Weaver Option Update 03 July 2020

**Extermination Interlude**

**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 She-Who-Thirsts.*

*If evidence was once more needed of how far we had fallen, the survivors of this massacre and the Webway factions not involved in the fighting were simply unable to give temporary 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 thought to be minimal casualty lists.*

*It made, no matter your point of view, 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 their invasion had been able to kill one hundred and thirty-six billion Aeldari, a number that most Craftworlds could decide was decidedly low compared to the real level of destructions. The death count of mercenaries was more nebulous, but the winners spoke of eight hundred and eighty-plus billion non-Aeldari disintegrated.*

*The fact over thirty billion Drukhari and Asuryani veteran 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 wipe-out of all strategic reserves, be they warriors, metals or esoteric artefacts. Seventy-five percent of all ship-building and ship-repair infrastructure in the entire Webway was confirmed destroyed. The percentage of skilled workforce in expert artisans, architects and machine-builders was 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 cost. 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 was sure to end in a lot of dead Craftworlds and billions of disembowelled Aeldari.*

*The exception was the Queen of Blades. But then this 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 the post-battle shock would pursue all survivors for 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 busier fleeing through the 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 something more than a potential source of slaves.*

*And yet it was clear, contrary to what some idiots said, things couldn’t return to the ‘good old days’. The Old Gods and the immensely powerful being 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. 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 millions of Aeldari disunited across the galaxy. And 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 will end, you will have one minute to comply. I advise you to make the correct choice...if your heads have still something 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 would investigate several days later would find 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 taught 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 fell to his knees, screamed like a little girl and agonised 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 EXAGGERATING! The crowd has been roused by several ‘aquila-preachers’, and they are proclaiming this is the Hour of the God-Emperor’s Judgement or some nonsense. They are millions of them! Send the Valkyries, we leave 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 my 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 seconds 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 in ashes.*

*Terra-Nova and the Segmentum it ruled over would have likely fallen anyway, that much I think we can both agree. The rumours of a full STC Database had already brought the hundreds of Forge Worlds tying the party line to the brink of defection. Urdesh and a few other worlds had already returned to the fold, 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 there 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 ammunition’s production, construction dockyards and all the things one absolutely has to be in possession to wage a war. People too often tended 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 anymore which mattered, wasn’t it? It was* faith*. Pacificus was without contest the least religious Segmentum of the Imperium, but even its citizens weren’t immune to the appearance of a Living Saint and the millions of ‘miracles’ the elimination of Slaaneshi cultists in a single hour represented.*

*To add to what already promised to be the disintegration of a two centuries-plus old nation, Weaver was not a fanatic like most people who are imbued with part of His power are. Yes, I met two of them before her. Both of times, they had received Wrath. My opinion at the same time 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 perfectly adapted to them.*

*Unlike them, the Angel of Nyx wasn’t fond of oppressing billions of civilians, launching Wars of Faith right and left, and if she massacred billions of xenos, it was difficult to argue that Commorragh hadn’t it coming. It also helped she was rather attractive for 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 hindsight as the Nova-Terra Empire collapsed at its foundation 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 staring right at them, that they could challenge the monsters and win.*

*It was without precedent, and I was really surprised few of the Old Guard who had once known the Primarchs didn’t realise the implications of that. 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 were 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 their private 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 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 Angels’ 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 this 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 decorations, rewards, and celebrations the Battle of Commorragh generated among the Imperium of Mankind was properly phenomenal. The seven Stars of Terra and the two Lions of Terra were what the history manuals emphasized, but there were plenty of commemorative medals, street naming, 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, proved 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.

**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 Divine Inquisition didn’t blame Lady Weaver. First, because it was imprudent to blame someone who could remove your head while five kilometres away by sending a spider directly through your throat in your sleep. Secondly, because it wasn’t the fault of Lady Nyx that Wuhan stayed a place of indulgence and nobility decadence.

As had the purges and the massive expansion of the Penal Legions proved, the supreme ruler of Nyx had put an end to most of the problem 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 it was in the Nyx System, a location where the word of General-Basileia Taylor Hebert was law. Outside of it, it rapidly diminished. It was never inexistent, 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 a Sector Lady – was supposed to be what High Gothic called the *primus inter pares*, the first among equal. Thanks to the voluminous libraries Lord Inquisitor Thor 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 economic, military and technologically powerful world in the Sector – probably the most relevant religiously now too – but plenty of star clusters hadn’t 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 times 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 hinted the mistakes of Omsk’s rulers were going to make sure this 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 influence of 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 the modernisation.

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 was beginning and ending with him. The manipulating leader of Wuhan II had thus become famous for answering all the vital obligations of his domains with extreme celerity, while avoiding as best as he could everything that could imperil his grip upon his personal wealth and the political support of his fellow nobles.

