artemis currently watched the spectacle.

And it was a spectacle of colours and faith. Two grand alleys of painters in a single hall, fifty-one painters in all, all busy making their pencils and painting utensils dance upon the canvas and the support they used to reveal their talents, their inspiration, and their faith.

“Never have we been blessed by miracles of the God-Emperor,” Artemis Rickard pointed out slowly as he watched Damian Jolly wield his 'weapon' like it was a question of life or death, as a large imperial flag was born on the canvas in the hands of a guardsman. “So is that the famous scene where the Matapan 1st raised the Imperial Flag over Commorragh, you reckon?”

“Certainly,” his subordinate agreed. “I must say that letting the freed souls come aboard has proved a great boon in this regard, Captain.”

Yes, next to each of his painters there were at least a couple of men, women, or children who had been rescued from the monsters of the Dark City. How else could Artemis and his artists create realistic works of art? They had not marched in the carnage of Commorragh, fought side by side with the Living Saint, or been direct witnesses of the miracles. Some people, the Captain of the *Faith in His Divine Art* knew, would have been tempted to follow very lax guidelines to get faster results, but those were not the ideals this starship was run with.

“They are in need of succour, and we are in need of miracles,” the Imperial Guard had given these poor souls spare military clothes, which unfortunately weren't exactly tailored for them. The Caribbean command and the Mechanicus ships provided food packages by the thousands. But rooms not cramped, an atmosphere which was not filled with baying soldiers, proper civilian clothes, and other 'luxuries'? That they could provide, at least to a couple of thousand; the *Faith in His Divine Art* had only been filled to four-fifths of its maximum passenger capacity at its latest stop, an unavoidable consequence of having the final fifth waiting for him at the next stop on their journey.

“I heard they have started an interesting tradition, these pilgrims rescued from the dark,” his second informed him as he observed a woman whose face had been subjected to horrible scarification whisper something to Oliver, who was trying to give justice to the *Will of Eternity* massacring the Eldar fleets with the holy might of the God-Emperor.

“A tradition?”

“Many of them were born in that realm of darkness,” whispered the officer as befitted such a terrible revelation, “and others were tortured so much by the xenos that either way, the result was the same: they didn't have names of their own before they were freed. They had only a few letters and numbers, most often branded onto their flesh by their 'masters'.”

Artemis Rickard lowered his head in shame. He knew it wasn't his fault, nor was it really the fault of the Imperium as a whole; it wasn't like the High Lords and the Commanders of any Segmentum had never wanted to invade this lair of horrors, they'd simply been unable to until recently. But at this moment he felt like a failure at the thought that billions had been suffering in a never-ending torment while his crew and himself celebrated and continued their never-ending pilgrimage.

“But since the Living Saint freed them with her insects, they have taken insect names as their own. The three around Oliver decided to call themselves Termite, Moth, and Helspider.”

“Helspider?” He could not stop himself from chuckling.

Laughter answered him.

“I understand it's a popular one, given the sheer horror the long-ears felt when their pets were turned against their armies.”

“Well, it's their decision,” and who was he to say they were wrong to show their devotion to the Saint who had acted to save so many of them from the slave-markets and the dark dungeons where they had awaited long and awful deaths? “And for what it's worth, I pray it will be a new beginning under His Grace for them.”

The light was back. And if Commorragh, the pit of evil, was gone, then surely many things weren't impossible in the first place.

“Aegroto dum anima est, spes est.”

*As long as there is life, there is hope*.

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

Dennis smiled when he woke up. He must say he had a pleasant night, and the view he had in the morning was extremely attractive too.

“Someone is looking very pleased with himself,” Gabriela Jordan grumbled. Despite donning a new uniform and presenting her back to him, the Captain somehow managed to know everything which was going on around her.

“Assassin training?” he asked.

“Yes,” the yellow eyes were filled with amusement.

"That's unfair," the red-haired parahuman complained theatrically.

“Says the man who can stop time for a few minutes in service of a General who can send an army of insects against her enemies,” Gabriela told him, while making her body disappear under her Guard uniform and searching for her boots. “You should prepare too. The flexi-discs and the data-slates are not coming more slowly just because we aren't there to fill them.”

“I thought winning meant less paperwork.”

“No,” the woman who had been the second-in-command of the Alamo 4th Penal Legion before its annihilation corrected him. “Winning means the Administratum and the rest of the bureaucracy don't have to train your replacement to do your quota of paperwork.”

Realising waiting was not going to be a worthwhile solution and that the nightly activities weren't going to resume, Dennis abandoned the warmth of his bed and went searching for a presentable uniform.

“Was it true also for your...” Dennis didn't know how to finish the sentence. He had been among the maybe dozen people to be informed Gabriela was an ex-agent of the Officio Assassinorum, though he hadn't expected to get to know her as intimately as he did before Operation Caribbean began.

“A lot of Temples are based in the heart of Solar, and the Sol System is the heart of the Imperium's bureaucracy. What do you think?”

One more myth which collapsed, even the most dangerous assassins were not exempt from after-action reports and other boring protocols.

“I'm thinking I don't want the job,” Dennis answered, watching the athletic woman and her long black hair.

“No one really volunteers,” Gabriela shrugged. “It's not a system which is conceived to give the chance to be a millionaire."

“I am not a millionaire,” the Second Naval Secretary of Nyx sniffed in an offended tone.

“Liar,” the ex-assassin he had accidently electrocuted while fighting spoke. “No formal numbers have been given as the cogboys are busy calculating the value of the spoils, but it will be in the millions of Throne Gelts, easily.”

“For you maybe,” Dennis took the haughty posture of an arrogant noble, “but you're a Captain, and with the loot of Pavia Captains have accumulated a total of approximately four million four hundred thousand Throne Gelts in their bank accounts so far. I'm a Naval Secretary, a High Officer, and my share is closer to one hundred and seventy million. By the time the shares of Commorragh are counted...”

“You will be a billionaire or a trillionaire,” finished Gabriela. “Now that's my turn to say 'that's unfair'.”

“I have not set the system of prize money in place, my Lady.”

A glance at the code of laws governing the capture of criminals, enemy infrastructure, archeotech, and other valuable objects was sufficient to tell you the Imperium was not an egalitarian society. The whole system of shares was divided into tenths. Two of these tenths went to the junior enlisted having participated in the battle, who through a strange coincidence always made up over eighty percent of the armies' and fleets' manpower. One-tenth went to the junior NCOs. One-tenth went to the senior NCOs. The officers – Colonel or equivalent rank and below – would distribute one-tenth among their numbers according to rank and seniority, and this was repeated for the high officers. But the commander-in-chief had two-tenths, the Admiralty which had given the orders one-tenth, and the local Sector authorities received the last tenth. And of course, that didn't take the massive bribery, favours, and 'gifts' one was supposed to transfer to people who had never been present on the battlefield for a single day into account.

Yet in this case, people were going to scream...or depending if certain astropathic messages had reached them, they were already screaming. Due to the lack of attention this whole operation had received, the lack of Admiralty overseeing the procedure, and the reality they weren't inside the Imperium's zone of influence, everything which should have gone to an Admiralty or a Sector Lord was going to the Commander-in-chief...aka one General Taylor Hebert, who was thus earning a even forty percent of the gains shared among the warships and formations mustered.

How did you spell 'rich', again?

“I would have to kill you if you did,” Gabriela moved so fast he almost jumped when her lips found his. “You were an acceptable lover last night, Mr. Secretary. I may be convinced to re-try the experience.”

She had the last word, for, by the time he had regained his wits to don the rest of his uniform and leave his quarters, Gabriela was long gone.

“I can't deny fraternisation has its upsides...” though he was nonetheless going to support Taylor putting the Dreadnought back into his stasis field as fast as possible.

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Tech-priest T-11001100-Zeta**

More than once, T-11001100-Zeta had experienced sheer terror as one experiment or another exploded in close proximity to his mechadendrites and threatened to end his career in the service of the Omnissiah.

Commorragh had been another dark moment to survive, though unlike some other Tech-Priests, it had not been the most awful event he'd experienced in recent years. It hadn't been devoid of danger; at some point the parahuman they were supposed to 'oversee' had tried to pilfer from archeotech piles which weren't his property, and it had taken immense efforts of negotiation to save the ungrateful red-clothed loudmouth from servitorhood.

But the Tech-Priest promoted to Omicron-Gamma rank was ready to admit there were some funny moments too. On average, they happened twice per day, when Leet failed to realise what little authority he possessed wasn't sufficient to let him go where he wanted.

“No, you will not pass,” the Sanguinary Priest in the colours of the Angels Resplendent and the purple cloak of the Dawnbreaker Guard announced in a thunderous voice. “Our Lady is resting, and will not be disturbed for a trivial matter.”

“This isn't a trivial matter!” Leet yelped. “That Squat is utterly crazy, I tell you! He's doing arm-wrestling with the Black Templars and wants me to accompany him to his Glorious Doom!”

T-11001100-Zeta noticed the Tinker had used capital letters like the muscular abhuman did.

“I fail to see why that is our Lady's problem,” the white armour of Sanguinary Guard Puriel of the Angels Encarmine was gleaming like it was new, as it had been one of the first to be fully repaired by the Magi toiling aboard the *Enterprise*. “Unless the Slayer is causing great damage and impeding the ongoing repairs, the Dawnbreaker Guard has no reason to intervene with him.”

“He nearly drowned me in a tank of amasec!”

The Sanguinary Priest, who was called Sterzing, T-11001100-Zeta remembered a bit late, did not seem impressed by this 'incident'.

“Half of the crew is drowning themselves in amasec as soon as they have the opportunity to celebrate,” the red-armoured Dawnbreaker Guard informed the Tinker sarcastically before turning his head towards his companion. “And it is remarkable, because Rhodes didn't think we had stored a third of the alcoholic cargo the fleet is currently drinking at the moment.”

“Reinforcements aren't the only thing we have received in the last hours, brother,” Puriel replied. “We are also 'blessed' by the presence of the *King of Amasec*, a ship normally operating in the Desaderian Gulf. But the Governors using its services are so grateful our Lady rid them of the Eldar raids we have been allowed to empty its hull of its alcoholic contents.”

“You mean there is enough alcohol left for Borek to drink ten nights and ten days?” Leet's face was livid...well, more livid than his average of the last hours.

“I'm not sure the stocks will hold for ten days and nights,” Puriel said after a moment of reflexion. “This Slayer has quite a robust constitution, and he's regularly challenged by the Silver Skulls and the Salamanders. And those Chapters aren't exactly lightweights when it comes to celebrating.”

“You see?” One thing T-11001100-Zeta had to give to Leet, he didn't retreat at the first sign of danger. Many guardsmen and Tech-Priests would have scurried away when two Space Marines told them to get lost. “It's imperative I speak to-“

“No.”

“Please!”

“No. Lady Weaver is resting.”

“You let Clockblocker pass this morning!”

“We did,” Sterzing admitted. “But it was the Second Naval Secretary, he didn't stay long anyway, and we knew he wasn't going to pester our Lady with his personal issues.”

“I am not going to pester Taylor with my personal-“

When they wanted to be, Space Marines could be very, very intimidating. Like...right now.