The Inquisitorial Acolyte did not believe he revealed an important secret by telling Hongfeng Cao’s support among the middle and the lower classes was typical of a lazy, gluttonous, amoral and debauched aristocrat. To be accurate, it was between ‘very low’ and ‘nearly non-existent’. But the rotund Governor controlled the PDF and the SDF with men loyal to him and him alone, and Lady Weaver’s economical and political moves had not looked 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 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 his talents – blinked before chasing off these thoughts. The general politic of the Nyx Sector was something far over his pay grade, and utterly dangerous to involve yourself into. It was best to concentrate on his mission.

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

The true Gerard Barlow? The man was enjoying the hospitality of Arbites cells back somewhere in Nyx Tertius. This was what happened when your own superiors and the Nyx government had the evidence you had pilfered in 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 looking like vaguely a huge red bird with all the frippery and the red ribbons worn 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 disgusting 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 of his political allegiance were apparently well-founded.

“And miss the party?” The false-Envoy of the Adeptus Administratum chuckled. He had not to fake it a lot; with the evidence he hoped 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 in chains to answer some pointed questions to Judges and the senior Inquisitors of the Nyx Conclave.

“Yes, we couldn’t have that, could 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 had definitely to keep a satisfied smile hearing this succession of falsehoods. Judging by the new standard Nyx set...bah, why was he thinking about it, again? It was evident the Wuhanese nobles by themselves were unable to understand the signification 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 resources, which meant the Governor had once again changed the appearance of this ‘honour guard’ in the last month. Crixus preferred not to think much about the sheer costs involved or the morale of the soldiers forced to dress into 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 imagined to. 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 worse – though undoubtedly the organisers of it would beg to disagree. Between the pillars of marble, large tables overflowed with plates of precious metals filled with delicacies and crystal glasses regularly replenished by highly-expensive liquors. 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 for.

In this atmosphere of depravity, where piety and self-control had long 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 on a very large throne naked, the path to reach him being crowded by rutting bodies and a spectacle of orgy he had never seen before. Assuredly the ruler of Wuhan Secundus had kept a smiling silver mask to hide his face, but between his small size 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 great 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 descending 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 than 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 were clearly the wrong build to be servants; half of the bodies, while decidedly not fat and of a clearly young and vigorous constitution, could not hide once naked the first signs of drug abuses and several years of physical debauchery.

An imposing on one of the leading men’s hands allowed Crixus to recognise 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 made this realisation when the group all revealed 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 said and the members of the nobility sometimes 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 was a massacre. Daggers cut throats and inflicted lethal wounds. Arteries were opened, and the carpet and the decoration began to be tainted by blood. Crixus saw Xu Cao plunge his weapon in the chest of his half-brother Zheng Cao, Hongfeng’s Heir, and this wasn’t the only fratricide playing out, as judging by the imprecations and the screams of betrayals, the assassins were children far in the line of succession themselves.

He wasn’t defenceless, as an Acolyte. One of the rings he had on his left hand was a digi-weapon, but it had only two shots, and he expended them rapidly 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’ qualification were to let enter that many assassins without so much a whisper of alert.

Fortunately, the profusion of forks, knives, cups and everything useful for an orgy meant he had a profusion of projectiles at his disposal. Unfortunately, his predilection had been more in blunt, close-range weapons, and given the size of the daggers and shot swords the cultist-assassins had, it was not prudent.

All he could do was gaining 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 past them. If he managed to hold 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 to their attackers, and one by one the drunk aristocrats were cut down like grox to the slaughter. Crixus saw the Governor himself leave his throne and call his guard to save him, only to be viciously stabbed by more than 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 the Acolyte heard sounds coming from the cultists’ throats as he killed two of them that no human throat should have made.

And then, in a moment he would not forget until he died, all the attackers shrieked inhumanly.

“**NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!”

This 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 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 it wasn’t the definition of a miracle, what was it supposed to be?

**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 one.

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.

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 ceded and artworks older than thousands of Empires were thrown into the void.

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

The boarders came soon enough. Gigantic Mon-keigh warriors slammed in ungracious torpedo-like objects and poured into the gardens and the 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 common 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 scream of dying Asuryani rose to the skies. She did not hear She-Who-Thirsts’ laughter, and far from rejoicing her, it inflicted her more sorrow. 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 their enemies had mustered in a single location to punish the warmongers. She heard their battle-cries.

“DORN LIVES!”

The vision darkened and another appeared. This time it was Arach-Qin which was under attack. It was burning, but not under 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 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 thrashed 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 world 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 souls or those of any Aeldari.