“Our decision is final. And we will warn the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard about your disrespectful insistence when our shift ends.”

“Furthermore, I don't see why you are complaining!” The Angel Resplendent added viciously a moment later. “Following a warrior like Borek should be a lot of excitement for the next years!”

And yes, Leet might have forgotten that members of the Adeptus Astartes viewed things a bit differently than the rest of humanity.

“You haven't heard him sing!” Leet complained. “Even the Fay 20th has fled when faced with that weapon...”

“We have heard the ruckus made by Possessed Traitors, Tinker. Borek can't be that terrible...”

**Ark** **Mechanicus *El Dorado***

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

"SILENCE! SILENCE!"

The screams of the poor Magos he had left to brave the extremely agitated crowds of Magi was powerful, but he was losing ground with every second against the loud arguments and the furious debates raging everywhere.

Ultimately, Desmerius did what he should have done from the very beginning; he fled towards the elevators, with as much dignity and stealth an Archmagos could allow to present in public. And if he murmured twelve sacred cants once he was back on the upper levels of the *El Dorado*, well, no one but the servitors was witness of his weakness.

And to think he had once believed the aftermath of the Battle of the Death Star was bad. Compared to the scenes unfolding at this very moment beneath his feet, the greatest battle ever waged in the Nyx Sector was nothing. Nothing! There were already half a billion Tech-Priests in system, and the number was growing steadily hour after hour. And from the lowliest Tech-Priest to the highest Archmagos, they went to watch the miracles of the Omnissiah and pillage the asteroid bases and the debris of the pirate lairs. Not necessarily in this order, mind you.

“They haven't calmed I take it?” inquired Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix when he entered the room where the Voice of Mars compiled most of the information relative to the victory won at Pavia.

“They aren't calming; in fact if I didn't think it was technologically impossible, I would swear on the Laws they're getting worse,” the Stygies VIII-born servant of the Omnissiah considered it an incredible triumph of will he didn't snap back. “I already dread how bad the situation is going to be when we start selling part of the ore and other resources we obtained at Commorragh. The Magi of Lucius and Agripinaa are particularly...vocal about not being excluded from the negotiations this time.”

By the areas they prioritised in the Quest for Knowledge, these two major Forge Worlds had been excluded from the Athena Databases negotiations, since their first ships had arrived years too late, and their representatives were hardly powerful enough to put enough resources in the balance. In a logical turn of events, this had not encouraged them to send forces for Operation Caribbean...something they had to be regretting a lot right now.

“We will deal with them according to the Chosen of the Omnissiah's and the Fabricator-General's instructions. We have a first return on the bounties, allowing us to make solid preliminary estimates on the prize money we will share between the forces of Operation Caribbean.”

“I'm listening,” Desmerius canted in a simple manner. Pavia had accumulated fewer valuable things than Commorragh – the STC templates seized in the Dark City were worth so much only the two Artefacts of Vulkan were not totally outclassed, and the latter were going to be returned to the Salamanders. But Pavia had been fought when the number of ships had been limited to Operation Caribbean warships, and only the Forge Worlds and the Adeptuses having representatives in the system at the moment Sliscus died were allowed shares of prize money and participation in the assets' sales.

“The Adeptus Almitas is avaricious and incompetent as always," Hediatrix began in fast-flowing binary, “but with the overwhelming evidence we have sent them, they had no choice but to bow and deliver the majority of the bounties. We have the five hundred billion of Blackdakka, seven hundred billion for the Kroot, seven hundred and fifty billion for Brakorth, four hundred billion for Tanaka, five billion for Moonblitz, nine hundred and thirty billion for the Navy traitor, two hundred billion for the Rashan, one and a half trillion for the Rogue Trader Traitor, two trillion for the Siren, two point two trillion for Bloodweaver, two and a half trillion for Horth, and of course seventeen trillion for Sliscus the Serpent. To these numbers are added four major bounties and one hundred and seven minor bounties. The total sum in Nyxian Throne Gelts is of twenty-eight trillion six hundred eighty-nine billion eight hundred and forty-one million.”

“It's far better than I or any Magi thought we would be able to claim so quickly,” Lankovar admitted.

“I agree,” the senior Archmagos gave a few binaric commands to show other data flows on the tri-dimensional hololith. “The Fabricator-General and a few other High Lords must have pressured the Almitas for them to act so efficiently and productively. As per the agreements, one hundred percent of this sum will be declared prize money.”

Before he met Taylor Hebert, this number would have likely seriously agitated Desmerius. Today it wasn't normal to hear it, but it had lost the astonishment factor.

“Good. Your previous Noosphere message informed me Anvillus had won the bid for the *Omnissiah's Favour*,” because they certainly weren't going to continue calling a Malta-class Starfort *Palace of Feasting*, by the Great Cog!

“Yes, the negotiation also gave them the ceramite, plasteel, and promethium found in and near the space fortress,” revealed the Voice of Mars. “The final sale price was thirty trillion Throne Gelts; once we remove the taxes, the vellum, and the need to appease several Segmentum-level authorities, the prize money for this Starfort is twenty-two point five trillion.”

There was more, of course. There always seemed to be more, now that the enemies were dead and the Imperium was alone on the field of victory. The archeotech the Basileia had allowed the sale of was 'only' worth three billion, but the crystals of Ligeia paid by the Siren to save her scales had to be sold to the Adeptus Astra Telepathica by law, and those added four point five trillion Throne Gelts to the total. There was much to be gained in salvage rights and fuel around Pavia; at this very moment it added a trillion more. There had been gold, silver, platinum, and jewel sales from Kalmar's pirate bases, and they provided twenty-eight point five billion Throne Gelts to the survivors and the pension funds of Operation Caribbean.

All in all, not including the adamantium, keeping a generous amount of gold and platinum in the custody of Lady Weaver, disregarding several captured warships and obviously removing the Artefacts of Vulkan and the greater part of Sliscus' vaults from the discussion, the prize money of Operation Caribbean was worth fifty-six trillion seven hundred seventy-two billion thirty-one million seven hundred and seventy-four thousand Nyxian Throne Gelts.

It meant that even the lowest private, whether he had survived the destruction of Commorragh and Slaanesh or not, had won a sum of thirty-five thousand Throne Gelts for himself and his family – easily multiplying the combined fortune of a manufactorum-working family by a factor of at least ten.

Without counting a single Throne Gelt of the prize money of Commorragh.

“Then there's the Adamantium.”

“Ah yes, the Adamantium,” this 'ransom' deserved the capital letters; Desmerius wasn't going to naysay that. “I suppose there's no need to ponder the matter for dozens of cogitator cycles; while we don't object to the transfer of fifty-one percent of these two million tons of ninety-nine percent pure adamantium, I have received confirmation from Magos-Draco Richter and several other members of the Nyx Council that it is out of the question to receive this in prize money or to otherwise convert it into Throne Gelts directly.”

It was only fifty-one percent of the ransom, but at seven hundred thousand two hundred and eleven Throne Gelts per kilogram, this represented nine hundred and fifty-eight trillion Throne Gelts, enough to generate a lot of inflation...and outright buy a few planets several times.

“I don't have any objection in principle, and I'm sure the Fabricator-General won't either,” Gastaph Hediatrix replied. “What do you have in mind?”

**Macro-Transport** ***Granite Rampart***

**Marshal Lorelei Moltke**

It was a sad thing that Lorelei could sit comfortably in a cushy chair and say without lying that the unending list of fatalities and wounded suffered by Army Group Caribbean was not the worst she had ever seen, neither proportionally nor in absolute numbers.

“One Marshal out of three, four Lieutenant-Generals out of six, sixteen Major-Generals out of twenty-four, thirteen Brigadier-Generals out of forty-eight, and forty-nine Colonels out of one hundred and forty-four are dead,” the Mordian woman summarized the latest update on the fatalities, which hopefully would be far closer to the final after-battle report as the guardsmen and guardswomen succumbing to toxins and the various torture devices of the Drukhari diminished with every hour.

“It could be worse,” Lieutenant-General Marcus Hannover, who was at the moment combining the functions of commander of Fifth Corps and the duties of her chief of staff, replied with a far happier expression than the butcher's bill should have warranted. “In fact, it should be worse, even with the billions of insects the General used to break through the defences of the Eldar and stop any counterattack of the Arch-Enemy and the xenos dead. The God-Emperor was smiling on us during the battle; a lot of long-ears were fighting each other and we found allies and enemies ready to bathe in Eldar blood.”

Normally, the Marshal would have treated the mention of His Most Holy Majesty as the excuse a poor tactician or strategist used to explain that he had used up all his luck for the next decades, but in this instance...

Lorelei had seen the angels born of light charging the daemons. They were commanded by a woman who was meeting the definition of a Living Saint word for word. The entire operation had been ordered by a Custodes, and if the rumours held any truth, the golden giant was the Captain-General himself. It had also been confirmed by the official channels another Captain-General, one lost since the end of the Horus Heresy, had taken command of the Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity* to lead them to victory.

This was a lot of miraculous interventions, and each was not exactly small on the scale of divine miracles.

“True. By all rights, we should have lost the entire Army Group and the Field Army of Desaderia long before cleaning up the Port of Lost Souls,” as it were, the three Field Armies had right now recorded nine hundred thirty-seven thousand frontline troops deceased of an initial order of battle of one million four hundred and thirty-one thousand men and women. This was sixty-five point five percent fatalities, and it was far from the most devastated formation; Field Army Desaderia had a grand total of *seventy* percent fatalities, and they had entered the battle well after any regiment of Nyx. “This is an excellent reason to be satisfied.”

“Especially where the Armoured, Mechanised, and Artillery Regiments are concerned,” the Sonasthi officer agreed. “In my opinion, the method the offensive was conducted with using the first waves of Khans, Cataphracts, and Chimeras should be copied for all the military academies of the Segmentum. We may even petition for the manoeuvres and the inter-regiment synchronicity to be added to the manuals of the *Tactica Imperialis*.”

“It was perfectible,” the scarred veteran wasn't prepared to endorse this optimistic viewpoint in its totality. “At least three times at Zel'harst, we missed encircling several army-sized xenos formations.”

“I don't think Lady Weaver truly wanted to encircle those armies, Marshal,” Marcus argued while replaying several critical moments of the Battle of Zel'harst. “I mean, yes she would have done so if they were idiotic enough to not retreat like they did, but when she advanced, I think she settled on breaking their infantry and their cohesion.”

“A plan known to fail repeatedly when attempted against greenskins,” the Mordian woman knew what she was talking about; she had the scars and the bad career report to prove this viewpoint.

“Given her past record against them and the sum of experience most of the Brigadier-Generals have against the Orks, I think our General would have chosen a different battleplan if the enemy had been screaming 'WAAGH'.”

Deep inside, Lorelei wanted to believe it too, though she had known many officers who excelled against one xenos method of warfare but were unable to counter another.

“However, I think we can agree the vox liaisons between Aeronautica and Guard need a lot of improvement. And if the tanks and mechanised formations have proven their worth, the infantry and reconnaissance regiments have been on the receiving end of a bloodbath.” Out of the nine hundred thousand-plus fatalities suffered by the Army Group, an atrocious majority came from the infantry. It wasn't really their commander's fault, obviously. The Eldar had outnumbered them significantly, and given that one of the long-eared xenos was faster, boasted better reflexes and senses, and had access to really, really horrible weaponry when they remembered armour was there for more than decoration, the huge losses weren't a surprise. Still, the Nyx-recruited regiments in these specialties remained well below the standards expected of a veteran Mordian or Cadian company of the same size.

“Absolutely. I have already begun to put some of my thoughts on dataslab. I saw Marshal Groener a few minutes ago, and he told me several Colonels have already begun doing the same and the full synopsis will be given to Lady Weaver once properly formatted.”

Lorelei found herself nodding. Werner 'the Last Cadian' Groener – her fellow Marshal was the only Cadian officer to get out of Commorragh alive – was maybe a bit too lax with discipline, and his strategies could use some improvement, but there was nothing wrong with his mind and his conception of an Army Group. If he had shared some of their misgivings, then their existence was certified at the highest level.

“I can spare a good hour before returning to the bureaucratic nightmare. What would you say are the biggest weaknesses of the Nyxian infantry?”

“I'm a bit divided between their lack of mutual support with the Aeronautica Imperialis and the way they employ their mortars,” the commander of Fifth Corps answered. “While I am in awe of the courage it takes to charge straight into the teeth of the monsters, none of it would have been needed if...”

**Gloriana** **Battleship *Flamewrought***

**Forgefather Vulkan N'Varr**

Despite the sons of Vulkan often wishing otherwise, the entire Chapter rarely met in anything approaching its full strength more than once or twice a century. The galaxy was rarely peaceful enough to allow for more, and the sons of Vulkan were never the kind of Space Marines who stayed idle when innocent lives were threatened by daemons, traitors, and xenos.

And if one wanted to be completely accurate, the full might of the Salamanders wasn't here today either; between the incoming reinforcements of the 4th and 6th Company still in the Warp and the 7th Company garrisoning Nocturne, the best-updated records compiled confirmed five hundred and seventy-five battle-brothers of Nocturne were not present in the Pavia System.

The Hall of Victories of the *Flamewrought* was nonetheless resonating with the voices of the sons of Vulkan. There were exactly eight hundred and eighty-seven Space Marines gathered in this vast compartment.

The Forgefather hadn't needed much brainstorming to acknowledge he had never expected to behold to such a spectacle. The location was the first 'impossibility' his mind and that of each and every one of his battle-brothers had to struggle against. The *Flamewrought*, flagship of their Legion, was back.

After the end of the Heresy, immense efforts had been deployed to discover the fate of the Gloriana Battleship, but all had been met with failure. And now it was back, bringing with it columns of ancient veterans in customised Mark III and Mark IV power armours.

Really, the entirety of this mustering was a remarkable display of the equipment designed by the forges of Nocturne. Save the obsolete Mark I and Mark II, there was at least one example of every power armour ever built to serve the loyal Astartes of the Imperium, and the modifications a good smith always did on his equipment ensured that even the samples of existing Mark III or Mark IV presented a panoply of different technologies.

But most of the attention remained focused on the end of the Hall, where a gigantic throne of obsidian-looking stone waited. Millennia ago, it had been shaped to look like a sleeping Salamander, and the effect, Vulkan N'Varr had to admit, was breathtaking; the stone sculpture appeared to be plunged into a slumber which it could wake up from at any moment.

This was the throne of their Father. This was the throne of Nocturne. This was the throne of Vulkan.

And the *Gauntlet of the Forge* was placed on it, symbol of the victories won in the past days. Many had wished for the *Obsidian Chariot* to be brought here too, but after a few hypothetical debates to evaluate the practicality of it, a consensus had been reached that the symbolism wasn't worth the technical obstacles.

Silently, Chapter Master Ta'Phor Hezonn marched deliberately in the direction of the Throne before stopping many feet away from it at the place that, in the past, would have been where the First Captain of the Legion stood. On his right was Captain William Castor, senior officer of the Isstvan survivors. On his left was Captain Esar Aksspen, thought dead during the Klovian Disaster of M33 but in reality 'saved' by a xenos and freed after the Battle of Commorragh.

The Forgefather's own position was close to them, closer than most of the Captains and officers, but it had been decided that for today a trio of old and younger sons of Vulkan would stand together in unity at the helm. The same was true for the rest of the hundreds of Space Marines present; there were no neat lines, no separation between the Companies, and no segregation between battered and brand-new Space Marine power armours. In this Hall, they were all sons of Vulkan.

“BROTHERS,” the Regent of Nocturne began. “VULKAN LIVES!”

It was more than a battle-cry or a scream of defiance; it was conviction, it was loyalty, and it was the certainty of a volcano's fire that somewhere in this galaxy their gene-sire, their father, awaited them.

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES! VULKAN LIVES! VULKAN LIVES!”

It took five minutes for everyone to calm down, and Ta'Phor Hezonn spoke again.

“Reports have been coming in from all over the Imperium. They speak of depraved heretics dying at the moment of triumph. Task forces of the Traitor Third were disintegrated, took their own lives by plunging into suns and fire, or were massacred by loyal forces as they fell unconscious upon thousands of battlefields. We can't verify what is happening in the Eye of Terror of course, but between the uncorrupted gene-seed found here, the humiliation of the False-Primarch in the battlezone of Corespur, and the gigantic casualties these pleasure-addicted monsters suffered when the parasite they worshipped died...the Traitor Third must be near extinction now.”

“That is not enough torment to account for their treachery at Isstvan,” Captain William Castor declared with a ferocious smile. “But it's the beginning of a fitting punishment.”

“The Corrupted Phoenix has been cast down,” Aksspen finished. “Long may he scream and suffer at the proof of his irrelevance.”

“ONE TRAITOR LEGION CAST DOWN! AVE IMPERATOR!”

Long moments were spent adding a few comments about how good it was to be rid of these insults to everything a true Space Marine stood for.

“A great victory has been won,” Ta'Phor Hezonn resumed his speech. “For generations it will be celebrated in the cities of Nocturne and beyond. But for now, as the Regent of Nocturne and Chapter Master of the Salamanders, I wish to raise two issues. The first, as some of you might have correctly deduced, is that as of today, we are in violation of many, many rules of the Codex Astartes.”

Thanks to transhuman hearing, Vulkan N'Varr was sure he had heard at least five Isstvan veterans muttering Guilliman could shove his treaties in a very unhygienic place.

“And yes, I'm sure some of you feel...unhappy at the Codex. The Breaking of the Legions, that for some of our ranks was an eternity ago and forced by the cruel casualties of the Drop Site Massacre and many betrayals by the ones we called brothers, was not something our predecessors had any choice upon. But records of early M31 confirm our father gave his word the Codex would be respected, and we will not go against his ruling.”

It was necessary to make this point loudly in public. While the Inquisition and other Imperial Adeptuses sometimes turned a blind eye to the peculiarities of Nocturnan culture, philosophy, and post-battle actions, it was because ultimately, the Salamanders were a Codex-compliant Chapter and at no risk of building the numbers to become a Legion again.

But now everything had changed. At this very moment, there were one thousand four hundred and sixty-four battle-brothers bearing the Salamanders colours – one had to account for two serving as Honour Guard to the Primarch Rogal Dorn – and in addition to this well-above-norms number the gene-stocks of the *Flamewrought* had to be counted too.

It was possible some High Lords might have ignored the irregular effectives for the time it took for attrition to lower them to Codex restrictions. The moment they heard the Apothecarium of the Gloriana held five thousand progenoids of the Eighteenth Legion though...

“The second issue is the astronomical debt we owe Lady Taylor Hebert, Basileia of Nyx, Lady Weaver, Finder of two of the Artefacts.”

No hand gesture was made to emphasize the presence of the *Gauntlet of the Forge*, but none was needed.

“This young woman saved the *Forgehammer* and two Artefacts of Vulkan at great risk to herself and her forces,” the Chapter Master spoke and not a single soul objected. “And it is thanks to her actions so many sons of Vulkan stand here today. I have already given the order, under my authority as Regent of Nocturne, that many of the jewels and most expensive crystals kept in our vaults for such exceptional events will be given to her as heartfelt thanks for her noble deeds.”

“We will give one of the Volkite gun-making forges aboard the *Flamewrought*,” the representative of the M31 battle-brothers continued, “along with many schematics of medical facilities and preservation technology we have safeguarded.”

“Many great hunts for suitable insects will be organised by Astartes and non-Astartes on Nocturne and elsewhere,” Aksspen commanded. “For the Swarm helped us, and the Swarm must be strong in the flames of war.”

“Yet as I said, this is quite a crushing debt we have accrued, brothers.” Ta'Phor Hezonn effortlessly seized back all attention again. “When the time comes, I will therefore ask for two of you to swear the vows of the personal guard of our Hope and join the Dawnbreaker Guard. I will also,” the Chapter Master continued without giving time to let the words be dissected and assimilated, “ask for a vote. A vote that when we will divide this Chapter in two for a Salamander Founding, I will bow before the Emperor's Angel and ask humbly for the new Successor Chapter to be allowed to settle on a planet of the Nyx Sector and fight her battles like our father himself would if he was present!”

The *Flamewrought* was a Gloriana Battleship and thus quite a bit tougher than anything in the current Salamanders' fleet, despite the extensive damage it had suffered. Yet when Vulkan N'Varr had stopped cheering and vocally screaming his support like the rest of the Chapter one hour later, he wondered if maybe they hadn't shouted loudly enough to shake apart walls and battery decks...

**Battle-Barge** ***Jaghatai's Pride***

**Chapter Master Hibou Khan**

The Great Khan of the White Scars did not have many passions outside of war, but watching fleets gather together and exchange signals of welcome was definitely one. And the thousands of starships arriving at the Pavia System were a sight even a Chapter Master of the Adeptus Astartes didn't see every century. There were massive Arks Mechanicus and Heavy Battleships, dozens of their cousins' Battle-Barges surrounding the colossal Gloriana *Flamewrought*, antique warships belonging to some Rogue Traders who may not live long once the supreme authority decided their fate, and of course countless squadrons of the Imperial Navy, small Explorator fleets of the Adeptus Mechanicus, hundreds of pilgrim ships attracted by the decisive victory of Commorragh, support trains to repair the damages suffered in the titanic naval battles, and likely hundreds more hulls that a singer would spend the rest of the night waxing poetically about.

Hibou Khan didn't dance or celebrate at the moment; he had already done so, and there would be more to come later. For the moment, the song of silence and studious contemplation were all he needed.

Alas, like many things when the sons of the Khan were away from the steppes of Chogoris, the serenity of silence was interrupted by his Voice of the Storm, that other Chapters devoid of poetry tended to call a High Chaplain or Master of Sanctity.

“You will have to make a decision soon, Great Khan.”

“I will make my decision when I have truly mastered the winds blowing off Commorragh's destruction,” Hibou replied, waiting for the reaction of his interlocutor in a meditation pose.

“Surely you do not intend to support the First Captain's suggestion,” the highest-ranked Chaplain of the White Scars Chapter protested.

“Suggestion, Voice of the Storm?” the Great Khan repeated interrogatively. “Unless my memory is not what it used to be, I heard the First Captain speak more than three.”