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

The gold thunder struck at that realisation, but Maea felt her spirit stone rapidly protect her from this unoriginal psychic attack...an attack which had not been one, she realised immediately. It was more an echo, a ricochet or 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 in 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, said 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 ‘brotherhoods’ of Legionnaires Astartes – which ended with a depressing regularity in betrayals and murders – the hereteks were worse in all aspects.

But for all its secrecy and its tendency about executing the Captains who proposed too little in exchange of their services, nobody doubted Sha’are Mavet was a very minor Hell Forge. The zone where it could be found wasn’t strategically valuable, or had 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 be 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 those of the Gloriana *Harbinger of Doom*, respectively Lord Vigilator of the Black Legion and the second most-powerful warship of the Black Fleet, were warranted.

A middle-sized Battleship could have fought his 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 it 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 exact, 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 to so far 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 one million more, Iskandar felt a non-negligible amount of pleasure at the idea of plundering the planet and accelerating a bit more the decline of the Third Legion.

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 urge something dreadful was nearly upon them intensified.

“Raise the Gellar Shields to full power, and sacrifice two of the wretches to boost their power,” 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 explosion so powerful the improved ethereal-augurs had no need to be particularly precise to reveal what had happened. The up became down, before becoming up again. Warships were thrown randomly across the system like obsolete toys the main players weren’t interested to amuse themselves anymore.

It was the apocalypse, and Sha’are Mavet was in the middle of this...psychic annihilation. The Gods were fighting, 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 these ones 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 it was going to stay that way in the short-term. 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 presents his compliments, 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 genitor could have done the deed if it was truly definite. 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 moved a centimetre since the start of their Exile. It didn’t move. 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 Andes Primus had all these three 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 hell hole no one cared anymore once the ‘glorious victory of Lady Weaver’ had been announced!

Long 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 it may not be true for long – but it wasn’t that 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 upon it, he would have only to look at his ‘command’. Once it had become clear the vicious Eldar had no wish to dance again with the Imperial Guard and the other forces of the God-Emperor, thousands of men 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 brought something 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, defeat the 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 there than waiting until old age and demobilisation found them.

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

“This better be not one of this damned Corelli’s security exercises...”

To say he and the senior officer of the Andes 17th Line Infantry, one Flavio Corelli, were not friends was something of an understatement. This 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 has stopped the whispers among the Wuhanese regiments he didn’t know what he was doing. That his azure-clad forces had not 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 to the command centre of Fort Mack, Colonel Corelli was already barking orders to the cogboys and some Atlas operators.

“Situation!” Tao Shujia barked as he entered the war room and the red uniforms facing him, though the stone-faced looks he received in return weren’t exactly going to make 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 this area had been utterly blasted away and well...most of the glutton-mosquitoes and the 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 implosion 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 from their last passage, or decided it’s time to mount a new offensive.”

“With due respect,” Colonel Flavio Corelli almost spit 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 we have no military presence into.”

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

“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 imploded, 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 into 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 onto a planetary atmosphere tended to ruin a bit the environment – and the irony of building something it knew had no common points with the Callax of origin 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 he wanted to admit it openly or not, the planet Callax was about as useful for his purposes as the first fortress to be granted the name.

Once the power of his Goddess had vanished, all sort 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 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 his 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 Rank 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 it 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? One 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 around 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, this 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, it was now impossible.

Many thoughts in its essence were in disbelief the positions which had been 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 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 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 name of the Gods was 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 grumbled above its head, but the Gods didn’t destroy Fazar’nzlath’hesh. Its oath had been accepted. Lucius, his 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 effect 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 they had at least to be over five thousand, and the sheer numbers of skulls piled up on every 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 watch the utter lack of morality of the Drukhari in these actions.

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists had also been able to observe 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 per 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 enslavement of more species, be they humans or non-humans.

Or at least this had been the model they followed until a few days ago in the Dark City, 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 attempt 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 come after. Yes, fortunately, because as he had a good belvedere to watch the rocks’ size, the Imperial Fists’ Primarch didn’t think 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 said during the Great Crusade, and there would no good 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 at. 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 approaching anything like 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 gone to the stars in M34, and had so much enjoyed his visit on the neo-Egyptian planet that he had decided to bring home a large quantity of objects, jewellery and trophies 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, the gold and the stone statues, but the neo-Egyptian vibe had been if anything increased. Large paintings of deserts bisected by great rivers had been transported there, 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 sets 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 peaceful effect on the minds, and it was accentuated by the stone frescoes, the fruit trees which looked like palm trees, and some squares of oasis greenness where white seats and jars awaited those who had been given the right to enter this part of the Basileia’s demesne.

It was 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 nobles or Cartel heads eager to inhabit domains which had been denied to them until a few years ago.

Of course, it 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 of rejuvenation specialty, and two other buildings were repurposed for security goals.