“You know what I mean,” the black-armoured Space Marine replied grouchily. “I don't really care if you intend to sign contracts with General Taylor Hebert to give you thousands of new tanks, planes, and bases to repair our warships when the Chapter needs it. Most of these decisions will only impact the allied PDF forces we will rely on and the effectiveness of our equipment. No, I wanted to know your final decision about the proposal of the First Captain to send one of our battle-brothers to this 'Dawnbreaker Guard'.”

In case someone had any doubts about it, Hibou Khan could confirm that yes, the Voice of the Storm was the most senior figure opposing this move.

“As I've said before, I have not yet mastered all the winds of this dangerously exciting situation,” the Great Khan answered. “There are reactions and minds I want to know better first. I want to hear the leaders of the descendants of the Seventh Legion once they arrive, for one.”

Between the Blood Angels and their Successors already present, the Salamanders, the Raven Guard, and even a single Ultramarine, this was a lot of the original Legions which would be gathered in a very tiny amount of space. Under these circumstances, deciding rashly and hotly like an inexperienced Scout on his first bike raid would mark him as unfit to be Great Khan.

“It will be a meeting like we haven't seen for too long,” Hibou continued, carefully noting the marks of irritation of the Voice of the Storm. “The three Legions which stood as one against the threat of the Arch-Heretic on Terra will be free to rejoice once more as the hordes of the fiends have been routed and the Astronomican shines on our hunts.”

“We aren't the lost sons of Sanguinius,” the Chaplain hotly retorted, rather peevishly in the Great Khan's opinion. “And what they need and desire from this lesser copy of-“

“Careful now,” the Chapter Master's voice did not hold even the shadow of a threat, and his posture had not shifted a single inch. But the two words, no matter how gently they had been spoken, had warned the Voice of the Storm there were boundaries to not be overstepped. “No, General Taylor Hebert isn't Sanguinius. After all, I think the Primarch of the Ninth failed to destroy Commorragh, no?”

It was a good thing the teeth of a Space Marine were very durable, otherwise the gritting which was done at this moment would have shortened their life expectancy by decades.

“As I said, I have not yet made a decision. I must speak with the General herself first, for while a man or a woman reveals their true personality in the midst of warfare, the burden of command and bloodshed also ensure it is not *all* his personality we are able to see. Then I will summon the Zadyin Arga, for their wisdom and abilities to see if our father's return is near will prove invaluable in the coming days.”

“As you command, Great Khan,” this was one of his brothers the Great Khan would never send to Nyx, neither as part of the Dawnbreaker Guard nor as simple envoy. Truly the Chaplains were too rigid for his tastes, dour when they should be joyful, inflexible when they had to flow like the rivers of the mountains, and prompt to punish when the soul needed to be healed.

“Patience is the greatest virtue of the hunter,” and Hibou Khan returned to his meditation in front of the stars.

**Prison** **Ship *Constant Vigilance***

**Lord Commissar Zuhev**

“DEATH TO THE CORSE-EMPEROR!”

“DOWN WITH THE IMPERIUM!”

“COME AND FIGHT US IF YOU THINK YOU'RE THE MASTERS OF THE GALAXY!”

“CORPSE-LOVERS!"”

“BEAST-LOVERS!”

“DOWN WITH THE IMPERIUM!”

“WE ARE FREE FROM THE CHAINS OF TYRANNY!”

For scum who had surrendered at the first opportunity, the pirates of Pavia who were waiting in the large empty compartment used for executions were rather loud. Maybe the absence of the usual pyres and chains gave them courage. Or maybe it was just plain stupidity.

“DOWN WITH THE IMPERIUM!”

Zuhev nodded to one of the junior Arbites Wardens. The strident alarm shrieked a couple of seconds later, and the prisoners were forced to stop their treacherous and heretical shouts.

“Pirates,” his voice was amplified by the Mechanicus machines, allowing him to speak at his leisure without raising his voice. “You were given a choice. A choice that, in my professional opinion, you didn't deserve but General Taylor Hebert gave in good faith. Cooperate with our interrogators, reveal the location of your caches and the identities of your accomplices across the Imperium, and your lives would be spared.”

“You think we would trust the word of an Imperial General?”

The outlaw who had dared interrupt him was rather tall and wore rags that, in another life, may have passed as a second-hand militia uniform. His beard was long and unkempt, his eyes full of the viciousness one expected from the people who had bowed before 'Admiral' Sliscus.

The insubordinate wretch took a lasgun shot in his left leg for the interruption. The black-bearded pirate didn't fall screaming, but loathing replaced viciousness on his face.

“I find particularly interesting that you don't trust the word of the Imperium when you clearly have no respect for your own words, oaths, or promises made earlier. Many of your surrender statements were properly recorded when you threw down your weapons, whether it was aboard the *Empire of Sin* or another crippled ship of your ' Thirteen Pavia Fleets'. But yes, the General intended to stay true to her promises if yours were honoured.”

They wouldn't have had easy lives, of course. For the humans, the Penal Legions would in all likelihood have been their fates.

“Oh stop playing the moralising fool, Commissar!” Zuhev narrowed his eyes, as it was not a human who had spoken, but one of the Drukhari. “Just go ahead and kill us! IF YOU CAN!”

There were a lot of things the Lord Commissar of Operation Caribbean would never say in front of a class of Cadets or for an inspection of guardsmen, but this once Zuhev had to admit he didn't think the sneer of the long-eared monster could be equalled by a human, including the nobility he had met so far during his career.

There was always something about Eldar arrogance which made the megalomaniac behaviour of Governors and Adepts lacking when compared to the xenos the forces of Operation Caribbean had killed by the billions.

“Have you ever heard about the tale of Jaeger Day the Ridiculous?” Zuhev asked instead of entering a contest of insults with the xenos pirate. “He was one of your Admirals in the Battle of Pavia, and was captured alive to be judged for the crimes of desertion, mutiny, piracy, devastation of human-inhabited planets and more. He believed we would not find an appropriate punishment for him since according to him, we wouldn't have the guts to throw him into the Sea of Souls in the traditional 'salvation pod'.”

No need to inform this scum that Lady Weaver had personally encouraged von Schafer to not use this method of execution, not because the insect-mistress believed the abject traitor didn't deserve this death, but because she wanted his soul to be judged by the God-Emperor, not swallowed by the abominations of the Empyrean.

“He was thrown into a basin of small burrowing spiders, which ate him bit by bit, laid their eggs inside his body, and poured just enough venom into him to cause extreme pain without letting him lose consciousness. Several times we plunged him into a tank of chemically-altered promethium to disinfect him and begin the process anew.”

“Is that supposed to scare us?” Another Eldar taunted him. “Sliscus did far worse for his amusement every week!”

Zuhev knew he was supposed to give them another chance at this point, but why bother wasting his saliva? It was evident the pirates, be they humans or xenos, weren't going to speak no matter what he did. Maybe the Inquisition could have broken them, but the Holy Ordos' Acolytes were working on the far more interesting specimens captured at Commorragh, and had neither the personnel nor the motivation to spare for the irredeemable Pavia scum.

“Good. Then I'm sure you will be delighted to hear that you and every prisoner aboard this ship have been marked for execution by Helspiders.” The first noises of the eight-legged arachnids were heard in the distance, and instantly all the long-eared xenos and plenty of the humans by their sides stopped smiling. “They come directly from the pits of Commorragh, and have received orders to play with their prey for a long time.”

Several pirates tried to put themselves back-to-back and form something that could have passed as a defensive circle if one wasn't too demanding regarding the quality of the 'tactic'.

It was not a stupid idea, but against beasts which had played the role of 'entertainment' in the Commorragh arenas, it was just not going to be enough. The first adult Helspiders and a cohort of young ones stormed inside the execution chamber, and soon the pirates began to scream for mercy and beg for someone to spare their lives.

“I'm surprised we didn't send Hoth with them,” said one of the Commissars of the Desaderian Field Army as the screams began.

“Hoth is still in Inquisitorial custody,” Zuhev informed his counterpart, “and I'm told the Ecclesiarchy has a very unpleasant fate in mind for him too.”

**Segmentum** **Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Mars**

**Forty-two hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Fabricator Locum Decimus Osmium-Five-1111**

Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 rarely visited Olympus Mons. There were several very good reasons for this, but the main one was his extensive yearly schedule. The Fabricator Locum of the Adeptus Mechanicus was the second-highest ranked authority over all Tech-Priests after all, and this implied a lot of major and minor responsibilities.

As a consequence, Decimus could only come to the largest Forge Temple of Mars for ceremonies and sessions of the Martian Parliament these last few years. He was far too busy to make the travel for other reasons, and frankly, as Noosphere communications improved more and more, it wasn't like his physical presence was really needed save if you really suffered from paranoia to the point of insanity or were doing things you really, really didn't want to be caught doing.

Today was the exception, evidently. But when your only superior summoned you, the answer was always 'yes', no matter how pressing the other concerns in his Forge and among the faction he led were.

Besides, as rumours about the destruction of Commorragh and the consequences it had on the Adeptus Mechanicus spiralled out of control, Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 wasn't going to protest that the situation didn't warrant it.

In a sign that they were living in unprecedented times, the meeting was not done in the heart of Xaerophrys Esvikom's inner sanctum, but in the holy avenues of the Temple of All Knowledge where the binaric hymns sang the praises of the Omnissiah.

“We have received astropathic communications from over ninety percent of the secessionist Forge Worlds,” the Fabricator-General began bluntly once the protocol salutations were over. “They profess to having seen the error of their ways and been granted visions of how hurtful their actions were to the Adeptus Mechanicus as a whole.”

Even if the Fabricator Locum didn't know Xaerophrys Esvikom personally, Decimus would have taken the secessionists' contrition with a heavy dose of scepticism. Seen the error of their ways? They really could have used something more believable...

“I'm sure the timing of the Twenty-Fourth Fleet's discoveries and the Chosen of the Omnissiah's tendency to find STCs has absolutely nothing to do with their willingness to return to the fold,” the second highest-ranked figure of Mars didn't bother hiding his disgust beneath a veil of logic. “All the major Forges are included?”

“Yes,” replied his superior tersely. “Artemia Majoris, Atar-Median, and Milhand are leading the pack, with Jerulas, M'khand, Orestes, and Tancredi not far behind.”

A full data-package was transmitted, and Decimus smiled at the magnitude of the defections which were about to strike Nova-Terra. Ninety-one point three percent of their Forge Worlds defecting back, yes, but all the notable and specialised centres of production were on the list. In overall productivity, it was closer to ninety-six, maybe ninety-seven percent.

Given that it was the secessionist Tech-Priests which were maintaining their fellow rebels' armies and fleets, it stood to reason that the rebellion of Segmentum Pacificus was about to experience very difficult times.

“I intend to be magnanimous,” Xaerophrys Esvikom spoke without a trace of irony. “They will send us tithe-fleets, the size of which will be determined by the Algorithms of Condition Eta.”

Somehow, Decimus didn't think 'magnanimous' was how the secessionists were going to call the terms proposed. Most likely they would say it was outrageous robbery or furious tyranny.