Still, the Luxor Palace had been used by all parahumans as a place where they could rest and not be assaulted by large crowds when they ended their day. It had 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 the whining and the 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 lied with the astropathic messages of Wuhan and Andes which had just arrived on her table.

“Somehow, I can’t help but thinking 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 tranquility. “Taylor has additional powers now, but I don’t see how she could convince heretics to fall dead several hundred light-years away from Nyx.”

The Minister of Justice grimaced but didn’t retort anything. Dragon was right...and yet Missy had the presentiment 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 said. “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 this planet into something useful.”

“Revenge against the glutton-mosquitoes and the swamps?” Missy asked lightly, not hoping for any confession, but to her surprise, Dragon vigorously nodded.

“I won’t deny this is one 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 sent to 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 this point,” Missy said as she sent 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 in reconnaissance at every opportunity.”

“In fact, 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 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 was 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 said. “She has often found 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 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 told finally 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 his 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 could, and I think we have seriously to entertain 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 spoke. “According to all Noosphere reports and the vox, we have less than thirty dead here on the planet due to this strange ‘death of heretics’ ray’ and nine-tenths of those who perished were monitored either by the Inquisition or the Arbites. Judging by the way this catastrophic assassination was mounted, 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 an affair, 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 been pulled out at an instant’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 over 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 did say 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 very clear the whole reason we have so many high-profile funerals in the short-term future is because our dear friend the Governor had organised several nights of orgy, debauchery and whole things I prefer not to think too much about.”

Seriously, Missy had known the Wuhanese nobles were only bowing to the Nyxians’ in wealth and resources, but had these aristocrats a drop of decency in their entire bodies? Missy was rich, and even her culinary and clothing weaknesses 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 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 difficulty 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 away for the better part of the year, and frankly for all her political skills, the Wuhanese-born noblewoman was not necessary good when it came to rule on her own. Would she be better than ninety-nine percent of the local nobility? Yes, but given how low morally 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, 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 by the end of the week in control of the Wuhan-Cao Cartel, 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 do. I am 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 some decency they would have never participated into.”

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 totally 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 laughed for the better part of twenty minutes too, and she was still smiling when she entered the room where the two members of the Mechanicus Council she had been able to summon at such a short notice were waiting.

“The victory rumours 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 be blame her. “There’s no hope to contain them.”

“Are we going to try?” asked Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund with a cant mostly used in triumphal celebrations. “Because I think we need a bigger budget if we decide to do it. 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 being passed.

“No, I don’t think it is wise to try,” the Magos-Draco said 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 had 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 to begin with.

“We will probably to give a holy day to the workers,” Lydia-Beta Rosamund proposed. “As long as the flesh will not have properly celebrated, production levels will decrease to unacceptable levels.”

It was always funny how the Mechanicus managed to rationalise the need of 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 to sigh. If an Archmagos Prime, one of the highest-ranked Adepts in the Nyx Sector, was beginning to think in terms of ‘holy’, the situation had truly grown out of religious control.

“I’m afraid the consequences are all too clear,” Dragon stated. “All the 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 super-inflation wave 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 a long time the potential sources of ore, metal, money and other benefits Operation Caribbean might seize if the fleet won one-sidedly.

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 put 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 Taylor had already shattered it before launching her attack of Commorragh. Two million of 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’s price to those Magi and Archmagi who wanted to purchase it, which at seven hundred thousand-plus Thrones Gelt the kilogram made a very neat pile of treasure.

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

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 who was counting? There were Mechanicus Explorators who spent their entire life without finding more than fragmented third-hand copies in 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 divine worshipping, because there was no alternative.

“I am going to begin working upon them,” the Mistress of Ships promised. “Without any study, however, I can 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 made sure 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 the two others she could almost not believe what she was telling them. “For all our industrial efforts, there is a limit 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 see. 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 after, the Salamanders were so indebted to the insect-mistress that not letting them come to Nyx would be the next best thing to impossible.

And of course that left completely aside 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 scarred-face 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 years. Their superiors had been idiots, especially their Colonel. The lasguns were they were given had not enough ammunition. His regiment was from Saint Tantalus’, 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 standards. There had been no warning, no drill, no special training to inform them what was waiting for them.

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

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

All of this didn’t matter anymore. Travis and all the survivors of the infantry regiment had failed to take their own lives while 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 of the most common opinion among their slave-battalions.

Like many men and women before them, the guardsmen of Saint Tantalus’ had hoped at first 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 louder they could scream when the hours of punishment came and how much work they could do before the last embers of life gave away.

“ON YOUR FEET MISERABLE VERMIN!” an overseer burst into the small wardrobes 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 watch too long at these weapons, and all sort 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 an ‘Underhive’ beneath it. The fanatic wouldn’t have liked being ‘corrected’, and the punishment for opening your voice when you weren’t invited to – which was ‘almost never’ – was not codified, but each punishment was sufficiently awful to discourage everyone watching it to try again.