“Should we not be worried they will refuse the terms? They have seceded and broken their oaths once, what's to say they won't do so again?”

“Because I will write on their pardon treaty-wafers that as long as they respect the upper-percentiles of Condition Eta, twelve percent of the tithed Tech-Priests and Mechanicus personnel sent with the tithes will be selected for an entrance petition into the Nyx Mechanicus.”

Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 had frequented with Xaerophrys Esvikom for several decades, and as such was rarely surprised by the deviousness of his superior anymore. This was one of the rare exceptions, and the Fabricator Locum was humble enough to admit his mechadendrites dropped for a few seconds. This was just...deliciously logical and productive.

The secessionists – or ex-secessionists now he supposed – had to know their reputation on Olympus Mars was only slightly above that of the Moira-aligned hereteks. Therefore their best chance to ingratiate themselves and restore their reputation with someone having all the latest database and template discoveries lay with the Mechanicus. If they didn't want to become irrelevant very quickly, they had to send the tithe-fleets and respect the high quotas set by the Fabricator-General.

“I see. I can certainly support this course of action in the next session of the Parliament,” whose next assembly was certain to be advanced a lot for evident reasons. “Have the template discoveries been confirmed?”

“Yes,” Xaerophrys canted in an impressively sophisticated manner. “Some Phaeton Magi found a new type of Fusion Reactor template. A Ranger Skitarius of Ryza discovered an interesting variant-schematic of a multi-hololithic strategium. The Gryphonne Mechanicus dug hard and were reprimanded for certain questionable military decisions, but they found a template for an energy blade. Accatran troops managed to secure the plans of a Hive-sized complex intended for agricultural purposes. Mezoa's upper priesthood is ecstatic as their part of the expedition seized plans for a new type of mining ship. Our Tech-Priests evacuated a damaged Standard Template Constructor and the Apis-pattern Tractor. And of course the Chosen of the Omnissiah, via her own troops, her Tech-Priests, and her formidable skills, found the templates for a small model of the M31 Omnissiah's God-Engines, an aerial supremacy atmospheric fighter, a new model of space elevator, an esoteric force field, the recipes and cultivation methods necessary to produce a beverage called 'beer', and a starship-mounted electromagnetic gun.”

“That is quite the list,” Decimus canted, impressed. “Yet there were some concerns about Cawl?”

“The Radical was involved in the discovery of the God-Engine's template,” Xaerophrys Esvikom admitted with evident regret. “But I have given instructions to all my agents onboard the Twenty-Fourth Fleet to be on their guard and advise the Chosen of the Omnissiah on the proper conduct to adopt when meeting this problematic Archmagos.”

“In this case, I would suggest repairing the damage inflicted to Twenty-Fourth Fleet as fast as redeployment orders allow.” Decimus pointed out. “We can't allow Cawl to gain influence at Nyx because it looks like we are taking the discovered templates and not caring about what happens in the Sector led by the Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“The Twenty-Fourth Fleet will be repaired and reinforced,” Xaerophrys Esvikom swore. “I have also begun to make the preliminary moves, which I pray the Parliament will support, that thirty-five brand-new Hoplite-class Destroyers and replacements for all Knights our allies lost in the Battle of Commorragh will be delivered to Lady Weaver at a date no further in the future than five years. The repair and replacement costs of Legio Aeris Aestus' and Legio Defensor's God-Engines will also be covered by Mars and its Forges.”

This was a bounty of metal and advanced technology few Tech-Priests were ever offered to lead in their Quests...and it was absolutely deserved, given the magnitude of the victory.

“High-priority macro-analysis must be pre-ordered to assess whether the implementation of a full Forge World in the Nyx Sector or a nearby region of space is viable in the long-term. The possibility of the legality of assigning Legio Defensor to the Chosen of the Omnissiah has to be ascertained at once.”

“The Chosen of the Omnissiah has a vote in the Martian Parliament,” the Fabricator Locum thought out loud. “If the number of votes to her name is increased from one to twelve and you grant the Regency of one of the Tharsis Forges we confiscated from the Moirae sympathisers to her, the legality of tying Legio Defensor into her service should pass the Parliament without difficulties.”

Some arch-conservatives would scream, no doubt, but they would have screamed anyway, Decimus thought as he examined the impressive databases of what the forces of Operation Caribbean had seized.

“Maybe we should give the Chosen of the Omnissiah certain privileges where Warrants of Trade are concerned.” Lady Weaver had apparently captured nine or ten Rogue Traders serving inimical interests, and her order of two Ambition-class Cruisers for the shipyards of the Ring of Iron had not gone unnoticed by his agents. “And I think beginning construction projects on a very large order of Astartes ships, equipment, machines, and infantry weapons may be...prescient.”

“The Logis Strategiums will study the possibilities,” his superior answered. “But for the next day, I want you to use your influence and connections to make sure that the logical location to repair the Gloriana *Flamewrought* is the Ring of Iron and nowhere else! I want the repairs done here, under our supervision and our best ship-builders!”

“Of course, Fabricator-General,” Decimus Osmium-Five-1111 acknowledged dutifully. “Like you, I have no wish to let this great gift of the Omnissiah fall into the clutches of Kar Duniash or Bakka. However, I fear we will have to adapt the dockyards of some of our Arks for the *Flamewrought*.”

“Do what you have to,” the Fabricator-General commanded. “You will have at least several months, and the possibility, slim as it exists, to build more Gloriana Battleships is worth contemplating.”

“Do you really think the other members of the High Twelve will allow us to build even one of these magnificent leviathans of the void?” Decimus thought he could be forgiven his scepticism. The *Flamewrought* was back and that was an accomplished fact, though given how many of the existing ships of this 'class' were in mothball promised hellish politicking to keep this one in active service. But a brand-new Gloriana promised to be something far more unpleasant to fight for.

“I'm rather sure they won't,” Xaerophrys Esvikom admitted. “That's why I will ask someone else.”

“Lord?”

“I have been summoned to the Imperial Palace,” Decimus Osmium-Five-1111's eyes opened wide as he processed the words and felt his heart drown in joy. Because there was only one being who could do this summoning. “I will make sure to ask this question...and many others.”

**Acacia** **Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Forty-six hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Battle-Barge *Europae***

**Captain Valerian Benlio**

Valerian watched the peaceful face of the Space Marine who had been one of his battle-brothers. In death, the ravages of the Red Thirst had faded rapidly, returning the afflicted to something much closer to an angelic appearance.

“Only in death do duty and the curse ends,” the Blood Angel whispered, slightly altering the old adage known to every Space Marine. The Sanguinary Priest by his side grimly nodded.

“The help of the Nyxian Biologis experts has been of great use,” acknowledged the gene-specialist, “but once the bloodlust has dug its claws into our psyche, there is little hope of freeing any battle-brother from it.”

“And the benediction of Lady Weaver doesn't work on this Flaw.” Unlike the Black Rage, there had never been much hope the Red Flaw was going to disappear, but with several battle-brothers succumbing to it in the middle of Commorragh while the Shield of Angels soared on golden wings, the possibility of having this curse disappear in another miracle was reduced to zero.

“Wrong,” the Sanguinary Priest disagreed, “I'm confident it does. The Librarius has analysed the battle-records, and given the violence and the number of the Chapters of the Blood present, the number of battle-brothers afflicted by the Red Thirst is extremely low. As per the most recent records, there have been approximately one percent of our battle-brothers suffering the most extreme symptoms of the Red Thirst; between the invasion of the Ruinous Power of Excess and the ugly fighting against the xenos, it should have been at twenty percent or more. The Librarians have offered the hypothesis the psychic component of the Red Thirst has been extremely weakened.”

“But it confirms the Red Curse is a genetic problem of our line, not a Warp-fuelled sorcery like the Black Rage,” the Blood Angel stated. And as much as it was good news since they knew where the problem lay, it was also a source of consternation. The gene-craft which had been used to create the Space Marine Legions was not something understood extremely well after all those centuries, even by the most dedicated Chief Apothecaries and the Archmagi of the Biologis Division.

And of course, developing major gene-labs to investigate the problem, never mind curing it, was always enormously expensive and a security risk, as the Ruinous Powers often tried to cripple the investments and brains behind the attempts before they were successful.

“I know there have been talks between Baal and Nyx about the Red Thirst,” the Sanguinary Priest tried very hard to inject a shadow of optimism into the conversation. “Between Bacta and some new components extracted from insect environments, we may be able to cut the numbers of our brothers succumbing to the Thirst down even further.”

“By the feathers of our father, let's hope you're right,” Valerian was tired of losing good veterans and promising young blood to this cursed bloodlust. Space Marines were meant to fight the most dangerous things in this galaxy, not be culled on operating tables as they bayed for blood like Khornate lunatics. “I will take my leave, unless there is more?”

“Go, brother,” the Sanguinary Priest shook his head, “you will only be able to watch, and no one should see a battle-brother in such a state.”

The Blood Angels' Captain thanked him silently and turned away, leaving the rooms used by the Apothecarium to examine the victims of the Red Thirst. Alone, Valerian walked through the corridors of the *Europae*, and wondered about the vast implications of everything he had heard. They were already huge. For all the bad news delivered about the Red Thirst, the Chapters of the Blood were fighting in a far more disciplined manner, and without the Black Rage afflicting anyone, the sons of Sanguinius were no longer asking themselves how to husband their strength before, during, and after a campaign. The ranks of the Chapter of the Blood were slowly replenished year after year, and despite the losses the contingents which had deployed in the Webway had suffered, the Blood Angels and their Successors had far more strength available than they had before the Battle of the Death Star.

Obviously, it hadn't exactly decreased the popularity of Lady Weaver among the battle-brothers tracing their gene-lineage to Sanguinius himself...

The thin smile of Valerian Benlio which had materialised after thinking this quickly disappeared as he approached a large door guarded by two Devastators and two Sanguinary Guards. Contrary to the near-totality of the Space Marines resting in the rooms of the Battle-Barge of Baal, only one of the Sanguinary Guard belonged to his own Chapter.

“I must speak with our guest,” the Captain saluted.

The Blood Drinker commanding the group of four saluted back.

“You may enter, Captain. I believe you know the procedure by now,” indeed Valerian did. The Sanguinary Guards would enter with him, and provide protection and what could be bluntly called 'mental vigilance' against anything their 'guest' might do.

The unlocking procedures were done with a prompt celerity no Techmarine could have found fault with, and the Captain was introduced to the presence of a person he had never imagined meeting a few days ago.

“Captain Benlio,” Chapter Master Raphael Yarhibol lowered the book he was reading on a table to meet his eyes. “I was not expecting you to return so soon.”

“There have been complications and changes,” Valerian didn't say more; the other Astartes didn't need to be aware of all the complications his presence engendered. “Many of the Inquisitors who have arrived in the last hours have begun making overtures to relinquish you and your entire Chapter into their custody. As such, the possibility of transferring you to Baal to stand judgement for your actions is almost non-existent by this point.”

Truthfully, the Blood Angels' Captain had always thought this was a very remote possibility. Pavia, for all its celebrations and improvised parties, was a system experiencing what could be summarized as an extremely strong anti-chaotic quarantine. Only the supreme commander of Operation Caribbean or an Inquisitor's seal could give you permission to leave the pirates' graveyard without being shot at by the thousands of warships mustered, and the people who had this type of power had so far only used them so sparingly one needed only one hand to count them, and finished with fingers to spare.