They were chained to each others, 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, he will make it quick’.

Something landed on their right as they climbed a long, impossible large stair 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 the 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 warm 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 HAD ARRIVED! THE TIME TO PRAY 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 it terrified 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 which were singing too as they were lowered centimetre after centimetre in the furnaces of Sicarus.

There were lakes of blood, and from them crawled *daemons*. And this time, an impulsion on the chains tying 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 agony 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. Over 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 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 man-thing!”

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

“**WHO DARES**?”

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

“**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 protection apart and reveal the daemon which had been hiding in it. “**YOUR POWER IS NOTHING! YOUR GOD IS NOTHING**!”

For the first time, Train 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 brown-furred rats.

And this was when the chains of slavery broke. Everything which restrained he and the thousands of other slaves broke. The collars became dust. The ankles and wrists tainted metal fissured and liquefied without causing them harm.

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

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

And under 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 projected 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, it 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 MY WORDS!”

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

“EVERYTHING THE WORD BEARERS HAVE SAID TO YOU...IS A LIE! THEIR GODS ARE JUST PARASITES WHO WANT YOU TO SUFFER AND SCREAM FOR THEIR AMUSEMENTS! LONG AGO THEY BANISHED THE TRUE GOD IN FEAR 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 HIS BLESSING, AND BY THIS YOU WILL KNOW OF HIM!”

And somehow, it felt *right*.

“WHEREVER YOU FIGHT AND PRAY, FIGHT THE FALSE GODS WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT!” the Skaven screeched in pain before continuing. “THERE 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 ANARCHY WILL WE DEFEAT 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!” thousands of slaves answered.

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 of good company. Presently, the Phaerakh was very much aware it wasn’t one of those.

“As much as I think his words are true...I think I don’t want to hear him for a while. Jatakh, please teleport him out of my Word 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 stopped.

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

“This can’t be denied,” the Mistress of the Nerushlatset Dynasty replied. “And I only fear he is 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 said, “she has proven...resourceful in the past, and if we tried to corner again, I fear we would lose a couple of World Engines.”

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

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

In hindsight, the survival of the First Sword-Bearer wasn’t alas 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 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 for her engrams to think about this issue. “And find an adaptable commander for them. It is almost guaranteed it won’t work, but there is no reason to not try our best.”

One needed to be only successful once, in the end, and if the Nerushlatset was successful killing their longest-living enemy, the prestige won would be extraordinary.

“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 the Greater Abomination and the sheer number of fatalities, the debased descendants of the Aeldari would need a long, long time before recovering to be a minor threat. Her dynasty would rebuild and strengthen itself faster than them.

“You know Destruction-Overlord, 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 genial plan once again led us to a great victory.”

The supreme ruler of all Necrons didn’t honestly 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 hadn’t another Triarch nearby who could chastise verbally the poor strategist.

Judging that one image was far clearer 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 his 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 millions of biologic 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 sense 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 was outnumbering them too much, and if they had an irreplaceable 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 to speak with his subordinates, Szarekh was forced to write his questions and his 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, armed 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 calculated courses 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 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 preferences 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 had not, in his opinion, be ever mentioned 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 playing this trick 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 extremities, 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 his officer’s cap, and noticed it was now painted in blue and serving as pillow of a woman he was pretty sure was the unofficial wife of the 3rd Company 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 come a Saint had demolished Commorragh and sent billions of Eldar straight to hell – or wherever the long-ears went when one was 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.

“You are very lucky,” the Commissar told him, “I am in 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 did or worse, I would have to organise the firing squads for the entire regiment and possibly more.”

Yes, at second sight, 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 blurted out loud.

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

“Good!” The smile of the discipline officer was a thing terrible to behold. “I’ve spoken with the surviving Ministorum Priest, and he agrees there were a lot of impious words and disrespectful expressions where 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 Eldar 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 it wasn’t an overestimation of the problem.

“Am I in the habit of joking?” The Commissar’s gaze made him shiver and Raj rapidly 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 a 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 kind had climbed to one hundred thousand.

It was an impressive number since the goal was to find salvation in 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. If 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 a 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. Without surprise, 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 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 one 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 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 by 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 worse, it was now closer to the first lights 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 they sure by Khaine 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 hundred 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 word 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 in 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 utility to Cegorach anymore, then.” Given the state of Commorragh when they had left it, it was extremely questionable if there was something 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.

“No. Our God is convinced one doesn’t abandon a blade just because the dance has changed.” The Harlequin then changed brutally the subject. “Do you know what is killing the Asuryani and your other cousins?”

To that question, Aurelia didn’t need a lot of brainstorming to find the 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 trusted so much the Haemonculi. 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 going to disappear 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 times-low. Since rescuing the Goddess was a hopeless task, the Laughing God has explored other options.”

“Other options?” Aurelia felt she could be forgiven to be 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 use tangentially 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 humankind – 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 did, why would be 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, of a matter looking like 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 had not 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 your 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 of emasculation if we asked again. You are thus the logical choice, symbolically and psychically.”

“I have no powers.”

“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.”

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**

**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 something with their voices and hearts. Not for nothing their home was named ‘Ulthwé of the Damned’ or ‘Unlucky Ulthwé’ among countless other disapproving names.

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

So Ulthwé said where it was, enduring the attacks of the Annihilator’s slaves, and the irregular events everyone was participating into were funerals. There were more happy occasions, but they were most of the time dignified and codified to the extreme; that way if they were interrupted by say, a daemonic invasion, organising an expeditionary force or a defence fleet was taking 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 way, every warrior defending this Craftworld was adequately prepared for its own funeral. Eldrad knew this wasn’t true – the black armours were crafted of 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, the ballrooms, the chambers, the 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 had been for too long forced to bottle up their pride and feelings.

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 with robes that any Drukhari of Commorragh would have vigorously approved, such was the amount of flesh they showed. They 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 spirit of the dead, had agreed that this time, they would throw a memorable party.

And at present, the promise was more than upheld. Millions of Asuryani were dancing, singing, and ending for three turns of light and night their self-control, 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 atmosphere.

Ulthwé had never liked the Dynasts of Commorragh and the less said about the pirates they used for 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 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 catching back 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 remained 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.

This was at its 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 feel corruption or something depraved...just joy and something mischievous.

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

“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, to begin with how many refugees the Harlequins had led them 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 in each other’s 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 presentations. 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 each other 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 in rage when she entered the Autarch Council headquarters’ chamber. The Storm of Silence had passed this point long ago, now her 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-“

“Be gone.” 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 reason of my presence?”

The entire audience stayed silent. Good, maybe there was a tiny 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 deployments of millions 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 fight side by side with the dark monsters of the Haemonculi and the Dynasts. This was Commorragh. Commorragh! The place made her remember the debauchery and the order collapse of before the Fall. The further an Asuryani stayed away from this nexus, the better for their souls 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 would inflict upon his worthless carcass.

“You entire expeditionary force which reached Commorragh is *dead*. No one counted the exact casualties, but I would be very surprised if your losses are inferior to 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 ferried 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 seal temporarily the most important Gates, the psychic explosion which surged forth during the deicide has caused critical damage both to Biel-Tan itself and to its population. Here too, nobody had the opportunity to count your losses, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there 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 having led 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 it is forced to decelerate to prevent more 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 of the courtesies. “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 pointed toys unable to do something else than shouting in the dark when the daemons come for your souls. You should have raised your voice against this idiocy, and instead you encouraged it!”

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

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

“Cutting your own throats will not right the wrongs you have done,” Jain Zar replied coldly. “You will earn your forgiveness by mighty deeds and repenting for the disasters your campaigns of arrogance and gratuitous satisfaction 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 vows 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 don’t want to have angry failures. Stand and go obey my commands.”

The three Exarchs and their two youngest 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 rare Shrines to have more than fifty thousand warriors!”

“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 warriors?”

The Autarch who had uttered this rhetorical question had only the time to realise it was his last mistake before Silent Death severed his throat.

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

“Asurmen and I are not going to close our eyes anymore on Biel-Tan’s actions,” 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 who swore themselves to me. Perhaps the other Lords will imitate me. It’s also possible they won’t. But let there 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, it 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 in time to their Craftworld.

Tens of thousands of ‘Space Marines’, and more warships than all the Asuryani possessed; Biel-Tan was going to be destroyed whatever resistance it was able to mount. The only thing left was to save what could be considered salvageable.

“Should you fail to meet your end inside these halls, I will hunt you 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 itself into full-blown hysterical laughter.

It took a lot of time to stop.

The Grand Council and a super-large majority of Lugganath had bestowed multiple honours on 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 believed he was competent enough to know in which direction the wind would blow every time he returned home.

This time he was 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.

“This 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 getting rid of Sliscus, 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 been truly a genial inspiration to negotiate when he did. Otherwise, there was absolutely zero doubt in his head that he would have joined the rest of the dead pirate Admirals.