“I would prefer not to be judged by the Inquisition,” the Chapter Master of the Sons of Sanguinius, once upon a time prestigious Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, now infamous renegades who had joined the cause of the Nova-Terrans' secessionists, stated with the dignity one expected from a Marine of his rank.

“The Chapters of the Blood would prefer to avoid such an unfavourable outcome too,” not because the Blood Angels were fond of the Sons of Sanguinius Chapter; the shame of having one of their own Chapters go renegade, the first ever since the Heresy, and especially one of the most trusted 2nd Founding Successors, had provoked many ugly scenes in the halls of Baal and several homeworlds. But trials of the Inquisition were rarely fair things, and often led to the Inquisition discovering secrets and past 'exploits' no Chapter wanted the rosette-wearing executioners to learn of. “But the last communication we had with Chapter Master Malakbel placed him far north of Baal, destroying several greenskin scrap yards. He would need at least ten months to reach Pavia. The Inquisition will not wait that long.”

Assuming Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper would have wanted to wait for the Lord of Baal in the first place. Valerian was pleased to affirm their Chapter Master was extremely popular in Ultima Segmentum, courtesy of ten thousand victories won against impossible odds to protect the Imperial citizens from dangers varying from mere mutants to abominable threats. But many of the very choices which had led to him being popular had also resulted in public clashes with Inquisitors.

“In the end, this leaves you with two choices. The first obviously is to be tried by the entirety of the Chapters present in the Pavia System.” Michael Yarhibol immediately grimaced, and Valerian wouldn't claim the Chapter Master didn't have reason to do so. While it had worked at Pavia for the now renamed Heracles Wardens, the ex-Alpha Legion warriors weren't the Sons of Sanguinius. The former had waged their own private war against xenos and the traitor-sworn humans, remaining loyal to their ideals but never formally part of the Adeptus Astartes. The argument they had given all for the Emperor was justifiable, and most of the rank and file had long atoned for not joining the loyalists openly against the Arch-Traitor and his hordes. Moreover, they had risked total destruction in the Battle of the Death Star, and the panel of Chapters present had been ready to take their sides over the Black Templars'.

Obviously, the aftermath of the Battle of the Death Star wasn't Commorragh, and the Sons of Sanguinius hadn't been mauled by the apocalyptic battle in the Port of Lost Souls; their fleet had arrived too late, only a single Strike Cruiser had fired its guns in anger. The renegade Chapter of the 2nd Founding had definitely broken its oaths by seceding with the Nova-Terrans, and the Chapters present were far less likely to take their side against the Black Templars in this instance.

Envoys had been sent to the First Founding flagships, and the replies had not been promising if one was in favour of mercy. Valerian understood; with the return of so many Salamanders and Raven Guard aboard the *Flamewrought*, all the Space Marines were reminded how dangerous the seeds of treason could be when left unopposed.

“And the second option?”

“You pledge your life and those of all your battle-brothers to Lady Weaver and the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, and pray they think your battle-prowess compensates for your talent to convince yourselves your oaths can be bent until they don't stand for anything true.”

The tall Astartes flinched, before bowing in regret.

“We deserve that,” Michael acknowledged after a moment. “In hindsight, we should have deserted the secessionists' side the moment the Black Rage was removed from our hearts and minds.”

Valerian was ready to admit it would have been a far more optimal scenario, yes. At least it would have convinced many Inquisitors and plenty of high-ranked figures the Sons of Sanguinius genuinely reacted to the 'miracle' of the Battle of the Death Star. Whereas right now? Tens of thousands of Astropaths were shouting through the void how many Forge Worlds were abandoning the treacherous realm of Pacificus and asking the mercy of Mars. And since the warriors of Chapter Master Michael Yarhibol had clearly not been reacting to the 'Commorragh Miracle'...

“I choose the judgement of Lady Weaver. If our fate is to be judged, let it be by the Angel who bears the weight of Sanguinius' legacy.”

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Seneschal-Consort Wei Cao**

The golden wings were superb for propaganda vid-casts and flying on a battlefield, but they weren't practical at all in the confines of a warship. Despite the width of the great bed, the symbols of the God-Emperor's power reached far beyond it, and should their wingspan spread a few more centimetres, they would hit the walls.

In addition to these problematic features, they were far too luminous if someone who wasn't their owner wanted to sleep in the same room. Taylor could influence how radiant they were while she was awake, but for the moment this self-control slipped when she was asleep, and the means to temporarily vanish the angelic appendages had so far eluded the General of the Imperial Guard.

Wei silently watched the face of her lover-mistress for several minutes before clearing her throat. As much as she wanted to let her sleep, there was much to do today, and the signs of extreme exhaustion from the Battle of Commorragh were no longer visible.

“Basileia, a glorious day of celebrations and political meetings awaits you!”

To this noble proclamation, a pillow was sent flying her way. Wei evaded with the ease of long practise.

“Leave me be a few more hours,” the old and immature remark was uttered under the blankets.

“The Captain-General respectfully asks for a moment of your time in two hours,” the Seneschal-Consort announced to the woman who at this moment didn't really look like the model of angelic sainthood thousands of pilgrims prayed to day and night. “And I don't think you want to have an audience with him in your nightclothes.”

A second pillow was thrown, this one missing her by an even larger margin than the first one.

“And if you're fast, I think we will be able to take a warm shower and have breakfast together.”

The blankets flew along with much of everything which had been left on the large bed of the commander's quarters, and in a flash, Taylor was embracing her. It was warmth and light. It was like every one of her regrets and fears was banished in an instant.

For several seconds, there was only kissing and savouring the moment. “You should have started with that,” the purr made her heart shiver with passion.

**Battleship** ***Son of Victory***

**Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal**

“No Baron, the official position of the Admiralties of Bakka and Kar Duniash is that Admiral Augustus von Kisher died a hero in the Battle of Commorragh. There won't be any court-martials or judicial procedures launched against him or any member of his faction.”

If it had been left to him, Oskar wouldn't have recommended this outcome. Yes, von Kisher had died facing the xenos, but his behaviour had not exactly been without reproach, and the recordings of the squadrons' councils of war which had survived the carnage were more than sufficient to begin serious investigations.

It seemed that Admiral Augustus had been loyal to the Imperium and his own ideas, but not exactly gifted when it came to developing the tactics and strategies which would lead to reducing the immense casualties each of his 'victorious battles' caused.

If the man had been a mere Captain, an Inquisitor would probably be in the process of purging him and his entire family, and likely the cousins and the second cousins for good measure. But it was a senior Admiral's reputation at stake, and it appeared the Admiralties had no wish to transform the aftermath of Commorragh into a circle of court-martial. Like most organisations gathered around the purified orb of green and blue of Pavia, the Imperial Navy had proclaimed everyone who perished against the Eldar and the Arch-Enemy were 'Eternal Heroes of the Imperium'.

“There will probably be sanctions in the years to come,” Baron Galahad Lagos of House Krast, his drinking partner for the evening, commented in a very sober voice despite having finished his second amasec bottle. You could say a lot of things about Knightly nobles, but they held their liquor.

“Oh undoubtedly,” the Admiral reassured his officer. “I would not be surprised if the building of most of the Invincible-class Fast Battleships and all the 'fast units' in construction at Kar Duniash and Bakka stopped within the year.”

On this it didn't matter if his report praised the Fast Battleships or not. Above Cruiser tonnage, the coalition of Imperial forces which had invaded Commorragh had lost one Blackstone Fortress, four Battleships, six Fast Battleships, and two Heavy Cruisers. The big problem was that all the 'standard' Battleships had needed hundreds if not thousands of hits to be reduced to impotence before being destroyed by the enemy, and it was a fatality count after four separate engagements. True, there were three other Battleships, one Grand Cruiser, one Battlecruiser, and one Bombardment Cruiser which were so badly damaged they were going to need years of repairs, but none of them had been battered as easily as von Kisher's ships were.

“Still, for the moment our biggest problem is trying to assess how bloody our victory was and how big the spoils of war are,” Reuenthal confided to the Baron. “I'm a bit jealous we aren't included in the Pavia divide, but I suppose that since we arrived dozens of hours after Sliscus was dead, neither my Battlefleet nor any of the reinforcements have a leg to stand on there.”

Maybe Augustus von Kisher would have been arrogant enough to try. The fact the imbecile had tried to contest the leadership of a Living Saint had spread everywhere across the Battleships and the other elements of the gigantic fleets arriving night and day at Pavia. If the Bakka-born Admiral guessed correctly, von Kisher had tried to stake a claim on the prize money despite not having done anything to deserve it. It had failed, and while there would be no courts-martial for him, there would be no praise either.

The different battles in the Port of Lost Souls had been an extremely violent series of unrestrained destruction and deliberate slaughter. One Blackstone Fortress, four Battleships, six Fast Battleships, two Heavy Cruisers, thirty-two Cruisers and Carriers, eight Strike Cruisers, thirty-three Light Cruisers, six Heavy Frigates, eighty-four Frigates, seven Corvettes, one hundred and ninety-nine Destroyers, five thousand one hundred Starfighters, fifty thousand and three hundred Atmospheric Planes of all types, forty-eight 'Dragon Armours', five Macro-Transports, two Titan-Transports, one Forge-Ship, one Fuel Transport, and sixteen Transports and auxiliaries had been lost.

The list of crippled and extremely damaged ships was just as long and possibly more worthy of tears.

But the Eldar threat represented by Commorragh had been devastated, with seven hundred seventy-seven xenos Battleships wiped out and one hundred thirty-six billion monsters removed from existence.

“Von Kisher aside, the Navy has little to be ashamed of, Admiral,” the red-bearded Baron emptied another large glass of amasec. “House Jeffers, our long-time Rogue Trader allies, can't say the same. Did you know one of their daughters was one of Sliscus' concubines?”

“No,” Oskar confessed, “I did not. I mean, I read the list of the so-called 'Rogue Traders' who were neutralised by the Tech-Priests, but I believed it was because some of them had stolen the Warrants of Trade and simply assumed the identities of the owners as well.”

Given that one of the nine 'Rogue Traders' had been captured after an assault upon an Eldar Cruiser and seen giving commands to a band of Commorragh-born murderers, this was not an unreasonable assumption, he thought.

“No, these were actual Rogue Traders that Sliscus convinced to work for him one way or another,” Galahad grumbled. “Oprah III Jeffers really is a daughter of House Jeffers, no Warrant-owner but still. I contacted my King to ask for explanations...I'm sure there are a lot of astropathic exchanges between Chrysis and First Duke Jeffers as we speak.”

This was a huge political scandal, even for an Imperium full of them. The Jeffers Rogue Traders were the dynasty who had founded the first Knightly Houses during the Great Crusade, in the shape of House Krast and other long-extinct Houses.

Oskar promised himself to re-read the list of Rogue Traders awaiting Lady Weaver's judgement. There were nine of them, so if they were truly all what they pretended to be, it was going to make the trials of the other heretics and xenos look like minor gossip at best.

“I hope for House Jeffers this was just a bad daughter led astray by a malicious xenos,” because otherwise the Inquisition and the Historical Revision Units were going to have field days. Treason of this magnitude could only be erased by the most dreadful death sentences.

“So do I, so do I,” the Baron attacked the lower end of his third bottle of amasec with enthusiasm. "Hum, it looks like there's a Custodes shuttle in flight. I wonder where it's going...”

**Battleship** ***Enterprise***

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

Anubis, as Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, was a High Lord of the Senatorum Imperialis, and most security measures in the known galaxy were deliberately and drastically lowered for him. As such, he only had to pass through four company-sized Guard formations, over forty Space Marines, the large Heracles Warden's Dreadnought with a pirate hat, and at least several hundreds of crewmen and Tech-Priests to reach the woman he had requested an audience with.

Obviously, Anubis Excelsor approved. After what had been done to Slaanesh, the remaining Ruinous Powers were going to want all participants involved in the Death of Excess dead, preferably under atrocious circumstances if they could arrange it.

“My condolences for Constantin Valdor,” the golden-winged General began as they met in a large mess hall which appeared to have been transformed into an art gallery in the days after the Battle of Commorragh.

“Thank you,” Anubis replied politely. “He will be sorely missed.”

The Bell of Lost Souls' operators had been ordered to ring the greatest bell a thousand times for the First Captain-General, after the thousand chimes which were given for the martyrs of Commorragh.

“I fear we will never see his equal again.”

“'Never' is a very long time,” remarked Taylor Hebert. “But I will admit, the way he died alone overshadows most exploits of the Heroes of the Imperium. I don't think we can inflict a repeat of Commorragh to the Ruinous Powers.”

“No, we can't,” pretending otherwise would be foolish and arrogant in the extreme. “We have offered rewards to anyone who can give us information about the location of the *Apollonian Spear*, the Captain-General's personal weapon. According to the elite psykers we have in our employ, it was not destroyed in the last moments of the Battle of Commorragh, and we dearly wish to bring it back to Terra.”

“I will inform some of my agents to look for it,” the woman his liege had empowered promised, “but it is a big galaxy, as I'm sure you are aware.” The eyes which met his gaze were strong and defiant. “Do you want me to continue searching for the Objectives we missed at Commorragh?”

“Concerning the whereabouts of the Khan, by all means,” it was the only major Objective which had not been successfully carried out, “His return and that of Dorn alone would in all likelihood convince many Traitors to rot in the Warp Storms while we purge the galaxy of their ilk. For the minor objectives, don't bother. Kharsaq El'Uriaq and Aurelia Malys are now beyond your reach; if we have to eliminate them, it will be the Adeptus Custodes and the Anathema Psykana which will go after them. The Hourglass of Sand Screams and the Book of Unblemished Ecstasy have been stolen, I fear, by agents of the Arch-Enemy or the murderous clowns of Cegorach.”

“And the Sslyth? We have barely captured thirty-six of them in good condition...”

“Oh, the Sslyth were a distraction to force the parasites' attention away from the objectives which truly mattered,” this was the truth...sort of. “But I will arrange the transfer of your scaly prisoners to my ship.”

Sslyth or no Sslyth, the fact the Imperial forces under her command had accounted for all but one of the major objectives and five of the minor ones was something to be praised.

“You are more than welcome to have them,” the insect-mistress answered as they admired the sculpture of a Space Marine breaking slaves' chains while trampling several Eldar in the process. “I suppose you want to supervise the transfer of the gene-seed of the Third Legion to Terra too?”

“We intend to leave approximately one thousand and two hundred in your custody actually,” the light in the parahuman's eyes changed for an instant into something that looked like disbelief.

“You're not serious. That is a horrible idea.” The Lady of the Nyx Sector bit her lip. “The senior High Lords will scream that I am rebuilding an Astartes Legion, and we have no idea what sort of underhanded slave-bond the Naga has available to enforce his control over the gene-seed of the Third Legion.”

“Rest assured we will keep the High Lords in line,” Anubis Excelsor assured her. “As for the Third Legion's gene-seed, the Naga has lost all psychic allegiance over it, though I won't deny allowing the founding of a Chapter under your watch will be a necessary test to see if we can really use this gene-seed in later Foundings.”

“All right,” Taylor Hebert conceded after a few seconds, “but I have neither the ships nor the heavy equipment to arm them. Infantry weapons and power armours are fine, recruiting operations on a few planets is no problem, but in the next several years I am going to be busy building up Battlefleet Nyx and our other space forces to make sure the Ruinous Powers don't do a Commorragh in reverse.”

“There is an Astartes Founding in the works, the Thirteenth I believe.” This was hardly a great secret; several High Lords had been pushing for it before his departure. “My Tribunes will order the Third's Successor, Dorn's legacy, and the Salamanders' second Chapter to be included in the military build-up.”

“The Salamanders?” Weaver regarded him with a strange expression.

“Oh, they haven't approached you yet? My mistake. Forget my last words.”

The woman who had fought the Queen of Blades grunted, and Anubis knew this wasn't something she was going to forget.

“We are going to transfer you a team of gene-specialists to help the Apothecaries and Magi Biologis you already have on hand,” this would serve a dual purpose: both helping reverse the genetic degradation affecting so many gene-lines of the Space Marines, and serving as a laboratory of research and improvements away from the Throneworld where certain parties wouldn't be able to ruin everything. “It will be led by one of the most renowned experts at our disposal, Jayus Usha-Devi.”

His name clearly meant nothing to his interlocutor, but then this was not a field which regularly made the headlines in the propaganda broadcasts.

“And in exchange?”

“In exchange, we want you to look for Blanks and build cadres of the Sisters of Silence, and research the possibility of refining Custodes- and Blank-usable variants of Bacta.”

“That sounds acceptable,” the golden-winged, black-haired woman said slowly. “But the Magi and the other Biologis specialists will need at least a Custodes to test the result of their work.”

“I will send three of the Ten Thousand to Nyx. Officially, they will be there as emissaries and bodyguards. Unofficially, they will serve as liaisons...and buyers for things which mustn't see the light of day.”

The parahuman woman looked at him with a suspicious gaze, and once again the Captain-General counted his blessings the Emperor had made this dangerous being more stable and less willing to go on a galactic rampage. Scenes like Commorragh were fine if precisely delivered at carefully regulated intervals; a decades-long Crusade at this intensity wasn't.

Fortunately, the 'Living Saint' – the Ecclesiarchy's decision should not be long in coming – had many anchors to keep her stable and loyal, and Anubis knew from his Tribune their liege wished to add a few more as precaution.

“Officially too, I can tell you that His Majesty is very pleased by your actions, and has given permission for you to be donned in Auramite-coloured power armour like we are," this one saw him receive a chuckle in return; with the *Angel's Tear* in repairs, the insect-mistress was clad in crimson power armour today. “You can keep the Auramite bullions,” the statue obtained at Commorragh had quickly been destroyed and melted down into one of the simplest forms of existing currency. By law, this Auramite should be delivered to Terra, but this time an exception would be made. “And most strategic metals you aren't contractually obligated to sell to the Mechanicus and other parties.”

The Golden Throne knew she deserved it for her victory over some of the most dangerous beings of this reality and beyond.

“We will transfer a Falchion-class Battleship into your command, as well as ten stasis-sealed bottles from the Imperial cellars,” the message he had received told him the parahuman would know the significance of this 'Champagne', even if he didn't. “Then there is a last formality. Kneel.”

Neither Anubis nor she knew it at this moment, but it would be the last time Taylor would do so formally before years in the future on the Throneworld.

“In the name of the Master of Mankind, Ruler of the Imperium, Protector of Humanity, Lord of the Astronomican, and Guardian of Terra, I, Anubis Excelsor, Captain-General of Custodes, formally recognise you as Peer of Terra, Baroness of Pavia, and Duchess of Commorragh, Lady Weaver.”

The Astartes of the Dawnbreaker Guard and the troops of the Fay 20th who had waited at the other end of the chamber roared in triumph.

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**11th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**LELITH HESPERAX/AENARIA ELDANESH**

'**THE QUEEN OF BLADES'**

**ANCIENT ELDAR WARRIOR**

**OMEGA-EXTREMIS-LEVEL WEAPON MASTER**

**ALPHA-PLUS-LEVEL PSYKER**

**FLEE ON SIGHT**

**REWARD: 1.5 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF BLADE-MASTER CONFERRED, IMPERIAL LAURELS, HYMN-CLASS PARADISE STATION**

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**The** **Webway**

**The Black Library**

**Seventy hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**The Queen of Blades**

For a few seconds, Aenaria was tempted to stop the Great Harlequin of the Laughing Shadows as he disappeared in the meanders of the Black Library holding the Book of Unblemished Ecstasy in his hands.

It wasn't that she didn't trust what the White Seers would do with it; it was just that in her opinion, that thing was best destroyed.

Unfortunately, in hundreds of thousands of cycles, the Queen of Blades had never found a way to permanently destroy this damnable object. Every time she severed it and reduced it to ashes before throwing it into a sun, the disgusting thing came back, somehow.

And no, contrary what its name suggested, it wasn't something created by Slaaneshi-addicted worship-slaves. This was a far more ancient mistake, one of the many problems she had culled from the Aeldari race before it could contaminate the rest.

“The humans have a saying I believe,” Cegorach began like he could read her thoughts. It wasn't possible, of course, but she knew it amused the God of Folly to try. “Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it over and over again.”

The former arena-mistress of Commorragh snorted.

“You should use all the Masques to carve this saying in bright gold letters into the crystal chambers of every Craftworld's Farseer. I think they would benefit from the reminder.”

Aeldari and God stayed silent on the balcony of the Black Library, the former drinking and eating, the latter watching the theatrical rehearsals of his followers below. There were over four hundred Harlequins, and through divine inspiration all were directly assimilating the new tale that was *The Fall of Slaanesh and the Return of Hope*.

“I hope you know what you're doing, Cegorach,” the Queen of Blades addressed the deity when her surroundings were cleared of food.

“Do I? The threads of the future are changing so fast trying to predict where something is going to fall is more an exercise of luck than skill.”

“You are trying to add deities to our Pantheon,” Lelith Hesperax declared, completely unamused. “The last time our race tried this, we tore reality apart and murdered half of the galaxy's population.”

There were still hundreds of long-lived races in the galaxy that considered shooting an Aeldari on sight to be a holy deed. Morathi and her cultists had really managed to instil undying loathing in too many hearts, and contrary to what certain Asuryani claimed, no, the Asuryani and Drukhari would never stop paying for this horrible legacy.

“You know what my first plan was,” the Great Harlequin reminded with a smirk.

“I have no wish to become a Goddess,” Aenaria replied in a tone far colder than she had intended.

“Then I will try my chances with the Aspects which might in time become Atharti and Addaioth.”

There was little power when the names were uttered. For all the present and future beings which would swear allegiance to these fledging entities, at the moment they were far too weak to present a challenge for someone of her level, never mind being recognised as true Gods.