“This 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 luck of Cegorach himself, he had survived an encounter with a being which was more akin to a hurricane of destruction. 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 for 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 it to call the Battle of Commorragh an epic moment of butchery, and none of them are invalid. The Imperial Guard lost one million one hundred one thousand and six hundred ninety-five men and women 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 the 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 accounting for four million-plus of these fatalities. Everyone suffered crippling casualties. The Frateris Templar, both in space and on ground, were almost wiped out; they lost nine hundred thousand two hundred and seventy souls. The Aeronautica Imperialis paid dearly 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 auxiliaries-serfs bled like their masters; six hundred ninety-seven thousand nine hundred and forty-eight died for the God-Emperor. Rogue Trader’s 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, are of 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 reporting to the Nyx Conclave, 297M35.

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**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 explanations.

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

If they had a pool 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 hear without mistake the billions of Drukhari vanishing forever, their souls devoured by a cruel Goddess on the edge of annihilation.

The humans were mad. It took really some special mental insanity to challenge the creatures which lurked and screamed in the Ocean-That-Wasn’t-One. There 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 and 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 to leave a fatal weakness in her heart and refused to take their threat seriously to 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 mistakes either?”

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

Maybe there was a third certainty to be found as Commorragh was no more and the end of 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 had always one of at least five bodyguards with him, security concerns were a thing – people always gave him a wide berth.

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

People were celebrating in every room as long as they were not on duty hours, 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 be dressed in a parade uniform which strangely looked like the 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 that cheerful when the Inquisition teams are testing thousands upon thousands of men and women to verify they aren’t...any 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 of 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 or recover from their military ordeals. I expect they will restore discipline in one day or two.”

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

“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 attraction proposed 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 with a 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 complementing the numbers.

Except it 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, porno and other sexual-related artefacts in the known galaxy’. Paintings, jewellery, sculptures and of course sex toys, many of them representing diverse parts of Sliscus’ anatomy. This was one was likely going to be sequestered or outright by burned the moment the Inquisitors had 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 piracy career. 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-plus 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 navigation objects in a single location, but even if half of the maps and the artefacts could be used, it was easily a prize worth more than the two million tons of adamantium Lady Weaver had extorted to the Eldar pirate for his life...and the value of that shipment was roughly one point eight quadrillion trillion Nyx Throne Gelts!

“We couldn’t, Chancellor. At least I wouldn’t pretend I see that coming. But Lady Weaver is full of surprises.”

That too was one of the largest 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 of 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 have really that much to offer to the Basileia anymore. Between the bounties of Pavia and Commorragh alone, the Saint will have a fortune in the trillions of Throne Gelts 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. We were at Pavia in an official contract when Vault Four was discovered, and if Lady Weaver decides to hand copies, I do not 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 gone. As the green giants I’ve met a few hours ago proclaim, ‘the anvil must be struck while it’s hot’.”

“Did they say it 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 for them, three of the four Inquisitors present wouldn’t be in a condition to speak with their colleagues...and in at least one case, not much 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 said. 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 was coming from.”

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

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

“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 virtually an unemployment sentence in areas behind the frontlines, since they were charged to explain unexplained phenomena and miracles and when nothing out of the ordinary happened, their specialty was very much not demanded.

And then there were other extremes like Commorragh.

“I won’t make even 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 to 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 an Inquisitor and not against other critical members of the Inquisition, but...” the cloaked woman exhaled rather loudly compared to her usual manners. “I have also 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 back. All my teams found are corpses, some of them looking like desiccated mummies.”

Rafaela grimaced before taking 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 make the request several Acolytes 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 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 the Living Saint wouldn’t let us kill her soldiers, but given how many templates of STC the Mechanicus found, anything we would do against the Tech-Priests would most likely result in a civil war with Mars!”

“Zoe is correct,” Cleopatra Coral 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 disturbing her recovery.

“In fact, I desired 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...make the difference between pure and tainted. It is onboard of *The Great Quest*, so it isn’t like it’s a huge logistical endeavour to organise the shuttle rotations.”

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

“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 fishes over guardsmen?”

“I will look over it,” Cleopatra said.

“On this 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 internal 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 reallocated 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-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 among this list.”

“I wanted the Stryxis to dissect them and see if the rumours of our colleagues generated in the Abyssinian Sector, specifically these things having a psychic matrix 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 this vermin,” the Ordo Mechanicum representative confirmed. “And now I think it’s time to raise the biggest problem 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 fault had not made him grow fonder of them. Failure, in this unforgiving galaxy, wasn’t an opportunity to rethink your mistakes. It had all the chances 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 unstable emotionally had more 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 beginning to make progress.

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

It had not been undefended. The Starfort’s primary weapons had been modified to use sorcery of his conception, 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 battle-station 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, Space Marines were too valuable to be kept on humiliating garrison duties like this one, but there were plenty of sorcerers ready to sell dearly their lives to avoid his displeasure...and his wrath.

Obviously, it hadn’t been enough.

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

Maybe the attackers had tried to erase the evidence of their crime, but if so, time had ran out for them. Out of the Webway, receiving an astropathic message of 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 failed.

It took him nine rituals to have his answers, and the answers he obtained didn’t calm his anger a single moment.

*Ignis.*

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

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

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

Ahzek and Ignis were sufficiently close in thoughts 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 stabbed him and offered 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 and only Plague Marine present aboard his ship gurgled in a voice where contagion and decay reigned supreme.

“Oh really,” the former Lieutenant of the Imperial Navy said, unsheathing his claws and making a parody of salute before pointing one at the gleaming symbol of the Eye of Horus. “Do you really think my ship was diverted in extreme urgency from its raid 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 said pointing at a five-armed thing which had been presented as the ‘Awakened Blight’ or a similar title. “Remind me 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 approved. “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 rusted chainsword eviscerated the speaker from behind and more blood and life-essence were poured on the black metal of the bridge.

“The Warmaster is unhappy to see his confidence in all 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 to be moved or activated had to be reported immediately. Should the False-Emperor’s dogs act to seize one artefact or one battle-station for great 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! This is a good one.” His laughter pleased the sentience of the *Unholy Dominion* 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 lives were to be delivered to him in person.”

Some of the wretches tried to launch themselves at him or to flee, but each one was brutally subjugated. 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 that was because the Marine believed the Despoiler would spare him or a belief 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 in your wildest dreams. 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 was not the space to add a thousand more bodies in the Manticore Square when Kharsaq El’Uriaq passed 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 there, and he hadn’t needed to pay a single one to be there, unlike previous allocutions and other important announcements.

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

Tens of thousands 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 all the last cycle...” 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 bestial-like thunder of satisfaction was almost frightening in its intensity.

“Yes, She-Who-Thirsts, our old Enemy, has received the fate its arrogance and its 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 word was uttered, and it wasn’t for Cegorach.

“Please, Drukhari,” Kharsaq smiled, rising 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 to the Webway and the region of Commorragh is not something I find entertaining.”

It 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 created him plenty of complications, 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 regained with desultory facility and sealed off, preventing dangerous incursions in the periphery of some minor cities.”

Applause doubled on, though on the first ranks of spectators his sight could see precisely he could see many faces 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 that was when 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 filtered.

“She-Who-Thirsts was a cruel and loathsome hag, and her destruction has not given us back any Gods to protect ourselves 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 acclaim was general.

“But we can’t count upon this abominable contest will be eternal,” the Tyrant said 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 advice. 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 suspended 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 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 show orange crystals with black streaks pulsating with energy.

“Those would have never been able to resist the wrath of She-Who-Thirsts, obviously,” there was no use to pretend otherwise; first because everybody would know within the hour it was an enormous lie, and secondly his flock would have wondered why he hadn’t spread them so far 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 to place a claim on your spiritual integrity. The minor drawback, of course, is one has to devote itself 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 the assistance saw it as a very acceptable condition.

They never knew 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 them 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! Forgotten 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 meet any obstacles he couldn’t handle.

And the better 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 commanded 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 who had been in his possession was considered shameful and a legacy to be rid of at the earliest opportunity.

But time had the power to erase a multitude of sins, and by M33, the aura of displeasure spread by 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 to say these Tang vases of fifteen kilograms, superb in their blue-white poly-ceramic where pure sapphires and diamonds shone their peerless lights, 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 when his furious brother smashed it against the window wall, ruining a M33 painting of the Senatorum Imperialis and spreading glass and debris everywhere on the green carpet.

“DAMN HER! DAMN HER!”

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

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

“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 crisis of rage he had been granted the ‘honour’ to watch. In fact, it was entirely possible it was the worst rage crisis, period.

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

Several bottles, most of them not empty, had the wrong idea to be in hand’s range, and followed the Tang vase in an irregular rhythm against the wall. Then it was the turn of the plates and the 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 allowed 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 persons allowed to pass through its defences were handpicked and subjected to some particular exhaustive investigations, but no one knew the reach of the Officio Assassinorum on Terra, and he wasn’t exactly pressed to discover if they were listening to their door.

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

That last remark made him widen his eyes. 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 THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND ITS LORD MILITANTS HAVEN’T 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 his forget a moment the screams of his brother.

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 going 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 QUARTERED FOR THIS ALONE!”

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 devastatingly 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 hadn’t the full picture for the Zion Sector or the two other star-realms under their control, but the first draft 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 or Ladies had suddenly and without explanation died, and a task-force of the Inquisition was in the process of hunting and massacring entire families which had been serving Clan Vandire for generations.

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

“IS IT 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 be likely 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 dispersing over the room a rare collection of M32 jewellery acquired from several Ultramar Chartist Captains.

“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 were shattered. A small sculpture in bronze was used as an improvised hammer to shatter more collections. Beverages spilled 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 for 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.