“Do what you want,” who knew, it might produce interesting results. Though she had more hopes for the shard of Carnality than the shard of Vainglory. The first had been taken by a young survivor of Commorragh and had understood the horrible reality of how badly the descendants of the Aeldari were outclassed when it came to standing and fighting against a worthwhile enemy. Kharsaq El'Uriaq on the other hand had not participated in the Battle of Commorragh and, from what she had heard, remained as arrogant as ever.

“Your followers of the Cult of Strife will need to make a choice.”

“I've renamed it the Cult of Blades.”

“Oh? Well, your Wyches will still need to make their choice. Given how much your ranks have swelled after Commorragh, you can't leave their souls unprotected for long.”

Sometimes, it was really a pain when Cegorach spoke in his reasonable not-so-crazy voice.

“It will be Atharti, let's not waste my time pretending otherwise. I will not let anyone of my Cult get filled with more pride. That is not conducive for humility and teachings of sword fighting. Unless you have another potential God up your sleeves?”

“You know very well there isn't...unless you wish for them to worship a human.”

Aenaria raised a mocking eyebrow.

“Even by the standards of the jokes you use, the repercussions wouldn't be funny...at all.”

“Says the Princess who crowned a human as Empress of the Aeldari...”

The Queen of Blades snorted a second time before rising from her seat and jumping onto the balcony's rail.

“Send the Wych I have chosen to be my Arena Ambassador to Nyx. Please.” The veteran of the War in Heaven turned her head a last time. “What do you intend to do with the ex-Avatar?”

“Now, now! I intend to let that stay a surprise...”

Aenaria huffed and jumped. One hour later, the Queen of Blades had left the Black Library and returned to her favourite activity: searching this dangerous galaxy for dangerous things to challenge.

**Acacia** **Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Pavia**

**Ninety hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Captain Victor Tovar**

As they waited under the blue sky populated with white clouds, Victor marvelled at the power of the God-Emperor. If someone had told him that, a few days ago, this world's atmosphere was violet because it was saturated with a filthy xenos weapon, the Fay Captain wouldn't have believed him.

The flowers and grass were trying to provide some green once more, the wind ruffling his uniform was pure and cold, and the waters of the streams nearby were a melancholic shade of blue-green that he was willing to bet the countless pilgrims arriving each day would sing the praises of.

The Fay 20th's survivors waited. Two thousand and one hundred six men and women had perished in the Battle of Commorragh, reducing the core of the veterans of the Battle of the Death Star once more. What was the saying of the Salamanders again? Into the fires of battle, unto the anvil of war? Well, the Fay 20th had once again passed a trial by fire, this time against the Eldar and the shock troops of the Arch-Enemy. Two hundred and fifty-five veterans of past campaigns out of nine hundred sixty-nine had gone down fighting weapons in hands and warcries on their lips. Two Captains, four lesser Tech-Priests, three Commissars, and plenty of supporting forces which had never been placed as frontline troops but that the Enemy had slaughtered anyway.

And their Mechanised Infantry was one of the best regiments, if their low rate of casualties alone didn't prove it. The evidence was plain to see as on the large avenue prepared by the Mechanicus machines, regiment after regiment took position. Many had been reduced to single companies, and some even less than that. The banners of the Sherlock 5th were carried by young boys who had certainly been sent away before the hammer fell, for there was not a single frontline survivor of their effectives. The same was true of the Nyx 31st Siege Infantry. The Patton 23rd Armoured, the Montgomery 5th Armoured, the Fay 24th Mechanised Infantry, the Pandia 71st Reconnaissance, the Alamo 4th Penal Legion, and the Buxenus 7th Mechanised were also nothing more than a flag and a group of dazzled survivors. And plenty more regiments were shadows of themselves.

But at the moment a great luminous light arrived above their heads, it was extremely difficult to be gloomy, and a torrent of cheers rose to the heavens as *Her Celestial Highness' Moth* *Lisa* descended onto the parade grounds of Pavia in a rain of gold, and Victor Tovar wasn't ashamed to admit that like many guardsmen and guardswomen he kneeled at her arrival.

Then applauses doubled as the servo-transmitters of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the vid-broadcasts revealed the General and a single Custodes on the gigantic moth's back.

Maybe something important was said in the minutes which followed. Victor thought it was possible. But between the guardsmen shouting, the Skitarii singing something in their incomprehensible language, the blaring of the God-Engines and the Knights who stood like tall mountains, and the rumble-hammering – no one was going to call those noises song – of a Dreadnought wearing a pirate hat and a muscled Squat, no one would know for sure.

Lisa the Moth landed, right in front of a gigantic altar of sugar, fruits, and other delicacies which had been prepared for her, and the largest insect of the Swarm showed absolutely no intention to wait before savouring her 'reward'.

People nonetheless cheered harder, as Lady Weaver jumped on golden wings with the Custodes. The ruckus was properly deafening, with the forces of Operation Caribbean providing only part of the rejoicing; between the Commorragh reinforcements, hundreds of thousands of former slaves, tens of thousands of Navy personnel, pilgrims, Frateris Templar, civilians of a thousand worlds, representatives of a hundred Forge Worlds, the massive parade ground had an audience which looked like a proper victory triumph.

“WEAVER! WEAVER!”

“PRAISE THE LIVING SAINT! PRAISE THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

The Custodes slammed the butt of his long spear against the ground, and something approaching a respectable silence came. Their General was the first to speak.

“In the name of the Emperor of Man and His Imperium,” the golden-armoured woman proclaimed, “I claim this world. I bring light into the darkness, justice into the lair of lies, punishment and death to the traitors. I claim the world of Pavia for humanity and the Golden Throne of Terra. AVE IMPERATOR!”

“AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR!”

The words were ancient and formal, but they were always spoken when it was time to add a new planet to His Most Holy Majesty's Imperium. By this law, by these traditions older than a thousand generations, Pavia belonged to humanity again.

More shuttles descended, disgorging Tech-Priests and staff crewmen carrying full coffers of medals and awards. But as the Custodes removed his helmet and spoke, they were mostly ignored.

“Many have perished to accomplish the Emperor's Will in the fires of Commorragh,” and the silence of millions was complete, as there was something about these two figures shrouded in golden power that told you that yes, these were two people who had been blessed by the Master of Mankind. “And last but not least to fall was Constantin Valdor, First Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes. In memory of him and all those who died fighting by his side, spiritually and physically, I beseech you for ten minutes of silence.”

Titans bowed. Knights went immobile. The endless ranks of infantry went to one knee, with only the banner bearers standing as was the tradition. For ten minutes, nothing moved, no one spoke. Then the Basileia of Nyx, their Angel of Fay, spoke again.

“There was once a city on our homeworld,” and Victor like millions heard the truth in her words, “that stood at the Carrefour of many old human civilisations. Even after time and sieges had torn apart most of its ancient beauty, it still stood in the hearts and memories, spears of light in the morning, crimson tears in the evening, gold and rose marble, Queen of the Cities.”

Somehow, it was like hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, took an even larger breath in before the final revelation.

“The name of this city was Constantinople, and in honour of Constantin Valdor, I propose the new capital of Pavia to be built here, and to be given this name again, so that no one will forget the memories of hope, wealth, trade, victory, and wonders it gave to humanity. What do you say?”

“CONSTANTINOPLE!”

“CONSTANTINOPLE!”

“AVE IMPERATOR! CONSTANTINOPLE!”

Her Celestial Highness' Moth Lisa sang loudly seconds after, but while there were more deafening cheers, Victor believed it was to ask for more food and more caresses.

**Abbess-Brigadier** **Galatea Dumas**

The ultra-large moth's head looked at her with curiosity before deciding that there were more important things to do in life, like salivating over the container of large blue fruits which was being elevated to her altar.

The beautiful song's melody resumed, sign to the masseurs and Tech-Priests assigned to her good health that Her Celestial Highness's Moth Lisa was ready to receive the petting her status deserved.

Galatea had the greatest difficulty not bursting into giggles at the behaviour of this particularly aristocratic-like insect.

Of course, the next seconds forced her to focus on the control of her brand-new red power armour. It would be extremely humiliating to fall over while the gazes of all the surviving Atlantis women were on her, plus those of a few thousand Astartes and millions of civilian and military witnesses.

It took long seconds, but she arrived at her destination, a few feet away from the Living Saint, without tripping or in some other way ruining her image.

Taylor Hebert watched her a long minute without saying anything. The only sounds were Lisa devouring her fruits and flags clacking in the wind of Constantinople.

Several silver spiders were running at the Living Saint's feet. Her armour was a vision of golden perfection. The radiance in and around her was so pure it was dolorous to watch for too long.

“A Primarch's life was saved. A STC template was found. For all your small numbers, it can't be denied the Division of Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius more than earned the accolades which future generations will give to each of their names.”

The Abbess-Brigadier stayed kneeling, acutely aware how much blood had been spent to achieve their two most glorious exploits in the Battle of Commorragh.

“You came to me a few hours ago, Abbess-Crusader, asking that, in exchange for the ownership of the template, I gave you the right to create a new Order of Frateris Templar in the Nyx Sector itself. To my greatest regret, that won't be possible.”

Only an iron will allowed Galatea to not gasp or make any sort of aghast sound. Behind her, some of the other women were not so silent.

“There are many things I like about the Frateris Templar,” continued the Living Saint. “And there are many I am not comfortable with. Thus when the Ecclesiarch himself sent an astropathic communication stating that I could act as I wished, I decided to change what was intended a bit.”

The Nebula's Shard, the unique sword of the Basileia-Saint, was drawn.

“I am surrounded by Astartes, as I think my guardians can attest.” There were loud chuckles all around. “So it can't be argued that the men of the Imperium have their chance to protect me and ascend to the status of the Emperor's Chosen. But no such formation exists for the women. As a consequence, I have decided that there will be no Frateris Templar in the Nyx Sector. There will be the Templar Sororitas, and they will have the privilege of organising selections on the worlds of Nyx and Claire 47 to select their warriors.”

The relief she felt at the words was indescribable. For long moments, Galatea felt ashamed to have doubted the Living Saint, and felt tears pouring down her cheeks. When they faded, she realised her power armour had changed; on the left shoulder pauldron was a magnificent rose of silver, while several fleur-de-lys symbols of the same colour and metal had appeared everywhere on her armour.

The silver spiders which ran down to rejoin their mistress were certainly no strangers to these alterations.

The crystalline sword was placed on her left shoulder.

“I name you the Order of the Silver Rose, and by this sign you will protect the innocent, defend those who cannot defend themselves, heal the loyal and the just, be steadfast in the preservation of humanity's future, and always, always, remember that as long as evil is fought in all its forms, good will be victorious in the end. Will you to pledge your life to this cause, in the name of the Emperor of Man, the Ecclesiarch, and my ideals, Legate Galatea Dumas?”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness. On my life, I swear it.”

**Author's note**: And so it begins...the true start of the tale of TTL Battle-Sisters. Which, as might be slightly hinted, are definitely not the Adepta Sororitas of a certain timeline.

If you think there are POVs missing, some issues about Commorragh which haven’t been solved, or councils which must absolutely be shown...you’re possibly right. This Interlude was the first, there will be another before Taylor’s return to Nyx.

To give credit where credit is due, Thanathos helped a lot with the Skaven-speech of a certain POV. My competences in megalomaniac screeching were sub-par, and some modifications were required.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption