**Extermination Interlude 2**

**Victory Councils**

*As we have now had many cycles to make our judgement on the issue, it is clear the Battle of Commorragh's consequences, whether good or ill, favoured the Asuryani when viewed in the short and long-term.*

*The death of She-Who-Thirsts was the first crushing defeat the Primordial Annihilator suffered in its endless war to sunder the barrier protecting reality from its horrors, and it was far more total than any, save perhaps the human Great Seer, could have anticipated.*

*The damnation imbued in the number six was purged everywhere, which would have already been a great victory, for it was the former sacred number of our ancestors.*

*But the symbolism went deeper than that. Several expeditions of Ulthwé recovered many documents from the era of the War in Heaven, and several cycles after the Mark we now have enough evidence to confirm some very old hypotheses.*

*Yes, the majestic Old Ones had created a proto-deity of Change first, breaking their own rules when confronted by the Yngir onslaught.*

*With this information, it was not difficult to see the horrible trend leading us to the End of Times.*

*The Corrupted Change had become the Death of Truth, Wielder of Lies, and the Holder of Nine.*

*Then Corrupted War emerged from the oceans of blood and turned out to be more powerful than its predecessor, for the galaxy was burning and armies destroyed stellar systems with weapons that should never have been invented. It won long enough to become the Holder of Eight.*

*As starvation and the Yngir inflicted more and more damage to the psyche and bodies of the children of the Old Ones, Despair and Decay were everywhere. They coalesced and formed the Holder of Seven.*

*And our people, in a folly of self-indulgence, betrayals and Excess, had given birth to the Holder of Six.*

*Maybe the humans would have created the Holder of Five at the end of their era. Maybe not. There are plenty of species in this galaxy which use their gifts inconsiderately, and the victors of Commorragh are by far not the worst of them, only the most numerous.*

*But whether it would have been a perversion of obedience, order, pollution, dark weaponry, or unrelenting destruction which was supposed to be created, it didn't happen.*

*Instead, it was the Beast of Anarchy's turn to usurp a throne. It was the Holder of Eleven, and it was not the fifth aspect of the Primordial Annihilator, but the fourth.*

*The cycle of Chaos, the very cycle many Farseers had believed impossible to oppose, was broken, possibly forever.*

*Each tendril of the Eternal Abyss wanted to prey on a different population of mortals. Instead, it suddenly had to adapt to a thing practising spiritual and symbolic cannibalism.*

*A battle was won, perhaps the most important one. For without hope, many souls would not have found within them the courage and defiance to rise up and oppose the plans of the Primordial Annihilator.*

*But as everyone with military experience knows, a battle is not a war.*

*The Enemy's reverse was temporary. Its hordes would come back.*

*I am Aurelia Malys of Craftworld Ulthwé. We are ready to fight them.*

\*\*\*\*

*The* *Weaverian Pilgrimage was officially recognised by this name after the 410M35 proclamation of Ecclesiarch Pelagius II, but obviously the pilgrims had not waited until this date to lay the foundations of what was going to be one of the most prestigious religious journeys across the entire Imperium.*

*The Age of Silk and Hope, the First Age, had ended by then, but the Weaverian Marvels were still there, each commemorating the victories of Her Celestial Highness Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, Basileia of Nyx, Living Saint of the Emperor.*

*Due to the symbolism and the events of the Grand Victory of Commorragh, the decision quickly imposed itself upon the myriad of pilgrims to begin their holy journey in the Pavia System and its Shrine World.*

*The presence of the Second Weaverian Marvel, the Fountain of Light, made this evident. This Marvel is thrice-blessed, for it is one of the most famous victory monuments of the Battle of Commorragh, the first location where a jewel of Aethergold was enshrined by the Living Saint, and at its heart the Tomb of Constantin Valdor the Hero was built. Billions of Faithful souls would in millennia* *to come abandon their material possessions and travel thousands of light-years to mourn the loss of such a worthy Champion.*

*By itself, it would already be an opportunity to contemplate magnificence incarnate, but the Fountain of Light was mere years later surrounded by the Holy City of Constantinople. The rumours, in this case, are completely true: one could spend a life there, and still fail to see every artwork and fascinating relic of the First Age.*

*After viewing such spectacular displays of saintly beauty, millions of voices pressed for the next part of the journey to include other examples of the Commorragh Ovation's monuments, but the Ecclesiarch remained firm. As such, the Gaius Mausoleum, the Arena of Blades, the Grand Reliquary, and the Commorragh Museum will be memorable parts of one's pilgrimage, but their visit will come after many other Marvels...*

Extract from *Weaverian Marvels*, written by retired Cardinal Greyer, 126M41.

\*\*\*\*

Transmitted: Holy Terra

Received: Astropath 10-XA-03 'Long-sight'

Destination: Kar Duniash

Mission time: [CLASSIFIED]

Telepathic Duct: [CLASSIFIED]

Reference: [CLASSIFIED]

Author: [CLASSIFIED]

Priority: Vermillion

*In the name of the High Lords of Terra and His Most Holy Majesty, the Primus decorations awarded for the Xenocide of the Eldar during the Battle of Commorragh are:*

*Star of Terra, General Taylor Hebert, Nyx, Army Group Caribbean commanding officer*

*Star of Terra, Major-General Helmut de Villiers, Cadia, 9th Division commanding officer, posthumous*

*Star of Terra, Major-General Honorius VII Weiss, Cadia, 12th Division commanding officer, posthumous*

*Star of Terra, Major-General Cassander Gorgias, Donia, 21st Division commanding officer, posthumous*

*Star of Terra, Brigadier-General Steele, Portsmouth, 43rd Brigade commanding officer, posthumous*

*Star of Terra, Colonel Alanes, Nyx, Nyx 31st Siege Infantry Regiment commanding officer, posthumous*

*Star of Terra, Captain Peter Tchuikov, Fay, Fay 26th Mechanised Infantry company commander, posthumous*

*Lion of Terra, Vice-Admiral Maximillian von Schafer, 17634th Ultima Battlegroup commanding officer*

*Lion of Terra, Third Lieutenant Freya Brasidas, Aeronautica Imperialis Tenth Wing*

Praise the Martyrs, for their blood is the foundation of the Imperium.

\*\*\*\*

“*To say the title of Peer of Terra is highly desired is a massive understatement. Of course, so is noting that it is difficult to acquire. To the best of my knowledge, there are only two ways to obtain it: convince ten out of twelve of the High Lords Primus of the Senatorum Imperialis to vote to have it bestowed upon you, or receive it from the hands of an Emissary Custodes. The former is always a daunting task. The latter never give it without the express consent of His Most Holy Majesty.*

*This regulation isn't without good reason, obviously. The title of Peer of Terra automatically gives its holder, whoever he or she may be, precedence over the entire Imperial aristocracy and Adepts in status, save the members of the Senatorum Imperialis. It also provides significant tax exemptions for a Hive-high list of commodities, authorisation to buy and sell top-grade military supplies, and many, many other privileges most citizens of the Imperium can't even imagine in their wildest dreams.*

*Should the High Twelve or His Most Holy Majesty decide to add further titles, the names of the locations added will more likely than not have other tax exemptions, land privileges, and wealth-generating measures added to what is already a divine favour.*

*You will understand, that* *the perks of being a Peer of Terra obviously far outweigh the consequences of attracting the envy and the interested gazes of trillions of souls. Even if it is not inheritable. Even if it the bestower – or the bestowers – of the Peerage can rescind it when they –or He – want.*

*But I will be of no help on this quest. That is something I've failed to achieve*.” Attributed to Star Marshal Alexander Macharius, 670M41.

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“*OF COURSE WE ARE GOING TO PUT A BOUNTY ON THIS LACKEY OF THE FALSE-EMPEROR! SPREAD THE WORD! SPREAD THE WORD THAT WE ARE OFFERING EIGHT HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-EIGHT PACTS, SEVEN TRILLION AURELIUS, NINE LEGION FAVOURS, AND SEVEN PLANETS TO THE ONE WHO ENDS HER LIFE! ALL METHODS ARE ACCEPTABLE! WEAVER! MUST! DIE*!” Words attributed to Hand of Destiny and Grand Dark Apostle Erebus, shortly after the Battle of Commorragh.

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“*At my word, the maelstrom shall come and Vraks shall drown in blood! Even the dead shall not find peace. I shall be the herald of the apocalypse of Anarchy and Lord Malal shall know all of your names*!” The last words of the secession speech of Apostate Cardinal Xaphan, Arch-Heretic Despot of Vraks, in 810M41, and, though no one confirmed it, likely his final words too. Ten seconds later, Templar Sororitas Palatine Anastasia blasted his head apart and executed him in the name of Him on Terra. Two hours later, the rebellion of his followers was broken militarily. The Order of the Silver Rose would spend the next ten years purging all followers and other heretical influence from the surface of Vraks and the surrounding Sector.

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**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**Eastern Fringe**

'**Scrapzard Moardakka'**

**One hundred and fifty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

Thought for the day: The Alien's dream is to dance on the grave of Mankind.

**Warboss Arrgard**

“LAST NIGHT BOYZ, I'ZE HADS A DREAM.”

“We wotz attack Tigruz, Boss?”

Arrgard glared at the tiny Boy who had dared to interrupt him. He was the Chosen of Gork and Mork! No one interrupted him. Fortunately, his favourite Big Shoota was close to his right fist.

BLAM!

“I'ZE HADS A DREAM!” the most powerful Warboss of the Eastern Fringe shouted. “MORK TELLZ ME DA SWARM BRINGA WILL GIV A BETTA FIGHT FOR UZ!”

This announcement was welcomed by thousands of roars and screams of joy from his warband.

“COMMORAGAZ WAZ A CHALLENGE FROM DA 'UMIES!” Arrgard told his troops. “GORK HEARDZ 'DEM TALKIN AND THEYZ THINK THEYZ DA MASTAS OF DA GREATEST SCRAP EVAH!”

“Bud whas aboutz Tigruz, Boss Gruffjaw 'as gone to attack it!”

BLAM!

“FORGETZ TIGRUZ AND DA RED ZARBIES!” Mork's Defiler ordered in a thunderous growl. “FORGETZ TIGRUZ AND DA PANSY 'UMIES! WE'ZE MUST PREPAR' FOR DA SWARM BRINGA!”

Arrgard's visions had never been wrong. The Warboss of the Eastern Fringe had killed all those who protested against them.

“WE'ZE WILL GADDA TRAKK! SQUIGGOTHS! MEGA KANNONZ! BOMBA! SHOOTA! STOMPA! GARGANT! I'ZE WANTZ DA BIGGEST WAAGH EVAH TO FIGHTZ DA SWARM BRINGA! AND WEZ' WILL WIN BECAUZ ORKS ARE DA BEST! WAAAGH!”

“WAAAAAGGH!”

“LOUDA!” Arrgard commanded, shooting several of the Boyz closest to him who hadn't shouted hard enough. “LOUDA! DIS WILL BE DA BIGGEST SCRAP EVAH! DA WAAGH OFZ AL' WAAGHS! WAAAAAAGH!”

This time millions of his troops answered the call on their scrap planet-headquarters. It was an expression of ferocity and joy all space-faring races had learned to fear the moment they saw a greenskin.

And it had never presaged anything good for them.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

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**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**One hundred and fifty-six hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Champion Kratos**

Once again, Kratos had to suppress his urge to shout and instead let the flow of pilgrims touch his red power armour before they allowed him to pass through the corridor.

It was...incredibly annoying. By the Blood, Kratos was just a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard, he was not Lady Weaver. He was not Sanguinius Reborn! He was a Champion of the Flesh Tearers, proud son of Cretacia, a noble warrior of the Adeptus Astartes, and certainly no divine being...but try to convince all these men and women of that!

At last, the effusions' and the prayers' times were over, and he was able to enter the main bridge of the *Enterprise*, where silence and cold professionalism reigned. Near the empty throne of their Lady, First Secretary Bach and Archmagos Sagami were talking with several Navy officers. Kratos removed his helmet and breathed a loud sigh of relief.

“I see the pilgrims tested your temper too,” Thermoses began conversationally. The twitching of the lips of the Red Legion's Space Marine couldn't qualify as a smirk, but the intention was there.

“We'll see if you're still laughing when your return to Lady Weaver's side,” the Flesh Tearer Champion replied. “The pilgrims and other religious devotees are out in force in the corridors. Remind me why we think we are a purpose-built warship?”

“Kratos, I will remind you we are allowing only the smallest trickle of religious representatives on the *Enterprise*. That way, the millions of Frateris Templars, pilgrims, and priests present in this system are compliant and satisfied.”

Kratos shrugged. All this stuff reeking of politics and religion had always bored or disgusted him. The more distance there was between him and those ridiculous mortals, the better it was for him...and certainly for everyone else.

“Our Lady orders and I obey,” the Champion of the Dawnbreaker Guard muttered. “But I would prefer if we could keep them on their pilgrim ships and avoid their presence here on the *Enterprise*. I don't feel comfortable with them here.”

“Use some of your rest hours to find an artistic pastime,” the Devastator Marine suggested. “I know part of the reason my serenity isn't so troubled is that I have my glassware projects for the Hagia Sanguinala and the Nyx palaces. You should try it, it refreshes the mind.”

Kratos grimaced internally. Several years ago, he had confessed to Gamaliel that, unlike the overwhelming majority of the Dawnbreaker Guard, the Flesh Tearers had never entertained any artistic pursuits whatsoever. Before that point, it had hardly bothered him, but as he saw Midas playing with jewellery and medals, Sterzing sculpting his statues, and the others frequenting ateliers and artists' lairs during their spare time...well, it put him ill-at-ease, because it appeared the accusations of several Chapters that the Flesh Tearers were barbarians was hitting closer than he wanted.

“I will...think about it,” the Champion muttered noncommittally. “Any notable changes since the last report?”

“A new Mechanicus fleet from Stygies VIII has arrived. Though judging from the reports of Archmagos Lankovar, it looks like we have three or four Explorator Magi who gathered their forces and rushed to meet us as fast as their engines could mechanically travel across the stars. This adds six Cruisers and more than seventy lighter Warp-capable hulls to the Mechanicus' presence.”

Days ago, this would have been a respectable amount of reinforcements. Now? Not so much. The space around the planet of Pavia, the ruined carcass of the *Empire of Sin*, the two Malta Starforts, and the surviving fleet which had destroyed Commorragh was crowded with thousands of starships, both warships and civilian vessels. All the Adeptuses had come, from the mighty Battle-Barges of the Adeptus Astartes to the floating cathedrals of the Ministorum, from merchant conveyors of the Chartist Captains to the large cruiser squadrons of the Imperial Navy. There were even two golden hulls of the Custodes, surrounded by Arks Mechanicus, War-Arks, and the gigantic red and black Forge-ships of Mars.

“I suppose our Lady will want them to sign treaties of cooperation and technology exchange as soon as possible,” Thermoses continued. “The Tech-Priests of Stygies have a reputation, after all.”

And in many ways, Lankovar was a moderate for the breed of cogboys which headed out into the stars from that specific Forge-World.

“You know my thoughts on the subject,” Kratos commented drily, before frowning as several sections of the bridge began to spring to life and many men and women sworn personally to the Basileia began to rapidly update their data-streams and the tactical hololith.

“Alpha-plus Warp Translation on Mandeville T-3! Alpha-plus Warp Translation on Mandeville T-3! Tell all Mechanicus ships to abandon their explorations in that zone!”

“By the Blood!”

The exclamation escaped his lips, but Kratos knew a second later no one would comment on it.

A fleet-sized translation was not an unheard of phenomenon to occur. Watching an Astartes fleet emerge from the Warp, on the other hand, remained something reserved to a far smaller number of souls, and in general the enemies of the Golden Throne, who often had little time to marvel at the retribution force the Space Marines had gathered in a single location.

But even for a veteran Champion, the might of the armada materialising into reality was awe-striking.

“Soul Drinkers Battle-Barges identified: *Sanctifier*, *Carnivore*, and *Glory*. Five Strike Cruisers and ten lighter ships of their Chapter are accompanying them. Executioners Chapter Fleet identified. They brought the Battle-Barges *Blade of Perdition* and *Fist of Aquilon*, supported by four Strike Cruisers and eight Frigates.”

The list went on and on. Even when the Chapters of the Blood had mustered during the council on the aftermath of the Battle of the Death Star, there had not been so many Battle-Barges and capital ships present. Of course, the Ninth Legion had never possessed the greatest fleet of the Legions Astartes before its dissolution.

But the Seventh Legion, the sons of Dorn, had always loved their walls, be they on the ground or in space.

And at this moment, it appeared they had all come. It was more illusion than reality; by the very nature of strategic availability, not every Space Marine of Dorn's lineage could rush to Pavia. But the intention was there. The identification codes of the Venom Thorns blazed brightly next to the Fists of Wrath. Cross-painted Battle-Barges of the White Templars followed heavily armoured vessels of the Iron Champions. The Invaders had joined the Emperor's Havoc, and the Night Swords were sailing with the Fire Lords.

Dozens upon dozens of Battle-Barges and Strike Cruisers had already left the Immaterium when the Excoriators' Battle-Barge *Rampart of Terra* accelerated, the reason quickly becoming all too clear as gargantuan masses dwarfing the largest battleships of the Adeptus Astartes by their simple existence arrived at Pavia.

“By the Primarch, that is-“ Thermoses' mouth failed him, and appropriately it was the Tech-Priest in charge of the long-range auspexes who finished the sentence.

“Crimson Fists' Starfort *Rutilus Tyrannus* identified. Imperial Fists' Starfort *Dawn of Crusade* identified.” Even an emotionless cogboy, however, needed to take a few seconds as a huge leviathan of the void arrived on the hololithic displays of the *Enterprise*. “Gloriana Battleship *Eternal Crusader*, Black Templars' flagship, identified.”

After this titanic arrival, the presence of two Imperial Fists' Battle-Barges in the rearguard, the *Storm of Wrath* and the *Spear of Vengeance*, were almost ignored.

“And here I was wondering why we had seen so few of them until now,” Wolfgang Bach, by the looks of it, had recovered faster from this 'surprise' than anyone else. “Final count?”

“Two Starforts, one Gloriana Super-Battleship, fifty-four Battle-Barges, one hundred and seventy-two Strike Cruisers, and four hundred and twenty lesser warships have translated, First Secretary. We have thirty-six different Chapters demanding permission to enter the system.”

“Permission granted,” the young blonde-haired man turned towards Kratos and Thermoses. “Please inform Lady Weaver the Imperial Fists and their Successors are there.”

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Scelus Sector**

**Craftworld Ulthwé**

**One hundred and sixty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren**

Of all the things amusing him since he arrived at Ulthwé, Filgonilth had not expected the less-than-perfect appearance of Eldrad Ulthran to be the one he would place at the top.

But it was.

“Not a word,” the older Farseer hissed at him, threatening him with a half-hearted glare. Alas for him, the fact he wore a bright yellow robe and not his usual black armour rendered the command a bit less impressive than it should have been.

“I haven't said anything!” the last of the Sirethmoren declared in a deliciously innocent tone before succumbing to the temptation right after. “Will I be invited to the wedding?”

A book was levitated and missed his head by inches.

“If you have come to discuss my private life, I have one piece of advice for you: don't.”

“Fine, fine,” the exiled Farseer smiled. “Did she pledge her allegiance to Ulthwé?”

“Yes, she did it last dawn. Already two thousand of her fellow refugees have followed her example and taken the Carnality stones to protect their souls.”

“In that case,” Filgonilth said very seriously, “you'd better prepare for regular visits of new Drukhari refugees. The Second Fall and the utter destruction of the Commorragh nobility have left most of our dark cousins leaderless and searching for salvation. A nascent power which is stricter but leaves some leeway is far more acceptable in the Webway than it was a few cycles ago.”

“I know,” Eldrad admitted. “Though Ulthwé can't and won't absorb so many refugees in so little time. Aurelia's capacity to create the new Carnality stones of Atharti is unique, but once the oaths are given, we will spread the next wave of refugees across the coalition our Councils are preparing.”

“That way you will have this new class of Aspect Warriors becoming a familiar sight across several Craftworlds and increasing the assimilation process without straining the resources of Ulthwé. Clever.”

“I don't know if I would describe Aurelia and the new converts of Carnality as Aspect Warriors,” Eldrad mused thoughtfully, seemingly not realising he had called the High Emissary by her first name. “As far as we have tested, they certainly have military skills and talent in the Art like our Seers, but many of their foundations do not lie in the domain of Khaine. But we are still experimenting, and this is a subject with a lot of fields to study.”

Filgonilth considered it a true triumph of self-control that he didn't ask what sort of 'studies' were done in the beds of Ulthwé at night.

“You spoke of a coalition of Craftworlds. Furta-Rith is among them, I assume?” That Craftworld was a vassal of Ulthwé in all but name.

“Obviously,” Eldrad confirmed. “We have also been able to add II-Kaithe, Iybraesil, and Mynathensar. The word of the Storm of Silence carries weight, and of course, the significance of our Doom being vanquished has bolstered the factions pushing for a common front against the menace of the Primordial Annihilator.”

“Iyanden?”

“First contacts have been promising, but there's no formal agreement...yet.”

“Pity,” at this moment, Iyanden was unquestionably the largest and most populated Craftworld in existence, and their influence carried far and wide. If Ulthwé and Iyanden allied, true unity of purpose and minds might very well become a reality. “I'm afraid my visit to Alaitoc did not meet a sixth of these goals. Autarchs and Farseers are all terrified by the rise of a Necron Dynasty, and fear more are going to activate their tombs and begin a genocide of Asuryani. I think that if the worlds weren't so close to the Angel of Death's dominion, they would already be in the process of striking them.”

“Disappointing, but not unexpected. Thousands of cycles spent warning the new generations about the Yngir and their metallic servants can't be overturned in a cycle or two. I'm more interested in what Saim-Hann is up to.”

“Right now, I think they're still partying,” Filgonilth raised his eyebrows and made a few very suggestive gestures with both hands, gaining an offended glare from Eldrad. “And if you think your party went beyond the usual limits, let me tell you that you've not reached the prelude of what the Saim-Hann families have done.”

“Yes, I'm aware Saim-Hann was...wilder than our culture, even before the destruction of the Dark City. As long as they do not make too much a habit of it, I can close my eyes and ignore it. What is more important at the moment is showing off our strength and presenting a pro-human position. Of all the trillions of Imperial star-farers, there are many who believe that a war between our two species does nothing but hurt us and advance the plans of the Primordial Annihilator.”

“The corsair fleets are going to be a problem in this regard,” the exiled Farseer commented. “Some may be tempted to go to Biel-Tan when the humans' hammer is going to come down.”

“If they do, we will bury the connections which exist between our coalition and them,” Eldrad coldly responded. “At this moment, the last thing we need is to attract the attention of the Queen of the Swarm towards Ulthwé. Unless we could pay for the Queen of Blades' services, an attack involving her upon any Craftworld would result in the same carnage that was wrecked upon Commorragh. I'm sorry Filgonilth, but I won't sacrifice my hope for the lives of Biel-Tan and the allies it convinced to join them in the march to their doom.”

“I know, and I wasn't going to beseech you to,” frankly, there was probably nothing that could be done for the four Craftworlds which had participated in this disaster. Nothing but evacuating the maximum amount of civilians, especially the children, and protect the Infinity Circuits if it was at all possible. This was a very dangerous galaxy, and weakness always attracted predators, not only the Primordial Annihilator and the humans. “I heard Asurmen and Amon Harakht went to Nacretimeï in person?”

“And they only killed twenty-one senior commanders on their way out.” Eldrad confirmed. “Truly a great show of restraint on their part.”

“Assuredly,” his Farseer counterpart agreed. “So...how interesting is a sexual relationship with a refugee of Commorragh?”

Eldrad glared again, but Filgonilth regretted nothing.

**Acacia** **Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Will of Hoth***

**One hundred and sixty-three hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Sister Brunhilda Decker**

The purification of the Battleship was a one-sided battle Brunhilda loved to watch. The giant moth was sending orbs of pure golden light in every direction, and each second she and the rest of the audience were hearing more shrieks of corrupt things being disintegrated.

If only she wasn't forced to stand in parade stance decorated with so many medals the colour of her red armour was barely visible beneath them, the day would be perfect. Brunhilda was among the privileged soldiers invited to witness the creation of Holy Aethergold and the exorcism of evil forces, which was not something one refused! But between the fact she hadn't fully mastered her new power armour and the storms of servo-owls swirling around her, the new Templar Sororitas wished there were fewer souls – like a number under ten billion – watching each and every one of her moves.

“No, I don't think I will keep the Battleship, Magos,” her Celestial Highness the Basileia nonchalantly told the cogboy who had brought the Noctilith crystals out of the Blackstone Fortress. “I will rename it, of course. The *Will of Hoth* is a really stupid and heretical name. Better calling it *Hope of Light* or *Power of the Moth*.”

“My preferences would go towards *Hope of Light*, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” the Tech-Priest informed her respectfully. “Are there more reasons apart from its corrupted past why it is not your desire to keep this hull in your service?”

“Yes,” the Living Saint's answer was sufficiently loud to be heard by dozens of people, not just Brunhilda. “First above all is the fact that this starship is going to need years of repair. Lisa is purging the chaotic taint from it, and that's a very good thing. What Aethergold is not capable of, alas, is undoing decades of lack of maintenance. The heretic commanding this warship believed his fell patron would prevent engineering problems from surfacing, but he was as wrong there as he was on many other things. Give it twenty more years and maybe fifty more translations, and the hull would have begun to experience major integrity defects. Adding to this problem, most of my naval advisors think the Zion class is an inferior template compared to the Emperor, Apocalypse or Retribution classes. It may be cheaper to build one, but it is also under-gunned and under-armoured. Its Void Shields are clearly two or three orders below those of a Navy's command flagship, and there are a series of technological and infrastructure flaws which must be resolved. As a consequence, I prefer to let other potential buyers have it. Tell the Ecclesiarchy representatives they can participate in this auction too.”

“It will be done, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

The red robes saluted and departed, taking with them the big crystals of Aethergold that they had saved from the destruction of the Blackstone Fortress and which were promised to the Nyx Sector. Now that two had descended onto the world of Pavia, there were ten of them, and all shone like miniature suns filled with the God-Emperor's radiance.

The purification of the warship also appeared to be ending, as large cargo-hauler servitors were bringing a procession of moth-edible food and drinks, which were welcomed joyously by the gluttonous insect.

“Sugar, fruits, and other delicacies,” Lady Weaver commented as the largest insect in her possession began her feasting, and ordering Brunhilda to approach. “Like the first Lisa, the second drives expensive bargains for her services.”

“I haven't met the first Lisa, your Celestial Highness, so I will take you at your word.”

The red-armoured woman received a sigh in return.

“The high honorific can be left out when we're not in formal ceremonies, Sister,” the golden-armoured Living Saint told her. “I did not create the Templar Sororitas to kiss my armour and spend hundreds of hours singing my praises.”

As the servo-owls flew away and the gap between them and the Dawnbreaker Guard widened, Brunhilda felt the question burn on her lips. And then she decided to ask it. What was the worst that could happen?

“If you will forgive my curiosity, Lady Basileia, why have you chosen to let us stand apart? I am particularly grateful to you, but an Order within the Frateris Templar would not have attracted so much attention...”

“Honestly?” The black eyes burning with divine will went straight into her soul. “As a General of the Imperial Guard, I find that the principle of the Frateris Templar goes against the laws and the fragile equilibrium of power of the Imperium's Adeptuses. The Adeptus Ministorum was not part of His plan, but even so there's no practical reason why the Ecclesiarchy should have large ground and space forces answering to their authority. There is one army, the Imperial Guard. There is one navy, the Imperial Navy. The Frateris Templar are trampling prerogatives and seizing privileges which were never supposed to be theirs.”

This answer shocked her beyond belief.

“But...the Frateris Templars are doing a lot of good!”

“And the Templar Sororitas, I hope, will do far better than them,” Lady Weaver told her with an apologetic expression. “But I prefer to have a smaller and specialised elite force answering to a core of precepts I have established than the religious cousin of the Astra Militarum. I will give you power armours. I will allow you to train and become the best Medicae and hospital wardens of the Segmentum. If the plan is successful, you will become the female equivalent of the Space Marines, only based on faith and training rather than transhuman transformation. But I do not want the kind of army-processions certain Cardinals are mustering through legal loopholes.”

“In this case...will we be allowed to recruit new aspirants through the Sanguinala Games?”

“I see no reason not to,” the Living Saint replied. “But let your Legate know that she may find competitors in the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition. Oh, and we must speak about your rewards.”

“My rewards?” her voice was not exactly dignified as she repeated the two words, and a smirk appeared on Lady Weaver's lips.

“Sister, I was really touched you gave up the entire rights of your STC template to me, but for all the luck which allowed you to find it, you deserve proper rewards, in addition to the billions of Throne Gelts in your bank account and the Order of the Ancients. I was thinking about several more medals and a nobility title, and several lands and funding rights on Claire 47...”

Brunhilda suddenly realised she was going to become even more well-known and surrounded by ecstatic crowds in the future. Receive more medals. And be present in more grand parades alongside the Living Saint. This...why couldn't she return to shooting holes into some Eldar skulls?

**Starfort *Dawn of Crusade***

**Chapter Master Flavius Sextus Jovius**

Aside from the Feast of Blades, the number of occasions when the Chapter Masters of the five original Chapters of the Seventh Legion created by the Second Founding gathered together was equal to zero.

As such, the fact Flavius Sextus Jovius was able to converse with his four peers today was literally unprecedented. But then, so was the reason for their gathering at Pavia.

“Our father lives.”

Three words no Chapter Master of the Imperial Fists had ever thought the sons of the Seventh would ever have the opportunity to say again.

“Our father lives.” High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa repeated. “No doubt is possible.”

The three other Chapter Masters nodded in the next two seconds. Like them, they had seen the analysis of the blood vial, watched the vid-recordings an uncountable number of times, and interrogated several witnesses, both Malberg's surviving battle-brothers and other non-Astartes who had been present. As the supreme commander of the Black Templars had so justly proclaimed, no doubt was possible.

“We can only pray we will live long enough to see his return from the Webway,” Chapter Master Ruy Guzman expressed with an expression close to tears.

“Have faith, brother!” the High Marshal exclaimed. “Our liege has promised to stand with us against the traitors, the mutants, the heretics, and the xenos. He will return to lead us again. The oath has been given. Our line will stand together with him once more.”

A flicker of amusement was seen on the stern face of Chapter Master Padilla Garcia of the Excoriators. Assuredly, the venerable warrior was thinking the same thing as Flavius; that the 'faith' of the Black Templars had not been welcomed by their gene-sire as the grand idea the heirs of Sigismund wanted it to be.

“We can only hope your words will be true,” Chapter Master Felipe Alcantara of the Soul Drinkers replied. “But while we await his return, there are many decisions to be made. First of all, I think we have to rebuild the Huscarls.”

The other four Chapter Masters approved unanimously. The Huscarls had been the personal bodyguards of the Praetorian, although like with many things, the exact details had been forgotten over the centuries, with only a few Ancients remembering this epoch of legend. The Fists and their Successors remembered enough however to know these Chosen had been as much advisors as they were guards, given authority over mere Captains, and grand defenders of the Imperium in their own right.

“I think that if each of the Successors selects one or two Champions to join the Huscarls, we will rapidly fill a Company worthy of our father,” Ruy Guzman began before grimacing. “The High Lords may not like it, though. Everything which forces them to remember the days of Last Wall Protocol is not going to meet their approval.”

“Who cares what those useless bureaucrats think?” Padilla Garcia rhetorically asked. “We are the sons of Dorn, and I don't think the Salamanders or the Blood Angels are going to say we are in the wrong this time!”

“They will not, brother,” Felipe Alcantara's tone remained friendly and serene despite the amazing era they had just entered into. “But you know as well as I do that the Adeptus Astartes does not represent the Imperium as a whole. Study the moves of the woman who spoke with our father. Merely because you have the power and the leeway to do something does not mean that it is a good idea to do so.”

“As much as it pains me to admit it,” Gerlach Barbarossa interjected, “I think Felipe is right in this instance. We will rebuild the Huscarls, but we keep them separated in platoon-sized groups and out of sight.”

“I was thinking about detaching one of my own to the Dawnbreaker Guard,” Flavius revealed to his peers. “Since the Huscarls were always equipped with Tactical Dreadnought Armour, it would be a worthwhile addition to the ranks of the Blood Angels and their Successors.”

“Fitting,” approved the Excoriators' Chapter Master. “And I will definitely choose a true Champion to join them. But I think there's a simpler option to rebuild the Huscarls: we simply form them to be the cadre of the new Chapter which will be created with our father's blood.”

Flavius Sextus Jovius knew there was going to be a protestation from Ruy Guzman well before the Crimson Fist opened his mouth.

“That is dangerous,” the tall Chapter Master warned them. “I would far prefer to owe a favour to General Weaver, including and up to the military support of the *Rutilus Tyrannus* and our entire fleet.”

“These proposals aren't mutually exclusive,” the High Marshal remarked. “But yes, I agree hiding the Huscarls inside a newly-founded Chapter is not adequate. If nothing else, because at some point, these Huscarls will leave with our gene-sire, and then said Chapter will be deprived of the core of its veterans. The cadre of this Chapter may be recruited from all our Successors, however. We should be able to detach a demi-Company and give out several relics without a problem. Besides, the support of the Mechanicus in this endeavour is all but guaranteed.”

“Yes, I don't think the Fabricator-General and his senior Archmagi and Fabricators are going to create difficulties now,” if they did, honour was truly dead and the cogboys would never be trusted again. “This new Chapter should obtain the Battle-Barges and the Techmarines to satisfy the most stringent requirements of any Chapter Master without difficulties.”

“We have yet to choose a name for this Chapter,” Felipe Alcantara said.

“That will be one of Lady Weaver's prerogatives,” the Imperial Fists stated in a tone which would tolerate no dissention. “And speaking of the General who helped our father crush the Naga like we wanted to for more than four thousand years, I await your ideas for the rewards we will propose once we meet her in a formal audience. I suggest,” a sardonic expression found its way on his features, "to not think small in this instance."

**The Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lord of the Black Lions Vortigern**

Fortunately, Vortigern wasn't Iskandar. He didn't even want to imagine what sort of agony the Lord Vigilator would have felt when entering Lupercal's Court. The spectacle of the daemon sword feasting on several souls, red to the hilt with their blood and viscera, would have been hell no matter how skilled the sorcerer. As it stood, the Fallen Angel serving as Ninth in the Ezekarion of the Black Legion could feel the hatred and malice of the weapon, and he wasn't a psyker at all. This, in his humble opinion, spoke volumes about the power of the greatest artefact they had acquired during their first campaign against the Imperium.

The Lord of the Black Lions dreamed of the day they would be rid of this abominable weapon. Vortigern had committed some truly disturbing acts in the name of survival, but *Drach'nyen* the Ever-Thirsty was something even a veteran of the Long War like him was deeply unnerved by.

The daemon sword was just wrong. Iskandar having told him the 'sword' was merely an illusion of the senses had only increased his concerns.

But raising old concerns again today would not change the fact the Black Legion needed the power of *Drach'nyen* if they ever wanted to achieve victory and to topple the False-Emperor from his throne.

“Moriana will live,” he announced before falling into his comfortable seat, the furs of the great beasts he had adorned it with providing great comfort. “The destruction of Excess and the changes in the future threads have done a lot of damage, but the Seers are unanimous she will survive. They refuse to speculate how long it will take her to be brought back to her full potential, however.”

“I will visit her later. The others members of the Ezekarion?”

Vortigern shrugged.

“Iskandar, Lheorvine and Ceraxia are conquering the planets of the Third Legion one by one, as you instructed them to. For the moment, resistance is minimal. The biggest problem is how few true Astartes and gene-seed materials remain. The aftershocks of the Battle of Commorragh are still felt throughout the Eye, but I doubt that more than ten percent of the Third survived this butchery, and I'm counting our emotion-crippled recruits in that tally. Overall, I think we will be the Legion which will profit the most from the Third's destruction.”

It was not a sure thing, of course. Nobody knew what the elements of the Twentieth and the Eighth were truly up to in the Eye of Terror, and whatever they stole or conquered, few witnesses were there to report it to Black Legion commanders.

“Good.”

Ezekyle Abaddon – known to the entire galaxy as the Despoiler and the Warmaster of Chaos – seized *Drach'nyen* again and sheathed it back in its scabbard...for now.

“I think it's all the good news we will have for a long while, Ezekyle.”

“And I agree with you,” the Lord of the Black Legion replied, before taking his own seat with an expression of exhaustion Vortigern had rarely seen him display. “Despite not being involved in this fiasco, the Battle of Commorragh has cost us dearly, and I'm not speaking of our two hundred Slaaneshi Marines who fell over dead during the Death of Excess. Militarily, the Imperium has only eight Legions to worry about now. I don't care what sort of shenanigans Fabius Bile is concocting in his labs, there's zero chance he will be able to rebuild the Third without immense stocks of untainted gene-seed. Strategically, the light-pyre of the Astronomican can hurt us in our most secure bases.”

“The Gods for the moment seem to be able to stem its fury, if what happened at Sha'are Mavet is any indication. And the Beacon remains a slow phenomenon. All warships, even a Gloriana, will be able to translate out before it can hurt us.”

“I don't share your optimistic view, brother,” the former First Captain said in a bitter tone absolutely devoid of confidence. “The morale effect on our allies of the Dark Mechanicum is catastrophic, and the non-Astartes auxiliaries have suffered worse than the exiles of Mars. At the same time, the motivation of our enemies will be significantly bolstered. The Astronomican already shines brighter, and it's only going to get worse when the replacement parts for the Astronomican reach Terra.”

“I suppose there's no way to intercept them before they reach the Throneworld?”

“None whatsoever,” confirmed the Master of the Black Legion. “Our fleet is dispersed all across the Eye, Cadia still stands strong, and the Three are fighting each other for the spoils of Fallen Excess. The Custodes and the Tech-Priests won't make the error of going near a Warp Storm, and there are no fleets out there in real space – or any combination of fleets, really – to attack them.”

Vortigern grimaced. To summarize, another defeat, and they would have to stand there like powerless idiots and watch it happen. The fact that this was a superb strategic victory which had been executed flawlessly was not a consolation.

“Weaver hurt us very badly.”

Ezekyle laughed.

“Oh come on Vortigern! If Weaver was so successful, it's because Slaanesh's arrogance did half of the job for her! The Legions of Excess left a door wide open, and the Custodes only had to give her the key to the Gates to kick the entire edifice down and burn the foundations until nothing remained. Arrogance. That is what led to the defeat of the Gods in the Battle of Commorragh. The Naga proved beyond question that not only was it a mediocre usurper, it was also a slithering tactical and strategically useless mass of blunders and mistakes. Slaanesh was narcissistic enough to believe no one would ever dare exploit the large weakness its overreliance on Eldar souls represented, and it paid the ultimate price for it.”

Vortigern couldn't say anything against this opinion. Everyone knew the servants of Slaanesh were monsters of arrogance and depravity. It was just...they had always been there, and seeing them erased from the Eye was something truly frightening, even for an Astartes mind.

“I agree overconfidence and arrogance led to this disaster. But I don't think we can afford to let Weaver continue her military career against us. She already destroyed Commorragh and was one of the key pieces in killing a God, Ezekyle. Give her enough time to train new armies and gather a brand-new Battlefleet, and even the Three are not going to laugh when she unveils her next goals.”

“You make several fair points,” the Warmaster informed him appreciatively. “But as much as I want to eliminate this troublemaker who acts more and more like Sanguinius did, her powerbase is too far away from Obscurus to risk even a moderate raid. The logistical challenges are extremely daunting for such an endeavour, and that's without taking into account all the Battlefleets which would be able to engage us at will between the Eye and Ultima Segmentum! Moreover, Weaver has already gathered powerful allies around her, including the Custodes and something I would have preferred lost to the midst of time. No, brother, attacking the Nyx Sector at this time would be, I fear, the most colossal mistake since this Legion's creation. Any damage caused would be more than compensated by the near-total annihilation of our forces, deprived of any support base and safe haven.”

“It's ugly news, Ezekyle. That Sector's defences won't get lighter with time, and the more we wait, the more we run the risk of facing a second edition of the Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar...except, of course, this time the treachery of the Word Bearers won't open the gates.”

“And there are other problems which are going to make it worse. Like that little upstart Malicia, Weaver is a parahuman, and she controls insects. All insects. This gives her an endless pharmacopoeia of substances, including it seems something called 'Bacta', a super-healing fluid which will save tens of thousands of guardsmen and Astartes if we fail to permanently put them down on the field of battle.”

“I don't even want to know how it's possible for things to get worse.”

"I can think of one or two possibilities," those words really, really didn't reassure Vortigern. "Does the name Gavreel Forcas ring a bell?"

Thanks to an eidetic memory, finding the name didn't take long.

“Sergeant of the Calibanite Independent Force, Sixth Company, First Squad,” the Lord of the Black Lions automatically announced, before frowning. “Wait, you mean-“

“That the woman who destroyed Commorragh has a survivor of Caliban in her entourage? Yes, you gave the last confirmation I needed.”

“That is really problematic,” Vortigern murmured, unhappily aware he was beginning to somewhat repeat himself. There were a lot of things done on Caliban whose knowledge of he would prefer perish with the ghosts of that dead world, forgotten by all. “On the bright side, if the Interrogators of the First Legion become aware of this, they won't be pleased either. Any chance you reconsider your orders and command our fleet to sail in retaliation for this deicide, brother?”

“No,” Ezekyle replied, showing a hint of amusement. “I will not throw this Legion to its doom in a desperate gamble. The Siege of Terra was an excellent demonstration of what happens when time is running out and enemies destroy your supply lines.”

**Segmentum** **Tempestus**

**Caradryad Sector**

**One hundred and seventy-one hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Gloriana Battleship *Beta***

**First Harrowmaster Machiavelli Gonzaga**

Machiavelli had heard uncountable times that the Ultramarines and their blue-blooded descendants loved being invited to contemplate the near-dead body of their Primarch. Maybe the rumour was true. Maybe the Ultramarines considered it an honour, but his training as an Alpha Legionnaire didn't grant him any feelings of joy when circumstances forced him to visit his superior.

The First Harrowmaster gave a series of orders, and the multitude of indentured Medicae assigned to this extremely expensive Apothecarium – all of them serving here like their parents and grandparents before them – left the room. What was going to be discussed was not for their ears, even if the chances of them discussing it with an enemy of the Twentieth Legion were as close to zero as humanly possible.

Still, Machiavelli and the rest of the *Beta*'s crew had not survived all these centuries by being lax and unprofessional.

Several procedures were activated when he pressed the big yellow button standing prominently on the control panel in the middle of the room. Several huge data-transfer mechadendrites emerged from behind it, and with the ease of long practise the Harrowmaster connected them to a large databank where the entirety of the information about Commorragh and its consequences his agents had been able to gather was stored. As much as he wanted to deliver an oral report, this was a method the crippling injuries of the Primarch made impractical.

No stasis field switched off. There were emergency ones in the room, just in case, but they were rarely used, generally when a new phase of treatment started. This didn't mean there wasn't change, though. Several tubes began to pour new healing solutions into the central tank, making its colour shift from red to blue. Dozens of lights flickered on everywhere in the room. To his relief, each and every one was a soft green.

Machines shifted position and more mechadendrites and tubes deployed, giving the infrastructure the appearance of a strange arachnid, with the tank in the centre representing the 'body' and the rest of the objects misshapen 'legs'.

And as the nutrient bath turned from blue to a pale grey, the body of Lord Omegon, last surviving Primarch of the Twentieth Legion, was finally revealed. As always, Machiavelli couldn't repress a shudder at the ghastly sight the injuries of his gene-father were to his eyes.

The Ultramarines and their Primarch had believed they had decapitated the Alpha Legion at Eskrador. In reality, while Guilliman had failed, the Lord of Macragge had come very close to winning the day. During their retreat, the sons of Ultramar had detonated several phosphex warheads, and Lord Omegon had been in the outer blast zone of one. Only his Primarch's constitution and an emergency teleportation at the last second had prevented him from sharing the fate of thousands of Legionnaires.

Nonetheless, the Thirteenth Legion had won a great victory; there was no Primarch to keep the Twentieth true to its original purpose, and as the years passed, more and more cells ignored the *Beta*'s orders and swore their souls to Chaos.

“Machiavelli.” The voice came out of a synthetic voice-caster, and as such sounded like a Techmarine's. “It looks like our plans have been set afire by my father.”

“Yes, my Lord. With Commorragh and Slaanesh no more, the faith of Inquisitors and high-ranked military officers in the Imperium's ultimate victory will rise to new heights. Inversely, I fear the discontent is rising among cell leaders and a number of our most loyal support bases.”

“Regroup. Protect our core assets. Do your utmost to ensure as little equipment and manpower falls into the hands of the Eight Traitor Legions as possible. And activate our scorched earth plans for the Emperor's Children. Those hedonists are of no use anymore, better wipe the board clean.”

“I understand, my Lord. Though I have to warn you, Bile is certainly going to survive every plan we target him with. He has so many clones I doubt we can inconvenience him for more than a few days.”

No one had managed to put down the Clonelord in millennia, and this included a number of the best assassins of the Twentieth.

“The Bacta?”

“As far as our few agents in the Caribbean fleet have been able to be discover before being pummelled to death by Isley and Pierre, Bacta doesn't work on any psyker, be they latent or active. If an opportunity to steal some presents itself, I will certainly not refuse to act, but I fear there'd be decades of research before an eventual cure...if we had Weaver on our side.”

And as the events of Pavia and Commorragh had proven, the new Emperor-empowered parahuman was not going to tolerate the goals and deeds the Alpha Legion committed every standard year.

“I will wait.” There was a pause of three seconds before Lord Omegon spoke again. “Prepare the formation of a new Chapter-sized Harrowing. We may have to intervene directly in the coming years. Activate Plan Mamba. Send some agents to the Nyx Sector. Avoid the capital system and every planet where Isley and his agents are regularly sent to. And prepare some cells for exploration purposes. We must learn more about the 'Necron' xenos.”

“Your will be done.”

The healing tank turned blue again, and the voice of his Primarch faded away. Machiavelli didn't utter one more word as the hundreds of men and women returned to the room and began to return the machines to their day-to-day functioning.

The First Harrowmaster left the Apothecarium as fast as his legs allowed him to. There was much to do, and little time to enforce his gene-sire's commands.

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**One hundred and seventy-two hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

Tziz had dined in some 'private' dinners – which had been private in name only, as sometimes they had hosted more than five thousand participants – of the most powerful clans and Adept families of Holy Terra. As such, the three-course-meal prepared for this particular lunch was hardly leaving her dumbstruck in awe. The food was varied and fresh though, and far better than the rations served on the battlefield. And she could fill her plate herself without offending a small army of servants and instigating half a dozen political conspiracies.

There were drawbacks, obviously. And the biggest one was to always be on her guard, as the presence of gigantic spiders and beetles everywhere in the room gave her shivers the former Callidus did her best to hide.

“You have quite an appetite,” the Living Saint commented as she finished her own plate.

“I'm burning a lot of energy in the training fields,” Gabriela replied modestly.

“Only the training fields? Not during the nights?”

To her relief, the two questions had been voiced in an amused tone.

“Err...yes. How long-“

“If you wanted to escape my attention, don't leave Dennis' room when one of my beetles is in the corridor. And maybe don't shout when there are a few other officers in nearby rooms able to hear your frolics.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Gabriela assured the insect-mistress. “You're not against our...liaison?”

The Basileia of Nyx played with her silver fork, something that somehow appeared to emphasize the massive brilliant golden wings behind her.

“What Dennis does outside his hours of duty is his business, not mine,” the victorious General informed her. “If on the other hand you try to hurt him, physically or emotionally, I will intervene and you won't like it. Did I make myself clear?”

“You did, your Celestial Highness.”

There was a visible flicker of annoyance in the challenging eyes, before it disappeared like it had never existed.

“Good. Now that that has been said, we can move on to the real subjects of importance. First off, you are officially forgiven for your assassination attempt on my life. Congratulations, and the data-slates confirming it are awaiting you on your work desk.”

The Captain groaned. Would there be no end to this cursed paperwork?

“Thank you,” Gabriela answered, thinking that insulting a General may not be the best move she could make to get a promotion. “Do you want me to continue serving in the half-destroyed Wuhanese regiment about to be sent home?”

“That is an option available to you, should you desire it,” Lady Weaver informed her. “I suppose you're somewhat aware of what happened at Wuhan while we were fighting this campaign?”

The yellow-eyed officer nodded immediately. Gabriela didn't know all the details, it was possible only the Basileia in front of her had them, but she knew enough. A cult of Slaaneshi nobles had killed the Governor of the Hive World and a good part of the ruling nobility, and between this and the lacklustre performance of the regiments hailing from the planet, it did not take a lot of intelligence to realize that Weaver's hammer was going to fall upon a lot of heads.

“I am going to need a lot of competent officers to replace the dead idiots, including some experienced veterans to arrest and create new Penal Legions. If you want it, I can arrange a promotion to Colonel and give you command of several cadres of veterans which will tour the Hives and remove troublemakers before sending them to the battlefields of Ultima Segmentum.”

Before meeting the Living Saint, Tziz Jarek would have likely given her assent to this...assuming it was part of her mission as a member of the Officio Assassinorum, of course. Now? After surviving Commorragh, Gabriela was in no hurry to return to the battlefield. While she had suffered no major injuries, several times her life had come very close to ending. Plus it had not escaped her notice that the 'simple' missions given by Weaver tended to result in apocalyptic events which left the galaxy reeling in pain.

“Do you have other options, your Celestial Highness?”

“If you continue to call me that in private, I may assign you as assistant to Pierre,” Lady Weaver began before drinking pure water in a crystal glass. Gabriela struggled but could not disguise her expression of horror in time.

“NO! Do you have any idea how close I came to murdering that brute after his fraternisation remarks?”

“I have an idea, yes,” and the ex-Callidus apprentice knew for sure the Living Saint was taking great amusement from watching her horrified reaction. “And now that we have established you don't like the Dreadnought and his pirate tricorn, we can go to the option you're most likely to accept. While I didn't think much about it before Operation Caribbean, Dennis is going to be in need of a Seneschal when he takes his Warrant and begins his career as a Rogue Trader. Initially, the intention was to push an SDF officer into this role, but given your...bedroom indiscretions...you may be the best candidate for the job.”

One more time, Gabriela was deeply surprised by the insect-mistress. It was a good reminder to never underestimate the Living Saint again.

“Before I answer yes or no...what are his Warrant prerequisites? I sincerely doubt you and the High Lord sponsoring the Warrants are so naive to let Dennis go out into the unknown without some duties and obligations.”

“Dennis and the ships under his command will be responsible for the 'special' commercial exchanges between Nocturne and Nyx,” the Basileia revealed as several servants removed the plates and remaining food from the table. “My Hive World and the nearby planets will naturally be the bases for his Rogue Trader dynasty, though I will give him some tax incentives in exchange. For the more risky tasks, they will likely involve helping the Salamanders finding more Artefacts of Vulkan across the galaxy.”

“Dangerous,” the Captain whispered, “but profitable.” Nocturne was rather famous for exchanging the very precious ore and items discovered with the Adeptus Mechanicus once their planet stopped being an inhospitable hellhole. That the Sons of Vulkan were willing to add an exception to this millennia-old situation was an enormous change...and evidence of the high opinion the Nocturne Space Marines had for the Basileia. “Can I have a few days to think about it? I want to know where my...relationship with Dennis is going to lead to.”

“Take your time,” the golden-winged Chosen of the Emperor replied. “But I will want an answer before we reach Nyx. Once we do, I will have a lot of other issues to handle...”

**Leet**

“Why wasn't I invited to eat lobster with Dennis' assassin?”

One look at the very empty table was enough for Leet to know he wasn't going to fill his stomach here. The plates and everything edible had disappeared, the only indications Taylor had even eaten here were the glasses and bottles of water and wine.

The Skitter-powered glare the angel-looking parahuman sent him told him he had asked the wrong question at the wrong time.

“What the hell were you thinking?” the Lady of Nyx asked after a long moment of silence.

“If it's about the parties of Borek with the Space Marines-“

“I don't care about the parties as long as they don't do anything prohibited and everyone is involved in the cleaning afterwards,” the retort came as several beetles flew in from outside of the room with data-slates. “I was referring about your atrocious behaviour every time the Tech-Priests are not there to keep both eyes and all their mechadendrites on you.”

“I don't know what they've been reporting, but I'm sure they are lying.”

When the single word 'innovate' was enough to convince them you were an arch-heretek, was it really that surprising?

“I'm rather sure of the contrary, actually.” Taylor gestured towards an untouched pile on the right section of her table. It was a...very tall and wide pile of data-slates, vellum rolls, and other data-repositories. “This is the sum of complaints concerning your actions which were relayed to me, including Commissars' reports and Administratum protestations.”

“They're just jealous about Cthulhu.”

“Cthulhu,” an icy-cold voice made him shiver, “was the only positive contribution you made to the Battle of Commorragh. And while I don't deny its effectiveness, that doesn't erase nor excuse the multiple insubordinations, requisitions breaking the chain of command, insults against several low and high-ranking Tech-Priests, and a few thousand other rules broken for posterity. If Zuhev had his way, you would already be in front of a court-martial, and given the magnitude of the problems you've caused, I've no doubt the judge would already be gathering men for the firing squad.”

“But you aren't going to let him? We are the only parahumans-“

“You can thank your lucky stars that fact remains true,” the Warlord-turned-General said so conversationally it was more threatening than a thousand screams. “I'm rather sick of your behaviour. Fortunately, you have been kind enough to give me a proper stick.”

“First I should hear what the carrot is.”

The new glare was truly withering.

“The carrot, in this instance, will be Dragon and myself overseeing the development of your video game entertainment facilities while you're away and part of the income generated by it going to your bank account. It was your idea, after all.”

Leet smiled...and the next words were like a cold shower.

“Obviously this relies on your ideas being a success. I wasn't going to waste my astropaths' time on such a trivial subject, so I don't know if the opening in our absence was a success or not. If debts accumulate and the project isn't viable, I will not hesitate to close it.”

“And the stick?”

“The Mechanicus is very interested in re-establishing contact with the lost Squat Worlds. In a few months, when the ships assigned to the expedition will be ready in orbit around Nyx, you will go with them.”

“You're not serious!” Terror gripped his poor Tinker heart. “That Squat is completely crazy! He sings like a deranged bard with boar ancestry!”

To his consternation, this barely managed to make his golden leader blink for an instant.

“If Slayer Borek is so crazy, why did you think swearing an oath to him was such a good idea?”

“I wasn't thinking straight,” Leet admitted. He was not going to confess that he had downed half a bottle of amasec after the ground evacuation from the Port of Lost Souls. And when the demons had materialised, he had panicked! It could have happened to anyone! “But I'm sure there's a way to make this oath null!”

“You could die,” Weaver replied unempathetically. “Whether they are called Duardin or Squats, the few archives we have left from the Age where these abhumans were part of the Imperium all insist their culture is founded on oaths and the sanctity of one's word. I don't know if they are even capable of intentionally lying. So you are going to do what you promised, and follow this Slayer for as long as you need in order to repay your debt. I am not going to hurt Imperial-Squat diplomatic efforts before they have a chance to start.”

“But...you need me for certain projects!”

“You will be aboard a Mechanicus fleet, with direct astropathic connection to Nyx and Dragon. Your research will continue...under close supervision.” Leet shivered again, having a very good idea what sort of supervision the new 'Living Saint' had in mind.

“At least make me a Rogue Trader like Wolfgang and Dennis!”

A second after, the sudden brightness almost blinded him.

“GET OUT!”

**Malta Starfort *Omnissiah's Favour***

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

When the Great Khan of the White Scars had demanded 'a short moment of the General's time' and the Dawnbreaker Guard had agreed to let him enter, Agiel had expected it to be a short and quickly concluded affair. There was a judgement later during the day, and to be honest he didn't think the Shield of the Angels and the Master of Chogoris had many shared points of interest.

Three hours later, the Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red recognised his error. In his presence and that of over two hundred Space Marines, the golden-robed and golden-winged Basileia had conversed with the son of the Warhawk on subjects as diverse as Chogorian poetry, the influence of M2 Mongol culture during the Dark Ages, the possibility of a warlord called Genghis Khan being a secret identity of the Emperor, the hardships of proper calligraphy, and the merits of oral and written tradition.

“And you think the Emperor had a key in this cultural revival?” The Great Khan asked with deadly seriousness.

“I have gained enough evidence to be absolutely certain He walked among humankind in M2, M3, M22 and several millennia in-between,” replied the commander of Army Group Caribbean serenely. “As the Lord of the Imperium is more than a warrior and a politician, it stands to reason he would have wanted to preserve the traditions and lifestyles of pre-stellar Ancient Terra,though I won't speculate on his motives.”

“Maybe he just lived on the steppes for several decades,” Hibou Khan proposed. “When you have ridden horses across continents and under brilliant stars, you do not forget it. But I believe we went a bit off-topic.”

Agiel Izaz thanked the patience of the Blood and having donned his helmet. Three hours was *not* going 'a bit' off-topic!

“Yes. I believe we were speaking about military orders for the Yasan Sector?”

Usually, felling this decision would have been unconscionable without the presence of Lord Yasan, but the White Scars had always exerted a huge influence on the regiments and the Munitorum procurements of the worlds they protected. If the White Scars insisted a war machine had to be integrated into the Yasan regiments, the Colonels and their superiors would bow and obey.

“Fifty thousand Jaghatai Khan Battle-Tanks and one thousand Cataphract Super-Heavy Tanks,” the Great Khan announced calmly. “And we want at least half of the order delivered within the decade.”

“It will be done,” Lady Weaver affirmed after only a short moment of mental calculation. “The production lines are already running, they will just need to be expanded."

“Assuming the first prototypes of the new 'Brunhilda supremacy fighter' perform as well as the data suggests, we will also order one thousand of them, half for augmented pilots, half for Astartes pilots.”

“I must warn you that, given the Mechanicus protocols and of course the other Chapters wanting to have access to it, I don't know if these numbers can be delivered within the decade.”

“We can sweeten the deal by giving you the schematics of our jetbikes and supporting the technological modifications in order to convert your 'Dragon Armours' into Dreadnoughts.”

“This is going to cost a lot,” Lady Nyx told the Great Khan. “I think the Nyx Mechanicus Council had begun to envisage such a project, but the beginning of it had been put on hold due to the reforms and the infrastructure requirements to launch Operation Caribbean and satisfy the Munitorum tithe in the imparted delays.”

“We are in agreement then?”

The General muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'Dragon is going to dance for ten days' before nodding.

“We are in agreement.”

The next minutes were spent bargaining mutual ship repair rights and exchanges of smaller but yet extremely profitable technology templates.

A melody began to play two compartments away, signalling that the members of the 'public' invited to the judgement of the Sons of Sanguinius had begun to take the seats awaiting them.

“The Bacta-“

“I will negotiate with all the Space Marine Chapters together. It has not reached mass production anyway,” several spiders advanced and gave Hibou Khan a small coffer which, judging by the diamonds over it, must cost a fortune by itself. “I'm afraid the end of our pleasant conversation will have to take place another day.”

“May the winds be favourable to you,” the Great Khan bowed.

“And may your hunts be crowned with success,” the Basileia replied before walking directly towards the great gates of this Starfort's level.

**Rogue** **Trader Magdalena Orpheus**

Magdalena felt terrible unease today, and it wasn't because her scar was burning in pain or she had some debt collectors banging against her starship's airlock.

Funny how those two issues seemed petty and insignificant when confronted with a life-or-death matter.

She and the eight other women entered the judgement hall through a hidden backdoor, certainly one installed by the Pavia pirates when the Malta Starfort had still been in their possession. As a result, they were spared – for now – the inquisitive looks of the crowd, and that was for the better.

Because there were enough Space Marines and elite warriors of the Imperium in this long hall to use the words 'small army' and 'transhuman assault force'.

They were in four neat columns, one red, one white-yellow, one green, and one white-grey-blue. By themselves, they already created an atmosphere of indomitability and martial power. And they were not alone. While most of these people were unknown to her, Magdalena had enough experience to recognise the augments and the clothes Knight nobles, Titan Princepses, Mechanicus Archmagi, and other senior dignitaries wore.

The dark-haired Rogue Trader knew enough to realize that if everyone under the rank of Ship Captain or equivalent was ordered to leave this room, the numbers of people leaving could be counted with two hands, maybe less.

Any other day, they would have seized the attention. Here and now, they were just the witnesses of Imperial Justice.

The large set of golden scales was waiting on a table, a golden chalice on one end, a small sword on the other. Next to it a giant Space Marine equipped with baroque-red power armour was kneeling. It was a gesture which should have been surprising, but the two golden figures in front of him were dominating the assembly without trying.

Standing alone, the Custodes warrior was like a myth of the old legends which had suddenly decided to step into reality. His golden armour was martial perfection, and every detail promised death and retribution to those who dared challenge the God-Emperor and His edicts.

And yet, the Watcher of the Throne was not at the centre of attention. A young woman with black hair and a golden robe was. Her glowing wings radiated golden energy, making all her surroundings seem somehow dull and hastily prepared. Nothing stood comparison against the sight of the God-Emperor's light.

In the religious silence reigning over the assembly, there was no way to miss her sentences.

“You were given illegal instructions, that much can't be denied, Chapter Master Yarhibol. But the existence of a few corrupt officials, no matter how high-ranked, is not an adequate excuse when the outcome which followed is secession from the Imperium.”

The voice was not triumphant or boastful. At most, Magdalena could hear a tinge of sadness.

“It is because humanity is united under the light of the Astronomican that trillions of men and women can live their lives day after day without being preyed upon by eldritch horrors, be they xenos or worse things. Secession may seem a lesser crime to an inexperienced eye, but it is one which cracks the foundations of the Imperium. And to be blunt, the Codex Astartes gave plenty of autonomy to the Chapters after the Second Founding. Your case is hardly the fate of an ignorant landowner on a Feudal World. You had a choice, Sons of Sanguinius. And in the end, your decision was to secede.”

The Living Saint left her throne, and if anything, the power coursing through her veins and wings seemed to increase as she walked down to the set of scales and grabbed the golden chalice with her left hand and the sword with her right.

“Fortunately for your future, you returned to the Imperium of your own volition. Late, very late, but no one had to drag you to Holy Terra in chains for your judgement. Therefore, under the condition the High Lords validate my judgement, I sentence your entire Chapter to a Penitent Crusade of one hundred standard years. You will fight for the Imperium, and expiate the shame of your secession in blood and fire. The Blood Angels will safeguard your gene-seed reserves and your critical Apothecarium and war-production facilities at Baal for the next century. Should the Chapter not survive the Penitent Crusade, your shame and your crime will be considered paid in full and a new Chapter will be rebuilt from them.”

The sword was raised and stopped mere millimetres away from the throat of Chapter Master Yarhibol.

“Your first action will be to go to the Forge World of Tigrus and the nearby frontlines, and to purge it of the greenskin infestation threatening it with the help of the Imperial Guard and the Adeptus Mechanicus. However...” a single drop of blood fell on the pauldron of the Space Marine, and there was a minuscule spark of golden light. When the transhuman officer moved, Magdalena and the rest of the spectators discovered that the Chapter's sigil had been scoured off by the power of the God-Emperor. “You will be the Lamenters, not the Sons of Sanguinius. Regain your honour, and Baal and myself will deliberate and consider if you're worthy to take up that name once more.”

There was a lot of movement afterwards. The noise levels also soared. Plenty of Space Marines were satisfied, but there were loud grumblings that the judgement was showing leniency and forgiveness. The sinister-looking Black Templars were the foremost voices above the rest of the crowd.

Magdalena felt a measure of hope. The Saint obviously wasn't a bloody lunatic or a maniac reciting the verses of the Lectitio Divinitatus like they were the sum of all answers to everything in this galaxy.

The rest of her mind told her she was stupid to think her worthless hide would be spared. A Space Marine Chapter was worth far more militarily compared to a female Rogue Trader whose pockets were almost empty.

One by one, the guards escorted them to the location where the accused Chapter Master had stood minutes ago. Silently, they were aligned and presented to the Destroyer of Commorragh, who had returned to her golden throne dominating the hall.

There were no golden scales, and one couldn't miss the fact the Living Saint had drawn her personal crystal sword.

“When I was told there were Rogue Traders working for Sliscus, my first reaction was to think it was a poor attempt at humour,” the golden-winged woman began, unhappiness evident on her face. “My second reaction was to order the Inquisition to put all of you through rigorous interrogation before giving you the execution your crimes deserve.”

From the corner of her eyes, Magdalena saw several black-hooded figures take position not far from them. If she shivered a second later, it wasn't because of the cold.

“But I was curious. What could push the holder of a Warrant of Trade to betray the very seal of the Imperium and the oaths sworn to the God-Emperor? For the sake of justice, I read the records and the rest of the information my forces were able to acquire before, during, and after the Battle of Commorragh. It was...enlightening.”

The Captain of the *Arica Orpheus* thought someone was going to bring a mountain of vellum and other 'proof' of their crimes, but no one moved and the Living Saint continued.

“Scarlet Kade.”

She was the sole member of the nine Rogue Traders to be in chains, and the guards had to force her to kneel. The reason for this caution did not have to be investigated very deeply. Dyed dark red hair, crimson eyes, crimson red armour, cadaveric white skin and modified eyes and ears; to the average citizen, the woman would have been identified as an Eldar. “You were captured aboard the Eldar cruiser *Smile of Red Stars* once the Mechanicus boarding batteries had neutralised your crew's resistance. Slave trade, genocide, unsanctioned xenocide, trade of tainted xenos artefacts, slave raids, torture of Adeptus Administratum personnel, drug trade, assassinations of Adepts of the Imperium, devastation of Imperial colonies, piracy, blackmail, and poisoning of several cities are your crimes. I think I have enough evidence to sentence you to die a thousand times.”

“Kill me and Sliscus will slaughter a thousand worlds in retaliation!” barked the Eldar-looking Rogue Trader.

“Sliscus is dead, and you will follow him soon,” Lady Weaver replied in a bored tone. “Given the magnitude of your treason, all your assets, be they in precious metals or not, will be seized by the Inquisition for investigation. I have no doubt most assets will be destroyed before the year is out. All your accomplices, clients, and supporters will be put to death. The *Smile of Red Stars* and your bases will be disintegrated once the Holy Ordos has learned everything they need from them. By the authority invested in me by the High Lords of Terra and the Immortal God-Emperor, the M33 Warrant given by the Lords of Bakka is null and void, and will be ritually destroyed tomorrow. As for yourself...I think the Inquisition and the Ecclesiarchy will have fun making you scream. The Punishment of Shai-tan awaits.”

“NO! NO, I WANT A BLADE IN MY HAND WHEN I DIE!”

The Punishment of Shai-Tan was a very gruesome way to leave this galaxy. First, legs and arms were severed before cauterisation. The torso was opened and torturers injected in your insides substances multiplying your suffering by ten. The mark of the greatest crime you were accused of was branded on your forehead, and once the interrogators were satisfied, the tongue was cut, the intestines and the rest of the organs were dissected piece by piece, always taking great care to keep you alive for hours. A psyker often raped your mind and your soul while all of this happened. Final torment, when your sanity was beginning to slip away, the mutilated remains of your legs were set aflame slowly until your carcass was nothing but a pile of ashes and broken bones.

At the risk of repeating herself, it was a method of execution to avoid at all costs.

“I don't care what you want, Drukhari-lover,” for the first time, Magdalena truly heard hatred in the Saint's voice. “You will join Hoth, since your loyalty was as self-centered as his. Guards, take her away.”

At this moment, the rumours that the Eldar of Commorragh had called their judge by the nickname Angel of Death weren't so hard to believe.

“Oprah III Jeffers.”

The guards weren't required to force the arrogant aristocrat to her knees, but in her blue robe with obscene cleavage, Oprah III was behaving like she was going to be escorted away innocent and blameless any second now.

“Of all treasons, yours was one of the worst suffered by the Imperium.”

It might very well be, indeed. Fourth daughter of the First Duke – the title the holder of the Warrant took in the Jeffers Dynasty – the brown-haired member of Sliscus' harem had stolen millions of Throne Gelts, revealed critical information about the patrols of the Imperial Navy and the deployments of the Imperial Guard, leaked the schedule of major convoys, and eliminated everyone who might reveal her crimes.

“First Duke Jeffers has acknowledged the shame you have brought upon House Jeffers and will pay heavy reparations for your loathsome conduct. Your Ambition-class Cruiser the *Manifest Destiny* is officially ceded to Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach, and the five hundred-plus million Throne Gelts of assets you personally possessed will serve to compensate the victims of your odious crimes.”

“My father would never disavow me!” the face heavily modified by genetic surgery managed an expression of utter fury.

“You slept with a xenos and conspired with the enemies of the Imperium, tarnishing your Dynasty's honour in the process,” the Living Saint pointed out. “Baron Lagos, as per our agreement, her life is yours.”

The large Knight noble who had arrived next to them while their attention was elsewhere looked at Oprah as if she were a dirty cockroach.

“Thank you, your Celestial Highness. She will be beheaded before the day is out.”

All fight apparently drained out of her high heels and the rest of her frivolous clothes, the daughter of First Duke Jeffers was dragged away. The choreography had evidently been prepared beforehand with the envoys of Jeffers and the Knights of House Krast. Many war-walkers and precious resources should find their way to the Nyx Sector in the future.

“Vanessa Armengarde.”

“I plead guilty, your Celestial Highness,” the dark-skinned woman answered, an expression of resignation on her face.

“As well you should,” the golden-winged General retorted severely. “I know Lord Oslandul stabbed you with an economic dagger when he gave your Dynasty that Warrant, but meeting financial difficulties is no reason to use your influence to contact a pirate as infamous and dangerous as Sliscus the Serpent.”

“At the time, avoiding bankruptcy seemed an easier option,” the dark eyes stayed firmly fixed on the floor, her green uniform a very pale imitation of the clothes worn by the officers of the Pacificus loyalists.

“Good to know your loyalty is so cheap to buy,” the Living Saint commented. “And the reason why you refused the Magi's orders to participate in the Battle of Commorragh?”

This time there was the shadow of something sounding like defiance in Vanessa's words.

“As I've said to your emissaries, the Light Cruiser *Fortune of Armengarde* was too old to participate in this fleet-on-fleet action! My crew and I would have all lost our lives for nothing!”

“You would have been recognised as loyal and I would have declared your crimes atoned for,” her judge immediately disagreed. “But since you didn't obey the summons of men and women infinitely more loyal than you, you and your crew will die. I have no use for people who consort with Eldar at the first economic downfall. Your Light Cruiser will be sold back to the Imperial Navy. As your other crimes are not enough to warrant torture, you will hang tomorrow.”

Vanessa Armengarde was taken away, and Magdalena could not help but feel a twinge of pity for the dark-haired woman. Her fate had been sealed since her great-grandmother had taken the family Warrant, but the last of the Armengarde was going to end their Dynasty in an inglorious and humiliating manner.

“Olivia Cheshire.”

“Your Celestial Highness,” the Orpheus Rogue Trader could not help but feel jealous at the elegance shown by the 'Great Duchess of the Stars'. In her traditional blue dress, Olivia was a woman who looked like she was going to dance to the opera in the next minutes. She was a painting of different shades of blue, with darker blue hair, cool blue eyes, azure robe, and small sandals of sapphire.

“Unlike the others your crimes are limited to sexual relationships with a xenos and never repaying many debts accumulating in the Nyx System for the last decades. Since Sliscus obviously never trusted you enough to let you grow rich again, seizing your ship and your assets would not repay half of the Throne Gelts you owe me.”

“The Menelaus men were always incompetent traitors,” the blue-robed Rogue Trader sighed. “Any chance you will waive the debts and call it a day?”

“No.” Lady Weaver replied curtly. “Since you were a fairly gifted Rogue Trader before falling into Sliscus' claws and fought for the Imperium during the Battle of Commorragh, I will spare your life, but your Warrant is hereby rescinded. You, your crew, and your ship the Cruiser *The Last Opera* are now part of the Rogue Trader fleet of Rogue Trader Dennis Peters. And the Inquisition will arrest you at the first sign your loyalty wavers again.”

Magdalena allowed herself a small internal sigh of relief at the confirmation their golden-winged judge had not come to only utter execution notice after execution notice. And since aside from Cheshire, she was the only other Rogue Trader to have obeyed the Mechanicus cogboys and fought at Commorragh...

Less than one minute later, Blair de Vore was sentenced to death. The fact that her Warrant of Trade was an M34 document personally delivered by the Speaker for the Chartists of the Captains of the time didn't save her, nor her Sector-level wealth, her trade contacts in highly-valued metals and luxury items. Her ship, the Orion-class Star Clipper *Law of Profit*, was given to the fleet of Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach. The Warrant was evidently going to be burned, her House assets seized, and most of the crew and allies were going to be decapitated by axe or sword like the woman they had tied their destinies to. All the laces and ribbons Blair wore wouldn't change that.

Shiva Wrathbone was the next woman to be sent to the executioners. In looks, the 'Wrath of the Dark Tides' was the exact opposite of a Living Saint: midnight-coloured bodysuit with cabalistic silver icons, bald, white pale irises, unnaturally thin like most void clan members, and donning several bone amulets on every part of her body. But what sealed her fate from the very beginning were her raids on the Black Ships sailing to Holy Terra – though the illegal slave trade and massacre of millions of colonists didn't help, of course. Her ships and mostly everything having belonged to her were released into the custody of the Holy Ordos of His Most Divine Majesty's Inquisition. Shiva was to be burned alive, and the guards had to forcefully drag her out of the hall.

Eunomia Vhane wasn't spared either. The baroque armour of bronze, the green feathers, and the possible archeotech on her arms and neck might make plenty of antiquity experts happy, but Lady Weaver recounted the assassination of several adepts, sabotage of important manufactorums and Forges while she was obeying Sliscus orders, and the rape of an Ecclesiarchy Cardinal for five full minutes. The last crime – which had happened a year ago or so – would be 'rewarded' by crucifixion and being lowered into an acid pool until death came for her. Her Warrant would soon be meeting the pyres of the priests, and her flagship the Vengeance-class Grand Cruiser *First Antiquity* went to Rogue Trader Dennis Peters.

“Magdalena Orpheus.”

Silently, she knelt, hoping her actions spoke for themselves.

“You were the only one to refuse the consensual 'approaches' of Sliscus. For this alone you have my respect. And the moment you thought you had an opportunity to take your revenge, you fought against Sliscus' interests and participated in the Battle of Commorragh. Approach.”

Magdalena stood and walked to the throne. The crystal blade had been sheathed, and the Living Saint descended the last steps to meet her.

“Let me see your scar.”

Trembling, Magdalena used her left hand to get the black hair covering half of her face out of the way, revealing the long scar Sliscus had given her when she had told him 'no' during their first meeting.

A vial of red colour was produced from somewhere and dripped onto her scar, and when it touched her skin the pain seemed to miraculously dissipate in mere seconds!

A mirror was handed to her, and Magdalena stayed mouth wide open for a good minute, as nearly two-thirds of the scar had disappeared like it had never existed and the remaining third was much reduced in intensity and width.

“How?” She breathed.

“Bacta would have removed the scar entirely if it had been more recent,” the Saint said instead of answering her question. “I declare you innocent, Magdalena Orpheus.”

Loud shouts came behind her, and at first the Orpheus woman thought these were protestations that she was spared.

But when she turned her head, Magdalena was met with the spectacle of Rogue Trader Alyena Sinblade, gloriously naked, prostrated for their judge.

“My body and my soul are yours.”

Without even a glance towards the Victor of Commorragh, Magdalena felt certain that this had not been part of the script...

**Marshal Werner Groener**

As far as Werner had been able to ascertain, 'Admiral' Sliscus had not valued a body type or particular series of traits above all others when choosing the women sharing his bed on a decade-to-decade basis. The nine Rogue Traders who had been made to stand in line had proved this truth; from the athletic Magdalena Orpheus in black parade armour and white cape or the curvy ribbon-covered Blair de Vore, the nine women had truly little in common save their titles of Rogue Trader – though in Oprah III Jeffers, it was more 'daughter of famous Rogue Trader' than a holder of one of the infamous Warrants of Trade who was judged.

Not that their looks mattered a lot. To his best knowledge, General Taylor Hebert had not told the verdicts she intended to deliver to anyone outside her Dawnbreaker Guard and her close inner circle, but the Cadian Marshal had heard enough about the evidence accumulated by Tech-Priests and Inquisitors to know there were only two Rogue Traders who may have a chance to be spared a long and dolorous execution after they left the hall. The Lady of Nyx had a long list of priorities in her head, but she was not likely to forget that of the nine, only Olivia Cheshire and Magdalena Orpheus had obeyed her summons and fought in the naval battle of the Port of Lost Souls. As a consequence, it was seven sure executions, and two trials which may warrant lesser punishments. And yes, in hindsight, the rape of Magdalena Orpheus guaranteed the Tempestus Rogue Trader would be declared innocent and the – minor – law-breaking swept under the rug.

But so far, nothing truly shocking or really astonishing had happened during this long-deserved punishment session of Rogue Traders.

“My body and my soul are yours.”

That is, until the ninth Rogue Trader untangled the straps keeping her robe upon her body, and prostrated herself naked in front of the insect-mistress.

Werner was trying to remember a precedent for this, but he couldn't find one.

“Alyena Sinblade.” Werner knew the companion of Lady Weaver was a woman, but there was no trace of the black eyes being seduced by the naked body in front of her. “Of all the nine members of Sliscus' human harem, you were the one I was really surprised by your survival when the Blackstone Fortress ended the threat of the Arch-Enemy. Your behaviour and actions were worthy of an Excess cultist.”

The golden-winged General could have added her looks to the list too. Now that she had shed her scandalous near-transparent robe, the purple-haired Rogue Trader's body appeared to be built to give credence to the title of Sin Queen she had taken for herself.

“You assassinated several loyal Rogue Traders under Sliscus' orders. Your immediate predecessor engineered a Sector-wide civil war before atomising most of the evidence and fleeing to the frontier regions. You personally blackmailed several Planetary Governors and high-ranking Adepts, and flooded several markets with prohibited artefacts and xenos items.” The hand of the Basileia caressed the hilt of her sword, but it was not coursing with power...for now. “You say your body and your soul are mine. I am an unconvinced they are worth anything. Your flagship the *Glory of Sinblade?* It is an Universe-class Mass Conveyor, and it has plenty of uses for loyal men and women...once it has been purified by Lisa and given a loyal crew.”

“Test me,” implored the prostrated purple-lipped woman.

Werner acknowledged that Alyena Sinblade had guts...unless it was despair driving her. With the magnitude of the crimes she had committed, the Rogue Trader had to know her execution sentence would be closer to Kade's than the 'mere' beheading Oprah III Jeffers was about to receive.

“Very well. Archmagos Lankovar if you'd please?” The red-robed council member of the Nyx Mechanicus left the ranks of the Tech-Priests and handed a tiny storage device to his liege...and unlike some, this one didn't contain a vial of Bacta. Two seconds later, it was revealed to be a small crystal which could easily fit in the palm of the Basileia's hand.

But this was no diamond, ruby, or any piece of jewellery. It shone like a star had been imprisoned inside its crystalline depths, and Werner did not bother with the whispers generated in the aftermath. Yes, this was a crystal of Aethergold. The Guard officers of his rank were not close to the throne, but they could feel the 'song' – it was the best word to describe the phenomenon – overwhelming the senses.

And it was singing of loyalty, of hope for better days...but before all things, it sang of *Sacrifice*.

Lady Weaver descended the steps one more time and ordered Sinblade to raise one of her hands.

When the hand of the General placed the crystal of Aethergold in the Rogue Trader's palm, a loud scream escaped the lips of the latter, and the expression on the purple-haired woman's seductive face shifted from submission to non-feigned suffering.

There was no opportunity for the former lover of Sliscus the Serpent to let the crystal fall from her hand. Lady Weaver clasped her hand over hers, palm-to-palm, and for several seconds the golden halo created was visible to all. The commander of Army Group Caribbean showed no sign this was harmful for her. The screams of Alyena Sinblade were so powerful that it was clearly not true for her.

There was a powerful gust of wind, and Werner could have almost sworn the energy dispersed into the two women's bodies. Alyena Sinblade moaned and collapsed, her dark-haired judge finally relinquishing her grasp upon her hand and giving the Aethergold crystal back to the Tech-Priests.

“She's still alive, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” a Magos announced after a quick examination.

“Her soul was untainted,” the words generated a flurry of whispers and incredulous exclamations. “The Inquisition and the Imperial Navy can seize her assets outside Pavia and take the assets she stole from the *Glory of Sinblade*. The Warrant of Trade is rescinded. I will decide in the coming days what must be done about Alyena Sinblade and her Mass Conveyor.”

That was definitely not the outcome he had anticipated.

“And for the love of the Golden Throne, please give her some decent clothes!”

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Ophelia Sector**

**Ophelia VII**

**One hundred and eighty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Arch-Cardinal Winston Marlborough**

Once upon a time, the Holy Synod had been a ten-members-strong assembly. In that mythical age – which, assuming it had really existed, was well before early M33 – the most sacred assembly of the Cardinals and high prelates of the Adeptus Ministorum had included the Ecclesiarch, the four Arch Cardinals nominally enforcing the holy will of the God-Emperor over each Segmentum which wasn’t Solar, and the five Cardinals Terran.

Obviously more than three millennia later – assuming the Cult had ever been that fond of tiny gatherings – the five Terran representatives had fallen into irrelevance and been replaced by the five Cardinals Palatine, rulers and masters of Ophelia VII's grand cathedrals. The Ecclesiarch and the Arch-Cardinals were still there. Unfortunately, so were over ten thousand men and women, all holding a rank of Cardinal, Arch-Deacon, or any of the senior positions now allowing you a seat on the Holy Synod.

Since obviously seating a huge number of people in a 'simple' council room was physically impossible, the Holy Synod had taken to convening in the Church of Piety and Martyrdom, one of the first edifices ordered by Ecclesiarch Benedin IV when it was decided to transfer the seat of the Ecclesiarchy from Holy Terra to Ophelia VII.

In Winston's humble opinion, everything in this vast gallery hall betrayed the jealousy of the man at having been denied a voice in the affairs of the Imperium. At least half of the structures, paintings, and ornaments were outright copied from the Senatorum Imperialis and the Inner Palace. The monumental artwork *The* *God-Emperor's Ascension* was a pale imitation of the scene engraved on the Ultimate Gate protecting the Golden Throne, and the less said about *The* *Martyrdom of Ollanius Pius*, the better.

Not that his spiritual successor was much better, really. The gates of gold, platinum, and silver opened to reveal Pelagius I and his 'White Eminence', Cardinal Palatine Jean-Luc de Plessis, two men who in Winston's mind symbolised everything wrong with the current crop of senior Cardinals and Arch-Deacons.

They were old and in bad health. They had never left the Ophelia System. They prattled endlessly about the will of the God-Emperor, when in reality they ignored most of the astropathic and real messages coming from the Throneworld.

Winston was not saying he was the one who should replace them. That would be idiotic. He was only twenty years younger than Pelagius, though admittedly in far better health than him – his career in the Frateris Templar was long behind him, but it had allowed him to build a constitution which hadn't yet crumbled in the smoke of his favourite cigars. The Ecclesiarchy deserved a younger man – or a younger woman, he was not picky about the sex as long as the someone was competent and had fire in their belly.

“Let us pray, brothers, sisters,” droned Pelagius. By law, the Ecclesiarch should have made the prayer on his knees, but it had been more than fifty years since this 'tradition' was respected. “Oh God-Emperor, thank you for the magnificent victory you gave to the Imperium and Your Subjects. The Holy Light be Sanctified, Your Mighty Will was done...”

On and on Pelagius continued, in a prayer that honesty compelled Winston to place it in the category of 'just but boring'. A great military deed like this one should not give a Cardinal the urge to yawn and take a rest!

At last, it was over.

“The God-Emperor protects!” The Ecclesiarch had managed to make his voice a tad more dramatic for the final sentences.

“THE GOD-EMPEROR PROTECTS! AVE IMPERATOR!”

“Ave Imperator,” repeated Pelagius, trying to project an image of strength and holy duty, and failing miserably at both. “Great miracles have been reported to my ears, and we would be remiss in our duty if we didn't give them the praise and the boons every martyr, Saint, and Living Saint deserves. Under the Light of the Astronomican, before the Golden Throne, I propose...”

And the drowning began again. If Pelagius had been one of his allies, Winston would have advised him to let a younger Priest, maybe a Chapel-Master or a Drill Abbot, speak the words and the proposals. It wasn't exactly like anyone would fail to know which brain had decided to put them forward, and the Cardinals and high prelates of the Ministorum deserved something a bit more fiery. By the God-Emperor, tens of billions of long-ears had been blasted apart! This was a time of celebrations and faith in humanity's ultimate triumph!

Maybe Winston was too harsh. After all, most of the information within this speech was known to him beforehand thanks to his agents and the contacts he had cultivated during his career. Consequently, Theodora Gaius being canonised wasn't a surprise. Nor was General Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, Basileia of Nyx, being officially recognised as a Living Saint. The planet Pavia Primus was going to become a Shrine World, the 'Gateway to the Miracles' in Pelagius' own words, and the woman who had been chosen to carry high the divine power was also given total control over the Nyx diocese and a slice of the Atlantis one, in the form of the Suebi Sub-Sector.

The seat given to the Victor of Commorragh on the Holy Synod was not even worth the bat of an eye; since the cogboys of Mars had already given her several votes in their own Parliament, Pelagius had to give her one hundred votes – only one fewer than himself – or risk being ridiculed and disavowed by trillions of pilgrims.

The financial support of the Ministorum to the Living Saint in order to build grandiose monuments celebrating the destruction of the Dark City and the ending of pirate raids and a potential Eldar resurgence was also a given from the start. Sending architects, artists and many pilgrims to the Nyx Sector wasn't going to be commented much.

Predicting that Bacta, the miraculous healing substance provided by Lady Weaver, would be elevated to the rank of divine resource did not require a lot of foresight either.

A Battlefleet would be assembled for the newly founded Order of the Silver Rose, and many Astropathic Choirs would be created to decrease the communication gaps between Ophelia VII and Nyx.

The votes passed one after another with near-unanimities – and for the record the votes which weren't 'for' were abstentions.

But when Pelagius ceded the floor to Jean-Luc de Plessis, Winston like hundreds of Cardinals smiled carnivorously.

This was going to be *good*.

“We live in exceptional times, brothers, sisters.” the White Eminence began, “I propose to create the office of Cardinal-Emissary to Living Saint Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver.”

“I give my support to this motion and propose my candidature,” Cardinal Gerard shouted, ignoring a few centuries of traditions and Ministorum edicts.

“Over my dead body!” an Arch-Deacon retorted, and the Holy Synod became a storm of accusations and insults.

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**One hundred and eighty-four hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Hospital Ship *Tulip of Contentment***

**First Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

The big problem when you were in a hospital bed was the impossibility of slapping someone who annoyed you.

“You survived,” Freya grumbled.

“I am better than you,” Kurt Nils pointed out in an insufferable manner. “I mean, we both knew it, but the Battle of Commorragh confirmed it. I didn't need Bacta and several hours of attention from the Biologis Tech-Priests after it was over.” The 'unlike you' was not voiced, but the Nyxian noblewoman and the four or five pilots waiting behind the other survivor of White Squadron clearly heard it nonetheless.

“I have more victories than you!” Damn it, why couldn't the plebeian understand this? “Lady Weaver and the Imperial Navy recognised my valour!”

Five feet away from her bed was all the evidence a wise and impartial examiner needed. Freya had been given the Lion of Terra, the newly-created Moth Star, and hundreds of other major decorations, some she would have to consult the archives to know what exactly they stood for.

“Yeah, yeah,” Nils, frustratingly, was completely unimpressed. “But the Imperial Navy wanted a poster girl after the losses of the Port of Lost Souls, and you just happened to fit the profile perfectly. Noble, infuriatingly noble, noble pedigree, female, not horrible to look at...”

“You forget my three hundred and seventy-two confirmed victories,” Freya gave him her most dangerous smile, with her teeth bared. “How many long-ears did you miss while I was emptying the skies, Third Lieutenant?”

If there was good news to put before all the others once she left this hospital ship, it would be that for the time being, she was Nil's superior. Combined with the Lion of Terra, and the peasant-stock insolent would be forced to salute her, muscle problems and other minable apologies be damned.

“Two hundred and ninety-nine confirmed victories,” the Nyxian male pilot admitted, “but then the machine-spirits of my Thunderbolt became weird in the last battle, otherwise it would have been far more. And honestly, this is more than compensated by the fact I didn't crash my fighter into a cage of Catachan ants!”

That sounded...lacking as an excuse.

“What is the damage to his Thunderbolt?” Freya called out to a member of Gold Squadron waiting near the door.

“Oh, he's just missing one wing and the Tech-Priests are trying to assess how much metal they will be able to recycle from it.”

“HA!”

“My Thunderbolt is still in a better state than yours.”

“Excuses,” Freya sang, feeling a delicious sense of satisfaction in her heart and lungs. “Always excuses...I beat you, Nils, why won't you admit it?”

“Because I'm better than you in the skies, that's why!”

“I hate you.”

“I hate you too.”

“By the God-Emperor,” muttered someone, “why don't we leave them alone in the same room, seal the door, and come back in a week or two. They should have shagged by then and all this sexual tension will disappear...”

This was ridiculous. Having sexual relationships with this plebeian? Not in a thousand generations! She would rather fight the Battle of Commorragh a second time!

“If the one who has made this comment doesn't reveal himself in the next five seconds, I will use him as target practise once I am given a new fighter.”

“Excellent spirit!” The sole surviving Lieutenant of Aquila Squadron complimented her. “You will need it since both you and Nils are on the list of pilots who according to the rumour are earmarked for instructorship at the Aeronautica Nyx Academy.”

“No!”

“Oh yes,” Nils confirmed. “I will have more opportunities to show you I'm the better pilot.”

“Yes. Try to win a Moth Star and a Lion of Terra, and I may consider you an acceptable wingman...”

But this wouldn't happen. Freya was the best pilot. Even if they fought in ten more battles like Commorragh, this would stay true. There was no contest between her and Nils.

**Gloriana** **Battleship *Flamewrought***

**Captain Corr Phoecus**

“There are going to be conditions, you know.”

“Name them.”

General Taylor Hebert huffed after Chapter Master Ta'Phor Hezonn's words.

“I am not willing to declare one or more planets as Adeptus Non. That is not an insult against the reputation and honour of the Salamanders or any Chapter; I just don't want to stymie investment, colonisation prospects, and trade benefits in the Nyx Sector. The rule of non-Space Marines may be rescinded if I think the local rulers aren't up to the task or that the Adeptus Astartes will do a far better job than them, but to begin with, the Space Marines will focus on recruitment and training of their aspirants, and of course military actions.”

Corr knew this was definitely not a normal reaction from a Planetary Governor's perspective. Those tended to vary between two extremes, the 'you will never set foot on my planet, neo-barbarians!' and the 'please rule in my stead, and crush all these rebels while you're at it!' – the response to which never made the existing planetary authorities fond of the sons of Vulkan for some strange reason.

“We will accept, though we need to know more about specifics,” the Regent of Nocturne replied.

“That's fair,” the insect-mistress conceded, leaving her seat to place a flexi-disk of data in the hololithic console. A red-black planet materialised in the centre of the conference room five seconds later.

“The planet of Bahamut,” the discoverer of two Artefacts of Vulkan explained, “It is a Volcanic Death World of the Nyx Sector with a population of seventeen million inhabitants at the time of the latest census, though it must have increased since my departure as over eight thousand Tech-Priests and support were deployed there last year. The Planetary Governor is the Fire Champion, and is chosen by a grand series of mining and creation challenges the local citizens call 'meritocratic technocracy'. The main exports are obviously ore, gems, promethium, gas, unrefined resources, and some artisan-forged luxury items.”

“It would be more than adequate to perpetuate the legacy of Vulkan,” Chapter Master Hezonn assured. “The infrastructure is minimal for the moment, I take it?”

“Yes. I ordered an industrial civilian expansion a few years ago, but it was not given the highest priority. Obviously it will be subject to change now. If you have suggestions...?”

Captain and future Chapter Master William Castor was the first to answer after a short examination of the data-stream accompanying the planet's projection.

“On the ground, a fortress-monastery with spaceport will be necessary. In orbit, the minimum is a defence grid and a medium shipyard, at least to accommodate repairs of Battle-Barges and slow-rate construction of Strike Cruisers.”

“Mars will deliver this.” From another mouth, it might have sounded like boasting. In the young General's voice, it was the truth.

“We will deliver one Battle-Barge and two Strike Cruisers after we have modernised them,” the Lord of the Salamanders promised.

“And the Fabricator-General has promised one Battle-Barge and two Strike Cruisers along with an undetermined number of escorts for the official Founding of the Magma Spiders,” a shiver of excitement flitted across the room, since this meant the name had been approved by the Lady. “As I understand, it's tradition to include several planets in the protection sphere of a newly Founded Chapter?”

“It is.”

“In this case,” the space representation of Bahamut vanished to be replaced by a display of the Nyx Sector's northern border. “The arc going from Upelluri and encompassing the systems of Bahamut, Polar, Matapan, Colorado, Amazonia, Aglaea, and Brockton seem appropriate. The Mechanicus and I might need your services at Hellhound to slay plenty of lava-plesiosaurs, and for the moment, the worlds can really benefit from having Astartes protectors.”

Corr knew that neither the future Chapter Master William Castor nor Chapter Master Hezonn had a problem with this. In fact, it was one more proof they had been right proposing the Founding of this Successor Chapter in the Nyx Sector.

“We must now give you the rewards your generosity deserves,” the Regent of Nocturne told their benefactor while gesturing to someone behind him.

Seven Salamanders advanced, each one opening a large coffer filled with one of the jewels the seven cities of Nocturne used in their emblems. From left to right, there were the Quinquartz, Ignite, Phonolite, Hyperite, Hadian, Zexor, and last but not least the Salamandrite.

The insect-mistress appeared suitably impressed by the radiance and purity of the gemstones, many of which were larger than her hand.

“Before Commorragh, only the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Adeptus Custodes had the right to purchase these gems, but your exploits in the Dark City and before have earned your House being added to this list,” Forgefather N'Varr told to the blushing golden-clothed woman.

This display was followed by a list of ores, metals, gems, and transfers of technology which accompanied the initial gift. Corr couldn't be sure, but it had to be a third of the strategic reserves the Salamanders had accumulated over the last millennia for the Quest of the Artefacts. And that was just the start of it. Several Volkite production lines from the *Flamewrought* would go to Nyx with the *Enterprise*, as well as schematics for improved Apothecariums and medical facilities. A lot of technical expertise would be provided in the decades to come.

“We also wish to support the development of an Astartes-crewed Dragon Armour and a Dreadnought-purposed Dragon Armour.”

This time the Basileia of Nyx chuckled.

“I see no reason to refuse, but be aware the Great Khan of the White Scars asked before you, at least where the Dreadnought Dragon Armour is concerned.”

As a result, there was more bargaining and more metals promised, along with exchanges via Rogue Traders.

“The *Flamewrought* will accompany you in your campaigns, as soon as Mars has finished repairing it,” one of the officers of the *Flamewrought* said. “Unfortunately, it is going to take some time.”

It was accepted without further questions. As shuttles arrived in the hangars, the damage to the flanks of the Gloriana flagship was alas all too evident, and if the Tech-Priests of Mars were often beating incredible deadlines in the name of efficiency and productivity, the *Flamewrought* was an immense challenge even they didn’t see every month.

“We are also willing to capture several insects of the Nocturnan lands and caverns for you.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but isn't the overwhelming majority of Nocturne's wildlife reptilian?”

“It is, Lady Weaver” Corr intervened in the conversation for the first time, as he as a hunter was one of the foremost experts on the subject. “But while Salamanders are the apex predators and cousin species dominate great expanses, there are insect species you might like to control. We have the Scorpiads in our deserts, whose size sometimes can be compared to Baneblades and they have stingers capable of effortlessly piercing ceramite and plasteel. The Pyre-worms and the Serrwyrms also fall into the insect category going by the criteria you gave us, and these species are both incredibly armoured and resistant against a considerable range of deadly environments.”

It was a pity he didn't have very many pict or hololithic displays to give weight to his representation, but honestly no one had known before rushing to Pavia some consideration would need to be shown to the tank-sized Scorpiads and the other carrion-eaters of Nocturne.

“They may prove useful,” was the judgement of the insect-mistress after a couple of minutes. “If it's not too much of a hardship, try to capture three or four breeding pairs of each species.”

Two members of the Dawnbreaker Guard opened the door to let a messenger-guardsman enter and the meeting ended then and there. Naturally, this meant the other part of the Salamander's reward to Lady Weaver was going to have to be presented at a later time.

Taking position behind the red-armoured sons of Sanguinius, the Salamanders descended two levels and arrived on the great hall prepared for the occasion.

Over two thousand Space Marines waited for them, only two hundred of them bearing the green of the Eighteenth Legion.

In an impeccable choreography, the Space Marines saluted General Taylor Hebert.

“By blood, lineage, loyalty, courage, sacrifice, and many of the greatest qualities a Space Marine can show in protection of the citizens of the Imperium and service of the Emperor, your Chapters have accomplished great exploits which will be remembered for millennia to come. If you want to swear yourselves to my Dawnbreaker Guard, I will accept you, and together we will destroy the plots of the enemies of Mankind wherever we go.”

Corr was proud to say it was a Salamander who was the first to advance and kneel before the golden-winged heroine.

“I, Forgefather Vulkan N'Varr, pledge my hammer, body, mind and soul to Lady Taylor Hebert, Chosen of the Emperor and Finder of Vulkan's Artefacts. Into the fires of battle, unto the anvil of war.”

The first, but definitely not the last. Soon there was a long column of Champions waiting to swear themselves to Weaver's service. And the first, as honour demanded, were the Imperial Fists.

“I, Huscarl Diamantis of the Imperial Fists, pledge my strength, my will, and my defiance to Lady Taylor Hebert, sister of our father-sire, Destroyer of Commorragh, Bringer of Hope. The walls will hold, so it has been sworn, so it shall be.”

\*\*\*\*

Transmitted: Conclave of Nyx

Received: [REDACTED]

Destination: [REDACTED]

Mission Time: 01.01.299M35

Telepathic Conduct: [REDACTED]

Reference: Ordo Malleus/3D544448W9

Author: Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor

Priority: Magenta-Black

*I don't share your opinion about the risks we're taking with the Dawnbreaker Guard. For all the Chapters having decided to pledge one of their veterans to Lady Weaver, this Honour Guard remains inferior in size to a Codex-compliant Company. If you follow a logical path, you should feel more threatened by the Brothers of the Red or the newly-created Magma Spiders, which are more likely to reach the one thousand-mark than the Basileia's protectors.*

*As for your demands, I think we can divide the reinforcements of the Dawnbreaker Guard into four categories. [It should be noted that the Lamenters – former Sons of Sanguinius – have not been authorised to present a candidate. The position of Baal and Nyx on the subject will be re-examined at the end of their Penitent Crusade.] The first are the replacements for the fallen Martyrs of Commorragh:*

*Epistolary Cassiel of the Templars of Blood Chapter*

*Epistolary Jegudiel of the Angels of Defiance Chapter*

*After the scions of the Great Angel, we have the Chapters who fought at Commorragh:*

*Forgefather Vulkan N'Varr of the Salamanders Chapter*

*Firedrake T'klis Rubix of the Magma Spiders Chapter*

*Epistolary Ramon Nino of the Howling Griffons Chapter*

*Prognosticator Sergei Bourne of the Silver Skulls Chapter*

*Sergeant Wilbert Loris of the Iron Drakes Chapter*

*Stormseer Uriyangkhadai of the White Scars Chapter*

*Shadow Warden Kalyan Gowtham of the Raven Guard Chapter*

*Venerable Ancient Pierre of the Heracles Warden Chapter [Addendum: I believe that in this case, the Chapter Master wanted to get rid of a big source of trouble.]*

*The third category is, as was eminently predictable, the Imperial Fists and their Successors:*

*Huscarl Diamantis of the Imperial Fists Chapter*

*Emperor's Champion Sigenandus of the Black Templars Chapter*

*Captain Cerulean Cuzco of the Crimson Fists Chapter*

*Master of Siege Saul Agamemnon of the Excoriators Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Cabrero of the Soul Drinkers Chapter*

*Death Speaker Ribera of the Executioners Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Garceller of the Iron Knights Chapter*

*Techmarine Ximenes of the Night Swords Chapter*

*Apothecary Moreno of the Halo Brethren Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Bermudez of the Sable Swords Chapter*

*Captain Uran Aznar of the Death Strike Chapter*

*Sergeant Daegon Belligeris of the Invaders Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Thomas Theisman of the White Templars Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Llorente of the Venom Thorns Chapter*

*Architect-Captain Vidal of the Knights of Dorn Chapter*

*Techmarine Eximeno of the Crimson Axes Chapter*

*Epistolary Catalan of the Doom Fists Chapter*

*Blademaster Machado Gomes of the Sons of Dorn Chapter*

*Epistolary Dos Santos of the Fists of Wrath Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Macintosh of the Red Templars Chapter*

*Reclusiarch Boulc'h of the Iron Champions Chapter*

*Master of Reconnaissance Vilanova of the Emperor's Warbringers Chapter*

*Terminator Glycerius of the Fire Lords Chapter*

*Phalanx Warder Cisneros of the Crusaders of Dorn Chapter*

*Techmarine Hakkarainen of the Emperor's Havoc Chapter*

*Apothecary Moenchius of the Flames of Aries Chapter*

*The fourth category has the potential to be far more problematic in the short-term future. It consists of* *Chapters who believe Rogal Dorn is their gene-sire, but for various reasons, including the encouragement of certain High Lords, have never been formally presented to the Imperial Fists or their Successors for approval. As one can imagine, neither Chapter Master Jovius nor the Chapters concerned are very happy about this situation. The members of the Dawnbreaker Guard recruited from these Chapters are:*

*Apothecary Merkel of the Sanctors of Terra Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Nogueira of the Hammers of Retribution Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Trujillo of the Black Crusaders Chapter*

*Chaplain Verdugo of the Star Leopards Chapter*

*Techmarine Silveira of the Death Knights Chapter*

*Epistolary Forman of the Emperor's Swords Chapter*

*Codicier Soukup of the Crimson Guard Chapter*

*Master of Artillery Zemanova of the Sky Sentinels Chapter*

*The Dawnbreaker Guard currently stands at seventy-seven Space Marines. And no, I refuse to speculate how big it will become when Lady Weaver departs from Nyx once more.*

**Captain** **Aeonid Thiel**

“Both an Ultramarine and a Novamarine refusing to enter the Dawnbreaker Guard on the same day...have I somehow offended the sons of Guilliman without realizing it?”

Aeonid was not the only Astartes to chuckle at the light-hearted question.

“If that were the case, I doubt a Silver Skull and a Howling Griffon would have agreed to join you, General.”

“There must be some truth to that,” the black-haired officer replied before taking a drink offered by one of the sons of Sanguinius serving as her Dawnbreaker Guard.

“But no, I won't serve under your command,” the veteran Ultramarine continued seriously as the crowd began to thin out and many Space Marines brought food and drinks to celebrate the large expansion of Weaver's Honour Guard. “I am of the opinion my oath to Lord Guilliman supersedes everything else save the vows sworn to the Emperor, and it wouldn't be fair to you if I promised you my blade and one day left your side to never come back.”

To be sure, what the young woman had accomplished was extremely impressive. Even by being given a secret path to attack the Dark City of Commorragh by surprise, victory had been far from certain. Several of the Drukhari she had personally killed would have been more than a match for Champions of the Old Legions, and her swarm was easily worth a million Auxilia warriors in every engagement – and unlike regular troops, they were totally expendable.

But honesty compelled him to admit, he preferred Guilliman's methods to Taylor Hebert's. The former were more predictable and tempered with long practise and extensive regulations.

Yes, it was ironic to admit, but Aeonid preferred orderly environments...even if he rarely respected the rules when the first rounds were fired.

“I think the Novamarines' refusal is more tied to their effectives' dispersal, my Lady,” the new Huscarl of the Dawnbreaker Guard explained. “They are recognised as valiant defenders of the Ultima Segmentum, but they have numerous commitments, and too often they are forced to deploy each and every Battle-Brother they have across dozens of battlefronts. Allowing you to have one of their Battle-Brothers would be an effective loss since the Astartes in question would not be available if they needed reinforcements.”

“I'm not criticising,” the golden-winged officer said slowly, “but isn't that a bit risky? I know the Brothers of the Red have decided after their Penitent Crusade's end to maintain a reserve of at least one Company in the Nyx Sector. Deploying both the five frontline companies and the four reserve companies at all times does not leave much margin if unforeseen problems arise.”

“So far, their enviable list of victories has not met major drawbacks,” a Crimson Fist draped in his new purple robe replied. “Do you intend to use their Strike Cruiser as your transport to return to Macragge, cousin?”

“I do,” Thiel confirmed. “I have stayed away from home for too long...and I must inform the current Chapter Master of the recent developments.”

If only he could force Cawl to accompany him...but the chances of that were infinitesimal. At the moment, the brilliant Archmagos was wavering between Nyx and Mars for his next destination. Without a viable antidote and a working healing process for his father, the ancient Mechanicus Tech-Priest would not 'waste his precious time gallivanting to the Temple of Correction', and yes, those were his exact words.

“Give my regards to Lord Macragge,” Lady Weaver requested, “and please Captain Thiel, avoid mentioning all the problems I've found with the Codex Astartes...”

**Transport *Old Bastion***

**Corporal Alex Smith**

Like tens of thousands of guardsmen and sailors, Alex was watching the vid-cast of the Saint. And like thousands of veterans of Commorragh, he was irritated by the disrespect certain imbeciles behind him showed by daring to whisper while the God-Emperor's favourite daughter spoke.

Fortunately, two Commissars soon dragged the faithless out of the ranks for a severe punishment and everyone could return their full and undivided attention to her Celestial Highness' speech.

“Beginning on this day, Pavia will be placed under strict environmental preservation laws. Thanks to the power of the God-Emperor, the air of the planet is pure and the waters are clean, decontaminated of all traces of the xenos' bio-weapons. I intend for this state of affair to continue for millennia. As such, there will be only three great cities built on the surface of Pavia: Constantinople, New York, and Nova Nyx. Regulations for military and civilian hab-blocks will be announced in two days. The protocols...”

“Come on, we want to know who gets the Governorship...umph!” The Atlas guardsman who had made the comment was going to have to live to regret it, as a Commissar had been close enough to deliver a powerful blow to a location no sane man wanted to be struck.

“To enforce the God-Emperor's rule and the decrees preserving the beauty of Pavia, I have decided to name retired Marshal Hervey Cox of Elysia as non-hereditary Governor of Pavia and my personal representative in the newly founded city of Constantinople.”

“YES!” the guardsmen bellowed, and Alex knew so many had shouted at the same time the Commissars would be unable to assign individual punishments.

“Basing my ruling on several well-known Militarum precedents, I have decided that any freed slave who announces the desire to build a new life on this world will be permitted to do so. Veterans of Commorragh who want to obtain land grants and leave the Guard can report to the new Pavia Colonisation Office, though in their case they will need to produce a certification of twenty years of service or a medal of rank equal to the Ultima Honorifica. There will be incentives...”

Alex wasn't listening anymore. His augmetic hand was touching the Ultima Honorifica the Colonel had given him two days ago with the Commorragh Cross and five other decorations. These decorations had cost him one of his hands and given him plenty of scars due to the monsters' poisons. Suddenly though, their weight in metal was much more precious.

He, son and grandson of lowly workers on Colorado, could own land. Alex had served twenty-one years of loyal service in the God-Emperor's Guard! He qualified on both sides!

“PRAISE HER CELESTIAL HIGHNESS! PRAISE THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

His shouting went unnoticed as more and more promotions were handed out to officers and warrant officers on the vid-cast. Well that, and Alex was far from the only guardsman shouting his joy...

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Two hundred hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Imperial Palace**

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Samson Pitt**

Samson Pitt was a veteran of the political jousts of the Senatorum Imperialis and the meetings of the High Twelve. It was this great experience which had given him plenty of bad vibes for the first gathering of the twelve most powerful men and women of the Imperium after the consequences of the Commorragh Xenocide had shocked the Throneworld to its core.

Perhaps, in a perfect world, the High Twelve would speak with a single voice and celebrate the extermination of billions of Eldar. But the Inner Sanctum of the Imperial Palace was, despite all propaganda trying to convince the ignorant populace of the contrary, filled with imperfect beings.

And even in his darkest and most pessimistic nightmares, the Chancellor of the Imperial Council had not imagined Tribune Basil Macedonian would announce himself at the beginning of the session and drop the first bomb.

“The Edict of Restraint is hereby dissolved.”

Samson was left dumbstruck with his mouth hanging wide open. There were few constants in the great manipulations and millions of policies the Senatorum Imperialis had to arbitrate on a day-by-day basis, but one of them was the Edict of Restraint. Proclaimed by the legendary Lord Roboute Guilliman and Captain-General Constantin Valdor after the Emperor's Ascension, it specified the Ten Thousand were never to leave the Sol System in fighting strength.

“This is illegal!” Grand Provost Marshal Tudor Brezhnev barked. After recently receiving a series of rejuvenation procedures, he looked like a brown-haired young man, but the age reflected in his eyes betrayed the juvenile outward appearance. “You have no right to-“

The Tribune placed an aquila seal on the millennia-old table. Unlike the thousands the Chancellor and the other High Lords saw from dawn to dusk, this one was surrounded by a halo of pure golden light.

“By the authority of his Majesty, the Edict of Restraint is dissolved. Does anyone want to argue this point?” The squad of Custodes patiently waiting behind the Tribune weapons in hand suggested the answer shouldn't be affirmative if the High Twelve wanted to avoid a second Beheading.

“We obey His Will, of course,” Huang Utrecht replied. Chancellor of the Estate Imperium, he was in many ways the least of the High Twelve, his position regularly threatened by more powerful militant seats like the Imperial Guard and other more prestigious services. “We acknowledge the dissolving of the Edict of Restraint.”

“Good,” and the Tribune and his Custodes escort left the High Twelve's meeting room.

“I am too old for this shit,” Felipe de Rivera grumbled. Samson Pitt wasn't going to disagree with him, at least for the 'old' part. Blind and with a hairless face, the Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica was assuredly a powerful psyker, but there had to be a few skeletons on Holy Terra which looked to be in better health than him. “I think we should begin with the consequences of the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement?”

The next ten minutes were a very short summary of the consequences which had struck the Sol System and the most important worlds of Segmentum Solar, culminating in the revelation sixty-six members of the Senatorum Imperialis had been heretics-in-disguise, and there were eleven more which had gone missing in the uncountable crowds of Holy Terra, but were actively pursued by the Inquisition and all law-enforcers.

“This divine judgment allowed the Holy Ordos to gain an extremely accurate and disappointing overview of the heretics' infiltration of the nobility and the upper classes of the Imperium,” Lord Inquisitor Berlin Chimera had never been the most cheerful of the High Twelve, but right now, his face could have posed as the very incarnation of 'inflexible granite'. Two metres tall, built like an Ogryn bodyguard, the representative of the Holy Inquisition among the High Twelve was radiating displeasure and lethal menace. No one would ever call him seductive or good-looking. But of course, unlike plenty of High Lords, the Lord Inquisitor didn't care. The only clothes he allowed them to see was a long black coat and a grey suit that even a middle-class merchant could afford to buy. And yet, when he spoke, billions fell silent.

“My colleagues and I are extremely disappointed by how many heretics had infiltrated the Throneworld. It seems that for all our vigilance for the threat outside, we can't trust many of your associates to remain loyal and true. As a consequence, the Holy Ordos is prepared to initiate the creation of a new Ordo, which will be called Hereticus.”

Samson was not aware of the tedious little details the Inquisition's structure rested upon, but it did not take a very intelligent man to know what the Inquisitors assigned to this Ordo were going to do once they had recruited enough of their peers.

“I approve this measure!” Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom spoke, his size and mechadendrites easily making him the tallest member of the High Twelve. In fact, half of the reasons the High Twelve and himself were meeting in this room were due to his corpulence. “And now, I want to propose a motion to give a triumph to Lady Weaver. Her victory in the Battle of Commorragh deserves it!”

“Out of the question!” Rabadash y Byng el Calormen shouted, surprising absolutely no one. The Lord High Admiral had not appreciated the warships of the greatest naval force to ever sail the stars playing second fiddle to the Imperial Guard and the Adeptus Mechanicus.

“Why not?” Pocahontas Valletta mused. The Mistress of the Astronomican – though certain purists continued to call her 'Master of the Astronomican' – had come wearing a golden robe which could be best described as a toga, and her black hair and piercing blue eyes must have turned a few heads on her way to this room. “The Astronomican shines more brilliantly than it has done in centuries, and when the Custodes arrive and return the spare parts stolen by the xenos in one or two years, the range and power of the Holy Beacon will be increased again! Why should we not give the woman who made this victory possible a Triumph?”

“Because giving one would be tantamount to admitting the existence of things like 'Chaos Gods', 'Traitor Marines', 'Daemon-Primarchs', and other things we have worked very hard to convince the plebeians don't exist,” Xerxes Vandire replied, his hands placed in a meditative pose, though the Chancellor didn't believe a single second he was really that calm inside his head. “No one will deny a great victory has been won. But since it was 'only' against these perfidious long-ears...no, I'm not willing to support a Triumph.”

“An Ovation should be far more appropriate,” Paternal Envoy Gandhi Brobantis approved. “The Victor of Commorragh has already won a Sub-Sector and a few planets to her name, no?”

“The Ecclesiarch has at the Holy Synod confirmed his intention to give our new Living Saint the Suebi Sub-Sector, originally part of the Atlantis Diocese, and several planets in the Marches.” Arch-Cardinal Terran Salomon Rovere explained. In his golden, red, and white clothes, the Priest looked like a man of 'Faith' with a capital letter. Too bad that since the Holy Synod had departed for Ophelia VII, the men in his position were mouthpieces of their master a Segmentum away. “A Triumph would be preferred...”

“Let's put it to a vote, then,” The Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum cut through Rovere's words – metaphorically this time. “All in favour of an Ovation and enlarging the Nyx Sector to accept the planetary bounties?”

The hands of Rivera, Hunter, Vandire, Brezhnev, Brobantis, Byng and Utrecht went in the air. Seven votes out of twelve; the motion was carried.

There wasn't any great disappointment, except from the Arch-Cardinal and the Fabricator; though exactly what the latter thought was difficult to analyse behind the metal.

“I am greatly concerned however by the sheer number of Astartes Chapters flocking to Weaver's banner,” Rabadash y Byng el Calormen immediately pushed the offensive.

“That is not illegal,” Speaker for the Chartist Captains Aliénor Gutenberg smiled at the medal-covered supreme officer of the Imperial Navy.

“There was never a reason to vote on a law like this,” the Lord Inquisitor spoke in his frigid voice. “And I will remind all of you that you have very limited influence when it comes to forcing any Space Marine Chapter to obey such a kind of edict.”

“We are the High Lords of Terra!” Tudor Brezhnev slammed his fist against the table. As he was a thin, not-very-muscular individual, the effect achieved was not the one he'd been going for.

“And the Space Marines are the Space Marines,” the Mistress of the Astronomican retorted. “If you want the transhuman giants to pay some attention to your directives, perhaps-“

“No,” Grand Master Hunter interrupted. “The Officio Assassinorum will not allow the Space Marines gaining a seat, be it high or low, in the Senatorum Imperialis.”

There was no death threat uttered, but no one believed the ex-Vindicare Master would hesitate for a second to arrange tragic accidents for them if they decided to proceed along this line of thought.

“The main factor limiting the number of Space Marines is Lady Weaver herself,” Aliénor reminded the other members of the High Twelve. In her white uniform of the Gutenberg Chartist Navy, the Speaker was like those beautiful flowers cultivated in certain spires...beautiful, but concealing plenty of thorns and other ways to make you bleed. “After all, for every Chapter that is invited onto the planets she rules over, that is one world partially or completely falling under the Adeptus Astartes' authority.”

“This may be so,” Xerxes Vandire conceded in a tone which made obvious he believed none of it. “But you will forgive me if I think it's hurtful for the tithes and a concentration of martial might that few regions in the galaxy possess. Ultramar and its surroundings, the garrisons around the High Terror; those are the only examples which come to me when one speaks of Astartes' musters. Let's limit Nyx's Chapters to six.”

“Lady Weaver will certainly have reached this number, if she hasn't already exceeded it,” the Fabricator-General replied.

“Outrageous,” Gandhi snorted.

“When you kill a few billion Eldar yourself, we may give you similar respect,” Huang Utrecht snipped at the mutant.

“Ten Chapters,” Arch-Cardinal Salomon Rovere proposed, his grey-green fixing the other High Lords.

“Far too high,” refused the Grand Provost, “she doesn't deserve-“

“I suspect the reason the Captain-General himself wasn't here to dissolve the Edict was because he went to fight at Commorragh,” Aliénor feigned to inspect her long nails. “I would be extremely careful using the words 'she doesn't deserve this' around the Custodes.”

“Nine,” Felipe de Rivera offered in a half-defeated tone. “I will have to send more psykers to Pavia and Nyx anyway, I will confirm the Basileia-General complies with the edict. What about the Bacta our subordinates are deliriously babbling about?”

“For the moment, production of the miraculous healing substance appears to be incredibly limited, even at the level of a Battlefleet,” the Lord High Admiral bared his teeth. “I think the Imperial Navy should have priority-“

“Finish that sentence and you will be dead before you reach the door,” Lord Berlin Chimera warned him. The two men stared at each other for several seconds, and Rabadash was the first to look away. “After this meeting I will send several Inquisitors to assess the production levels of Bacta and how we can increase it to answer Imperial needs. One point I won't budge on is the fact the Holy Ordos will have the priority over Aethergold.”

“That is...” Rovere began to say something before closing his lips in front of the granite face of the Lord Inquisitor.

“That is acceptable, provided the material is truly used for the divine purposes of His Most Holy Majesty,” Pocahontas finished. Several of the High Twelve made conniving smiles; obviously the near-totality of them were going to try to get around this Inquisitorial order. “What is next? The future Thirteenth Founding of the Adeptus Astartes? With Lady Weaver recovering a huge number of gene-seed canisters and the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement, the risk of a Black Crusade for the coming decades has severely increased. And to fight the Traitor Astartes and their horrors, we must have Space Marines to keep the doors of hell shut.”

“We may add a Gloriana Battleship to the defences of Cadia too,” the Fabricator-General revealed, rather smugly for a Tech-Priest. “With the *Flamewrought* coming here to be repaired, the Adeptus Mechanicus will be ready within the decade to launch the construction of a new grand technological Gloriana worthy of the Omnissiah Himself. And He approved, I swear it on the Sacred Laws of the Machine.”

Samson Pitt frowned, and he wasn't the only one. Everyone who mattered in the Imperial Palace knew Xaerophrys had been summoned by the God-Emperor, but whatever the Most Holy Ruler of Mankind and the assemblage of mechadendrites serving as his Regent for the Martian Empire had talked about, it had remained a mystery until now. The Chancellor of the Imperial Council doubted it had been only about the construction of a Gloriana Battleship.

“I support this motion without reservation!” Naturally the Lord High Admiral was the first to sign on. There were a lot of grumblings and voices against, obviously. The temporary moment of union the Ministorum and the Mechanicus had established at the beginning didn't survive, the Ecclesiarch apparently being not in favour of the Imperial Navy and the Adeptus Mechanicus gaining a fleet-killer warship. But at seven against five, it was approved.

“And now,” the Officio Assassinorum Grand Master delivered the words like they were poison on his lips. “We must speak of one of the biggest issues which came up after the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement. It seems that when their enemies began to drop dead, the Space Wolves went on a rampage and razed the entire Hive World of London – though in his astropathic messages, the Great Wolf of this band of murderous brutes had the gall to call it a 'wild celebration'. Anyone in favour of censoring them?”

Unanimity among the High Twelve was rare. But as Samson Pitt saw the hands soar one by one, he had to admit the sons of Leman Russ really had a talent to achieve it...against themselves.

**Lord Commander Militant Paul von Oberstein**

The Lord Commander Militant of the Imperial Guard was not a man to sigh easily, but the sheer effort he was forced to exert in order to push on his pillow his faithful mastiff Pilou XII made the urge nearly irresistible.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do about it. Before his return to Holy Terra to serve among the highest-ranked officers of the Guard, finding time to take walks with Pilou XI and his ten predecessors had been doable. The mastiffs had been the salivating mascots of the Lucifer Black Regiments Paul had been assigned to, and one could always divert some paperwork into the hands of a naive subordinate before going across military camps and rear-area towns behind an enthusiastic mastiff doing its best to break its leash.

But on Holy Terra, there always was so much paperwork to deal with that even having a staff the size of a small army was never sufficient. And as a result, Pilou XII was, despite its relatively young age, becoming laziness and indolence incarnate.

Paul von Oberstein drank the rest of the cup posed on his desk, grimacing at the taste. Disgusting. After several days of deep thinking, he had decided to invest in one of those new tea-making machines, but the device was still somewhere between the Forges of Mars and Terra, and for now he had to drink what beverages he could prepare from Munitorum recipes. As for hiring a private butler, it was best not to think about that. The last he had appointed from his regiments had been horribly tortured a year ago, and most potential replacements were wary of filling the shoes of this particular deceased.

It was certainly the story of his life. Paul lived at the end, but everyone else died. His betrothed died; they had joined the Guard together, poor scions of collapsing Houses, in search of money, adventure, and fame. She had died two hours after their frontlines were engulfed in enemy fire for the first time.

Friends, bed companions, mentors, allies, heroes; everyone had died around him. Only the Pilou mastiff line had remained by his side. Irony of ironies; Paul had achieved what his naive and young teenage male ego wouldn't have thought possible: climbing up and managing a near-perfect string of military victories until there was no one above him and he was the Lord Commander Militant of the Imperial Guard.

Only at the end, there was no one else but him and Pilou XII to enjoy this life, which day after day was revealing itself to be a world of endless intrigues, permanent paranoia, and megalomaniac psychopaths.

Terra was not worth the mass it had cost him, the mass of slaughter that is.

The chime of his vox-caster arrived at his ears.

“My Lord, Major-General Schwarz is here.”

“You can escort him to my office, Koln,” Paul gave a last disapproving glance to Pilou XII before removing half of the mountain of vellum and data-wafers from his desk and standing to welcome the other officer.

Ten seconds later, the door opened, and a large shadow obscured the light-gems of the path leading to his work office. And no, it was anything but an exaggeration. Even by the standard of the Catachan Jungle Fighters – which for the record had long-since earned the nickname of 'baby Ogryns' – Major-General Jack 'Death' Schwarz was physically imposing and a force of nature. Some courtesans of the Imperial Palace had taken to joking the man was an Ork which had somehow managed to paint its skin brown when he first arrived on Holy Terra two years ago. Now they tended to whisper it where Schwarz couldn't possibly hear them. Those who had been caught insulting him generally had to learn how to speak and eat without teeth...if they survived the experience.

And as the Major-General drew closer, Paul saluted him. No matter the rank, every guardsman had to salute the holder of a Star of Terra. And if it had not been law, it was likely the last of the von Oberstein family would have saluted anyway.

When one Colonel and the few dozen survivors of his regiment managed to fight their way through an Ork WAAGH and sabotage a Gargant, explode the main ammunition depot of the greenskins, thereby reducing a third of their effectives to ashes in a few seconds, and then go on challenge the Warboss in personal combat...and emerge triumphant, the Star of Terra and the thousands of medals he was awarded with paled compared to this insane 'adventure'.

In fact, it was likely the only reason Jack Schwarz was on Terra right now; the Catachan guardsman was still recovering from the terrible wounds suffered on the mission where all but he had lost their lives.

It was the third time he and Paul met.

“I am ready to serve, General.”

Paul didn't raise an eyebrow at the fact the man hadn't called him by his long series of titles. If you didn't win the rank with a Catachan, it didn't count to the Jungle Fighters.

“I suppose you've heard about Commorragh?”

The Major-General laughed, a noise which managed to be hearty and half-threatening.

“Unless you're dead, you've heard about Commorragh.”

“Indeed,” and even some recently deceased people, like the heretics struck down during the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement, may have known about Commorragh before the living. “Would you be willing to serve under Weaver?”

“I am,” the Catachan Major-General was not one for long flowery speeches. “Any boy or girl who has the guts to challenge monsters like Drazhar and the other Eldar champions to a duel is one I can follow on the frontlines. You gave her a second Star of Terra, or so the rumours claim.”

“The High Twelve's vote was seven to five against giving her the Order of Ollanius Pius,” Paul admitted after a nod. “Since the highest-ranking decoration of the Imperial Guard wasn't available, I had to give her the one I could bestow on my own authority.”

“Bet the new Master of the Administratum loved that.”

“One day I will shoot that useless hypocrite right between the eyes,” the Lucifer Black officer continued conversationally. “But for now, he has far too much influence among the bureaucrats and the important Solar Clans. And since he has a grudge against the new heroine of the hour, I think it is my duty to make sure that if I am not successful in my efforts to remove Vandire, Weaver will take care of him when I'm gone.”

Paul was not stupid; for all the loyalty of the Lucifer Black regiments went to him, there were millions more planetary defence forces whose oaths were not worth low-quality grox skin. If Xerxes Vandire pulled a successful coup or another political move targeting the Imperial Guard, it would be important for someone charismatic and popular to continue the fight.

“I promoted Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, to Lady General.” It was only a two ranks-promotion, not the three customarily granted by the Star of Terra, but if he made the Victor of Commorragh a Lady Militant, there would be blood on the streets before the night began. Paul von Oberstein was not willing to do that, not yet at any rate. “And according to the messages she sent me, the Basileia intends to temporarily return to the Nyx Sector before creating a new Army Group. The Munitorum having proven its incompetence when it comes to supplying her a useful staff, she went directly to me for a new one.”

In parentheses, it was going to cost hundreds of people their heads. Or should he say it had already cost many people their heads and was going to cost yet more? Five hundred members of the Departmento Munitorum had already been arrested in the last fifty hours, and that number was going to increase exponentially very, very soon.

“The first thing on top of Lady Weaver's wish list was a training officer able to understand soldiers who went through hell and train the recruits to elite standards. You are my candidate for the position.”

“I am honoured,” Schwarz replied with a thin smile, “there must be what, a hundred thousand officers duelling for the position?”

“Try three million and you will be much closer to the truth,” the Lord Commander Militant revealed to his rowdy subordinate. “I will need time to sort out the adamantium from the false-plasteel, and I need more information about the Lady General's preferences. But training new troops at Nyx is more important, and that's why I want you to leave for Ultima Segmentum as soon as possible.”

It would also avoid any possible 'accidents' of jealous rivals trying to kill Schwarz and beginning a series of punitive skirmishes and small-scale wars on Terran soil.

“I will need to make a stop at Catachan and send several messages to old friends,” the man most of his men had taken to nickname Death told him.

“As long as they're not in a hot warzone beyond even my authority to recall, you will have them.” Given the idiots Paul was sometimes forced to lend Catachan Jungle Fighters to, giving priority to Schwarz was anything but a moral issue. “An officer from Public Relations, a Munitorum Logistician, and a Surgeon-General will go with you too.”

An exchange of salutations later and Paul returned to the never-ending fight against his great nemesis, the eternally-damned paperwork.

“You don't know your luck,” Paul spoke to his loyal mastiff. Pilou XII barked and continued to salivate on his favourite bone.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Jupiter**

**Jovian Shipyards**

**Two hundred and thirty-three hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Chartist Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

The Imperium had a large array of communication devices available for intra-system conversations. Hololithic transmitters and vox-links were among the most well-known. The lithocast systems and the vox-nets existed practically on every major Imperial World, and so long as you were not near a Warp Storm or an extremely powerful psychic phenomenon, these communications were very reliable.

Of course, these communications remained extremely slow. If you were on the same planet as your interlocutor, the debate would suffer no perceivable delay between the moment you stopped speaking and the second the other party began to present his or her arguments.

But once the person was on another planet, the wait between a question and its answer, depending on the distance between the two planets, could easily be counted in hours. Jupiter, for example, was at its closest five hundred and eighty-eight million kilometres away from Terra, and the speed of the light being the limit for hololithic devices, it meant a simple message she uttered would take one thousand nine hundred and sixty seconds to reach Terra, and the same delay would be applied to the return communication.

There were always astropathic communications to get around the problem, but those were most often used for the interstellar communications across the entire Imperium.

Yet the Sol System was not called Mankind's Cradle just for the prestige of it. It was here colossal projects of engineering and psyker-tech had taken place in the first millennia of the Dark Age of Technology, and while an immense majority of them had disappeared, some remained.

The Ansibles of the Jovian Shipyards were such a marvel. The Tech-Priests who had examined them preferred to call them by other names like 'Supra-Dimensional Quantum Entanglement Communicators', but Marianne had never liked the cogboys' terms, no matter how accurate. One couldn't underestimate how crucial this piece of infrastructure taller than a Hive's spire was for Sol's communications, however.

With an Ansible used by the two participants of the conversation, there was no delay between two speakers, no matter how far they were from each other. This was an instantaneous intra-system communication device the hundreds of quadrillions of humans living outside Sol would never see in their lives.

There were downsides. The Ansibles were big, but the flow of communications existing in the Sol System overwhelmed their handling capacities several times over. And these technological treasures of a more advanced time weren't available for each planet. Terra and Mars had two of them each, Venus had one, Jupiter had two – one of them obviously in the Jovian Shipyards, and there were always rumours one or two were somewhere in the void, repaired and built by the God-Emperor during the Great Crusade, though a wise woman didn't try to investigate whether this was true or not.

As a result, the number of people who could request to use one of the Ansibles and expect a positive answer from the Mechanicus and the other guardians of the vital communication structure within the day was extremely low.

Marianne, being the daughter of one of the High Twelve, was among these few chosen.

“Mother,” the Chartist Vicequeen gave a slight nod as the image of High Lady Aliénor Gutenberg, Speaker for the Chartist Captains and Merchant-Admiral of House Gutenberg, materialised in front of her with a clarity of transmission which never failed to amaze her.

“Daughter,” had they been in public, there would have been minutes of idle chatter and customs to deal with, but usage of the Ansibles was private...and expensive. “How fast can you be on your way to a Mandeville Point?”

The question was unexpected, but the white-uniformed Heiress had not reached the level of responsibilities she currently held by being slow on the uptake.

“Assuming the refuelling operations are on schedule and the procedures of maintenance have been completed by our men and women, I should theoretically be able to leave the Jovian Shipyards five hours after the command is given. But it is going to cost me...as I'm sure you know.”

The queue lines on every major orbital installation of Jupiter, Holy Terra, and Mars were not totally inflexible, but one needed very large bank accounts to convince the Archmagi and Adepts in charge of the traffic that one ship took utmost precedence over the others.

“The funds are being transferred as we speak,” replied her mother with a negligent wave of the hand. “Expedite your departure. I want you on your way to Ultima Segmentum and the Nyx Sector before any of our opponents can raise an objection.”

A few months ago, Marianne would have freely admitted she didn't know where the Nyx Sector was...or that such a Sector even existed. Most of her career had been spent playing the exciting and dangerous game of feuds against the Administratum and the Navy in Segmentum Solar. Ultima Segmentum, while larger than Solar, was a backwater in terms of population and systemic wealth.

This had been before Commorragh.

“I have spoken with our allies and the key players of the Chartist Assembly,” her mother continued, confirming her suspicions. “And they are in agreement we can't let an opportunity like this slip through our fingers. Too many times in the past, the Living Saints of the God-Emperor didn't care about the economy and the intricacy of the shipping lanes which ensure the Imperium works more or less as intended. Now that there is one who is inclined to listen, we must act. The Adeptus Mechanicus alas has an advantage, but outside of technology, their area of competence wanes.”

Marianne didn't wince, but she wanted to. What her mother was speaking about looked to her like a political conflict at the highest levels of the Imperium, the likes which left the victor with astronomical riches...and the losers crashing down, ruined and forced to pay huge debts.

“You will go as my personal representative to meet the Saint. The Bacta and all the goods only the Victor of Commorragh can produce must be transported on our ships or those of our allies we authorise to trade with Nyx.”

“Can I stop by Solingen?” Marianne was after all the ruler of that wealthy Industrial World, nourished by recently discovered Vanadium and other heavy metals-rich Mining Worlds. “My position would be so much stronger if I can present additional incentives.”

“While under other circumstances I would acquiesce, in this instance time is truly of the essence, daughter. Ophelia VII and other potential sources of trouble will send their own emissaries to Nyx. You must reach Weaver and begin negotiating with her before they do.”

“Resources I'm authorised to use?” The blonde-haired Heiress of the Mainz Sector asked for the sake of formality.

“You can deliver as many non-hereditary Charts as necessity dictates,” the Speaker for the Chartist Captains declared. “The common and luxury items we sell in Solar and the Throneworld, the ships we build, the usual armament contracts, void-faring crews and colonising projects, markets to sell exotic products to; display the splendour of the Gutenberg Chartist Fleet and our allies. Anything else will not impress a Sector Lady.”

“I understand mother,” and she really did; if she did excellent work, her mother's seat in the Senatorum Imperialis would be firmly secured for the next several decades, and it was not out of the realm of possibility Marianne herself would be authorised to succeed her in time. “I will take three companies of the Gutenberg Rifles with me aboard the *White Ducat*.”

Her pride and joy – named after the currency of the Mainz Sector, the Gutenberg Ducat – was a Saturnine-class 'Freighter' barely able to contain the firepower of that many professional mercenaries. The Freighter designation had always amused her, but it was necessary to convince the Imperial Navy to turn a blind eye to their affairs. Only one hundred years old and built from an M31 template most of the Imperial shipyards had forgotten, the *White Ducat* was ten kilometres-long and armed with several ancient weapons which were particularly redoubtable. Hopefully, it would impress the 'Celestial Highness' Marianne had to seduce...metaphorically or literally.

“I won't disappoint you, mother.”

“I know you won't, my dear. May the God-Emperor grant you a swift and safe journey.”

“And may He smiles on your enterprises here.”

The full irony of these last words wouldn't be revealed fully until two hours later, when three Custodes somehow intercepted her as she arrived on the bridge of her flagship.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Two hundred and thirty-eight hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**The Golden Throne and the Oniric realm**

**Sophia Hess**

Sophia wakes. And it is strange, because she can't remember ever falling asleep.

Seconds later, her memory starts to surge back to the forefront of her thoughts. There are many disjointed flashes, but it's sufficient to provoke a scream of utter loathing.

The Officio Assassinorum had tried to wipe her out. The Callidus mistress has betrayed her. All they wanted began and ended with her parahuman powers. They had decided to get rid of Sophia Hess.

They are going to pay! She is not Elena Kerrigan...

Sophia's thoughts stop as she witnesses the impossible. Standing in front of her is a tall young woman with vivid red hair and an extremely athletic body. She is green-eyed, her appearance one her mind has had a lot of time to assimilate as the Callidus Temple brainwashed her.

“You can't be here,” Sophia rushes the illusion – and it has to be an illusion! Elena Kerrigan is just a ghost, the result of thousands of psycho-indoctrination sessions and Polymorphine injections her body has been subjected to! She isn't real!

A terrible blow to the chest sends her to the ground, the wind knocked out of her lungs.

“You are pathetic,” the red-haired woman spits, before executing a series of acrobatics Shadow Stalker has always thought beyond her and sending her flying once more when she tries to return to her feet and get into a fighting position.

Strangely, her body's clothes – which look like a variant of her old costume, aren't damaged by the impacts. The pain each of the hits gives her is far too real, alas.

“No wonder Taylor Hebert didn't strike back against you,” the illusion – it has to be an illusion! – taunts her. “The great Shadow Stalker was a so-called hero who bullied a powerless girl when Brockton Bay was crawling with villains. You must be so proud!”

“If I had my crossbow-“

“You really assimilated nothing of our training, did you?” the synskin-covered Apprentice retorts. “Crossbows are inferior to Neural Shredders. And a real assassin uses each and every weapon at his or her disposal.”

“Easy to say when you have the advantage!”

“'Easy', if, if, if!” Each syllable is accentuated until it's a parody of her voice. “You are a cruel bully when you have all the cards in your hand, but whine and complain at the first sign something goes wrong! What a predator you are!”

“You're just a figment of Callidus brainwashing! You're not real!”

The next instant her opponent transforms into shadows. By reflex, Sophia transforms too...and screams as a small torch of light passes through her. Immediately she goes corporeal again...and receives an uppercut to the jaw.

“And this is not real?” the answer carries on winds of contempt, cold and clinical. “I thank you for giving me the opportunity to exist and have the opportunity to accomplish things, but I don't think I have to thank you for much else.”

On the crystalline floor which seems to be the ground wherever they are, Sophia spits and tries to find some strength, but the punishment this not-her has given her has cut her breath short and weakens her too much.

“I don't know how you were able to break our mental training, but it doesn't matter.” The right arm of Elena Kerrigan becomes a blade of shadows. “I am going to solve this problem once and for all. I will be pure and I will deliver death.”

“You do not determine who is guilty, Assassin.”

Sophia blinks. Somehow, she is sure they were alone, the illusion-assassin and herself. But now that she becomes aware of her surroundings, it's obvious they aren't.

Standing not twenty feet away from her is a man. Or is it really a man? In size, the being is easily the height of one of the Custodes that she occasionally saw in the Imperial Palace. And all in him breathes death and terror. His armour is midnight black, and appears to be shaped based on a Batman theme...if Batman had been fond of skulls and wanted to give an aneurysm to every child that met him.

This is the dark knight of all dark knights. This is a king of darkness, and his fists are soaked in a red fluid which certainly is not syrup.

And he has an enormous hole in the middle of the chest.

Sophia expects a triumphal evil laugh. Maybe there will be an evil monologue or thunderous laughter praising them for fighting each other.

But when the lips barely visible behind the mix of skeleton and bat helmet part, a disappointed voice arrives at their ears.

“After my son Konrad, I didn't believe there would be another person who would see me like this.”

“Who-“

Two metres away, Elena prostrates herself.

“Your Majesty!”

Sophia isn't easily frightened, but at this moment her blood does its best to freeze in her veins. This is the God-Emperor of the Imperium? Oh-

“The one and only,” the dark knight answers as if he can read each and every one of her thoughts. “And yes, I can.”

“What's the point of having a conversation, then?” Sophia hotly retorts.

“Be quiet!” To her surprise, it is not the man who had spoken, but Elena, and she looks really, really angry. “You should be on your knees begging His Majesty for forgiveness and compassion!”

“No,” her outburst almost surprises herself. “I did not swear the vows of the Officio Assassinorum. If you are truly a part of myself, you know that it's true! A psycho-indoctrinated version of me may have sworn its allegiance to the God-Emperor, but I sure as hell didn't!”

“You have a point,” the tall and threatening bat-colossus admits. “The senior Clade-mistresses of the Callidus Temple did their best to extinguish you, but for now as a result of their actions there are two minds in one body, and only Elena here is truly pledged to me. However.”

The single word is not voiced like it is special, but somehow, the giant...the Emperor makes it special. The psycho-indoctrinated Kerrigan abandons her prostrating pose and goes to stand by her side. Sophia isn't sure if she should be glad for this or furious.

“However?” she asks, trying not to make it the admission of weakness it is.

“However, I am thinking it may be for the best, because that way I would feel little regret about putting you down like the rabid dog you are.”

Sophia tries to transform into shadows...and realises it doesn't work.

“My realm, my rules.” The Supreme Lord of the Imperium informs her without a trace of compassion. “And you will listen to what I have to say, you and your power.”

Thousands of small lights lit, and Sophia watches petrified as under the endless crystalline floor, a gigantic worm of darkness is apparently trapped in a multitude of golden chains and webs.

“Yes, that is your Shard, or whatever term you want to apply to the xenos entity granting you inhuman capacities. I have to say, it is extremely uncooperative compared to the one of Taylor Hebert.”

“Because I am a predator!” Until now she has been able to somewhat keep a lid on her loathing, but the mention of Skitter is too much. How dare he-

“Because you are weak, unimaginative, cruel, and unable to resist your worst impulses for even a single second.” The Emperor corrects as if she was a two-year-old child. “You disgust me.”

“You would have hated Earth Bet, then! All parahumans thrive on conflict, it is our nature!”

Her legs begin to levitate above the crystals, and her body goes rigid.

“I would rather say the Shards are thriving on conflict, and there are parahumans who do their best to resist their lure and become models for the societies they are living in...and there are those who don't.”

Dark eyes pierce her, and in them Sophia sees her death.

“As it is, you are a dangerous liability, worse than the pawn of Tzeentch,” she's not even able to twitch, and the godly-powerful force slowly grows more and more crushing. “And unlike what you believe, the Shard is responsible for less than a third of the view you have of Mankind. Corruptors of humanity like this one give the initial push, but the fall was your fault and yours alone.”

And then there is pain. Sophia screams.

She screams, because the torment is too much.

She screams because there are souls screaming. The entire universe is pain and screams.

Oh God, it hurts! Make it stop! Make it stop!

When it finally does, the parahuman formerly known as Shadow Stalker cries with joy.

“That was a minuscule fraction of the pain I endure on the Golden Throne every day,” the Emperor comments like it's trivial news. And Sophia knows she nearly has a heart attack hearing it.

“How? How...how can you...”

“Because he's the God-Emperor,” Elena murmurs.

“No. I am not a God,” the sovereign of a million worlds tells them. “And I do this...because I love Mankind. And because there's no one to take my place if I fall.”

The dark knight regresses. The dark armour and the terror helmet disappear, replaced by a simple brown cloak and at last Sophia is free to observe the Master of Mankind's face.

*Ancient. Old. Power. Revelation. Justice. Sacrifice. Hope. Defiance*.

Sophia looks away. It's...it's too much. The faint golden aura surrounding Him is far less risky in comparison. It takes her several seconds to return to a calmer state, and to realise the mind-which-isn't-her is speaking.

“Surely there are possible replacements, Lord.”

“No, there aren't. The only one of my sons who could have possibly withstood the storm is dead and most of what's left of his soul has become a slave of the great parasite of Change. And while powerful psykers like the Queen of Blades have the raw power required, the Astronomican is entirely tuned for human psychic signatures. It has to be a human who directs the complex mechanisms of the Golden Throne. I appreciate the support...but for now there's no solution. I will have to endure, and at least the Battle of Commorragh and the many victories won there have made this long session of torture far more bearable.”

The voice at the end sounds like that of a very, very old man. And for the first time, Sophia feels real pity for this being which can't be human – for what human could endure such a torture for millennia? – but who definitely is no God.

“Now for you two.”

“Send me, my Lord,” Elena pleads. “Give me full control. I won't disappoint you.”

“You can't survive without Sophia Hess.” The Emperor states emotionlessly. “Were her personality and her soul to die, you would join her in the grave within two days. Your teachers can create a psycho-indoctrinated personality from an existent one, but they can't create a soul.”

Under their feet, the gigantic worm of darkness continues to writhe and struggle against its brilliant golden bindings.

“The Officio Assassinorum will be in dire need of reforms in the coming decades, and a champion to promote them would be highly appreciated.” Sophia's thoughts must have betrayed her, because the Emperor immediately adds. “Of course, I can always order Weaver to wipe out the Temples I find offensive when she will come to Terra.”

Sophia has a vision of the Temple being submerged by an endless tide of building-sized insects.

“That...that won't be necessary.”

“Excellent!” The Emperor's tone is suddenly far more...jovial. “I am going to synchronise you two together. If you desire a few more years of life, Sophia Hess, you will let Elena and your mind merge together and become one. Believe it or not, you have enormous potential...but you have wasted it until now. Fix this. Become something akin to the hero you pretended to be in your world.”

There is a flash from underneath them, and the worm disappears for a second, replaced by a sublime angel of shadow. The Angel of Shadows, with capital letters. But it does not last long, and the worm returns.

“I will monitor your progress as I alter the Shard. Don't disappoint me again.”

When she is escorted outside to Xanaria Lythis, there is only one mind left governing Elena's mind.

**Edge of the Eye of Terror**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Captain Boros Kurn**

Before the Legions fled Terra in what had to be the greatest rout ever seen by Space Marines, Boros had not been an accomplished naval tactician.

It was not because he'd been wearing the colours of the Sons of Horus at the time. It just wasn't his specialty. Naval tactics and strategy required a certain outlook on life and opportunities, as well as a behaviour completely opposite to that of a ground warrior.

Since then, Boros had learned of course. In the dark tides of the Eye of Terror, you learned or you died. Because the former officer of the Sixteenth Legion hadn't done the latter, he had the skills to do the former.

But right at this moment, looking at the old display showing the small fleet Malicia and he had coalesced together, there was no need for these skills.

Any idiot could have told him they were outnumbered more than three-to-one.

Worse, the freshly renamed warband of the Sons of Change was encircled and the one direction they weren't seeing enemies come from was the edge of the great Warp Storm they were all trapped in, where reality and unreality met each other in terrible psychic maelstroms, daemonic conflagrations, tempests of screaming lightning, and more phenomena able to break a ship in half before reforging it into something which would make even the mind of an Astartes scream for centuries.

“So much for your confidence our enemies and yours wouldn't unite,” Boros could not help but snipe at the orange-armoured sorceress to his left. He knew it was a childish comment; after all both she and he were part of the same warband: her enemies were his enemies and his enemies were hers. Not that it changed much from the last months and years: in the Eye, mostly everything was out to kill you.

“United?” Malicia laughed. “You give these hunters far too much credit, Captain. Look how far their formations are from each other. If you were psychically talented, I would tell you to listen how loudly they are insulting each other across the aether too. No, Captain, they are certainly not united.”

“I don't believe in coincidence,” Boros rebutted impatiently. “And three fleets coming here while only you and I had decided our destination's coordinates sounds particularly suspicious to me.”

Boros was not going to immediately assume Malicia had betrayed his warriors, but he would be a fool to not at least consider the possibility that the sorceress had contacted the Black Legion in order to save her own skin. It wouldn't work, but the sons of Horus would not live long enough to see her torn apart.

“Seers, prophets, and precognition adepts are not exactly a sparse resource in the Eye,” the white runes disposed in ever-changing patterns on the orange armour shone malevolently. “And those three fleets have the resources and the motivation to use them to hunt us down.”

The closest fleet, undoubtedly the most powerful of the three, had its identification dots lit in blue, giving it the shape of a murderous bullet coming from above them.

“The Thousand Sons the Exile and the other failures of Prospero have gathered under their banner,” Malicia pointed out with a large dose of scorn in her voice. “As long as they're able to pillage libraries and rape the minds of non-psykers, they delight in telling other souls that they know everything, despite being the ones who summon the daemons and sunder entire planets into the Sea of Souls.”

Boros clicked his tongue.

“Was it really necessary to steal their libraries and attack their bases?”

“Yes,” the former scion of Cthonia was not expecting apologies, and Malicia didn't give any. “I needed the pacts inside the Starfort to contact the Changeling and claim the Hourglass of the Sand Screams for my own purposes.”

“Like you needed the Battleship *Natural Selection*?” It had not been the name of this warship when his Marines butchered the last owners, but the former name itself was harder and harder to remember now that the effects of Commorragh were affecting everyone and everything.

“The destruction of the Emperor's Children Legion and the disarray it plunged the remnants of the Imperialis Armada serving under these narcissists into is not something I could afford to fail exploiting.”

“But the 'remnants' of the Imperial Armada are now hot on our trail, under a renegade Dark Angel naval commander. And last but not least, there's a sizeable Black Legion fleet.”

Ezekyle Abaddon was unquestionably a traitor and a betrayer of everything the Sons of Horus stood for, but his thirst to eliminate the heirs of the Sixteenth Legion was implacable. The 'choice' had been given the moment the first armours were painted in this cursed colour of black-gold: join me...or die.

The false-Warmaster was not here today, obviously. Neither the Astartes nor Malicia warranted such an 'honour'. In fact, the fleet had nothing heavier than a pair of modified Grand Cruisers to lead it. It was likely there wasn't even a member of the eight-damned Ezekarion in command.

“Yes, all our enemies have sent some forces to eliminate us. But half an effort is frankly worse than no effort at all.”

“They have us pinned against the edge's psychic hurricanes,” Boros felt forced to remember her.

“No,” Malicia laughed. “They think they have us pinned against the walls of the Eye.”

The artefact the parahuman sorceress had called the Hourglass of Sand Screams began to be surrounded by a halo of dark blue sorcery, and suddenly, there was a scar in the unbreakable storms marking the end of the Eye of Terror.

“Tell this bastard of a mutant-navigator I want us to make a direct jump for the Calyx Expanse once we are out,” Malicia commanded.

“How?” Boros asked, doing his best to not stand mouth wide open.

“The Hourglass allows me to isolate and keep open empyreal breaches which normally would have closed after a couple of milliseconds for several minutes. We can leave the Eye of Terror, Captain.”

“And what prevents our pursuers from doing the exact same thing?”

“The moment we are through, I will return the Hourglass to an inactive state. And I think the daemons of the Storm are going to be particularly grateful for an easy feast of souls!”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Urum**

**Consortium Headquarters**

**Lord Commander Primus Eidolon**

Of all the things he'd endured during his long career, the one Eidolon wanted to avoid repeating at all costs was waking up strapped on one of Fabius' operating tables with his chest wide open.

It had been one of the few experiences where the Lord Commander of the Emperor's Children had genuinely known fear. It wasn't a question of pain; though the experience was painful in the extreme. It wasn't a question of pride; though it was humiliating for his ego. It was the sudden realisation you were absolutely powerless, and the insane Chief Apothecary could do whatever he wanted to you for days and days without anyone coming to rescue you.

Alas, as Eidolon's eyes opened, the memory recall ingrained in an Astartes brain did not allow him to doubt. He was in one of Fabius Bile's labs. His fears were validated exactly three seconds later.

“GOOD MORNING TERRA!”

Eidolon screamed as a high voltage coursed through his body. Surprisingly, while his voice should have caused a destructive howl and ravaged the torture-lab, it did absolutely nothing.

The electrical shocks continued in short bursts for two hundred and sixty-six heartbeats before ceasing. A creature emerged from behind several huge tanks containing vaguely humanoid bodies.

“You should see your face,” the female being giggled.

“You will see your corpse when I am finished with you!” Eidolon snarled back.

“Now, now. Is that how an officer of the Third Legion talks to a friend?” The pronunciation of 'friend' was extremely familiar, and as he observed the body of his tormentor, Eidolon felt a sinking sensation in his two hearts. The thing in front of him had two legs and two arms, but its face was elongated like an Eldar's, and the ears were typical of the xenos. None of the Eldar however boasted the combination of a pink tail and black hooves the being before him displayed. And no baseline human had such a fuchsia-pink skin with black stripes. Add the presence of the black horns in the silver hair, and what stood before him was admittedly a flesh-and-blood cousin of the Daemonettes.

“You are Melusine,” except it should be impossible, since the first creation of the Clonelord had become a daemon in the service of Slaanesh a long time ago.

Since the death scream of the Dark Princess fresh in his mind wasn't something one could forget, Eidolon knew the creature should have been wiped from the universe.

“How?”

“My father was kind enough to build me a new body when I begged for salvation,” dark eyes shone with a joy that was childish and genuine. “For the first time in an eternity, I am free!”

It was likely the case she truly was free from the control any superior daemon could exert upon her, if the flesh of her new body truly protected her from the death of her divine mistress.

“Good for you,” the Astartes articulated, trying hard to not show exasperation. “Now free me from these bindings. When my warband will break through the Consortium's walls, I will welcome them standing and debating his loyalty issues with dear Fabius.”

Melusine raised one of her fingers innocently.

“You mean the warband the Consortium intercepted half-dead and fleeing for their lives? The warband my father convinced to join him in exchange for certain Warp-purging treatments to save their souls? The warband whose members most loyal to your cause are as we speak being psycho-indoctrinated by hypnomat and reshaped into more efficient and aesthetically pleasing forms? That warband?”

Eidolon gritted his teeth in anger. He had known he had fallen unconscious shortly after their patron Goddess had died, but if the Consortium's fleet had been sufficiently strong to overwhelm his naval forces and the Astartes commanding them, the damage was worse than his worst contingency planned for by several orders of magnitude.

“Yes, that warband,” he managed to answer without lashing out.

“Well that warband doesn't exist anymore,” the pink tail of the Daemonette touched his chest and fingers danced on his left arm. “They are serving the Consortium and my father now. Thanks for the stocks of gene-seed and the study materials!”

“Free me!”

“No.” Eidolon swallowed as the refusal had not come from the former daemon, but a tall silhouette in purple armour. The leader of the Consortium, the craziest Apothecary of a mad coterie of gene-crafters, the brilliant mind of a Chief Apothecary elevated to new heights of madness long before the rebellion against the False-Emperor.

Fabius Bile had arrived.

And as the former Lieutenant-Commander of the Emperor's Children drew closer, Eidolon was shocked.

It was Fabius, no doubt about it. It was Fabius as he had been during the Great Crusade, long before the Blight disfigured him and condemned his body to shameful decrepitude. No one would have claimed Fabius would attract more attention than the Phoenician, but the long silver hair and the noble face of ancient Europa's nobility radiated a certain charisma and charm.

“You are rejuvenated,” Eidolon tried to stay conversational. “A new body just to welcome me?”

“No.” Fabius smiled, and alarms rang in Eidolon's head. “This body is already six weeks old, by Urum calendar.”

Eidolon did not believe in coincidences.

“I didn't know!” he protested.

“I should have known the Selenar had Slaanesh's assistance when they prepared their damned Blight,” the fact Bile stayed calm while Melusine stared adoringly at him didn’t reassure Eidolon a single second. “In fact, maybe I did all along and the ball of raging emotions you all called a deity continued to blind me after I rejected her and her stupid games. And yes, I'm aware you didn't know, my dear Eidolon. I already interrogated you hours ago.”

Somehow, this didn't provide even a shadow of satisfaction or relief.

“But now the blinders have fallen and I have regained my physical integrity,” Chief Apothecary Fabius Bile spoke in an excited tone. "So much that was clouded from me is clear now! For the first time in millennia, my chains are broken, my first-born daughter is back, and the resources of the Apothecarium are getting more and more important as thousands of survivors and refugees flee the conquests of the Black Legion and the other warlords. I should really send a present to Weaver and the Emperor soon...though I have no idea where the former is. Ah, well. It's the thought that counts my dear, no?”

“Yes, father. Should I decapitate Eidolon? His head has a fairly nice bounty upon it, I think?”

“Now, now, my daughter,” Fabius chided her gently with one of his mad smirks. “I'm sure the Lord Commander Primus may be of some use to us before resorting to such a...permanent measure.”

Eidolon breathed out in relief.

“But since I am going to transfer his mind to a new body, you can play with him for a few hours. Just leave his brain intact.”

Inwardly the Lord Commander Primus raged, but there was no give in his restraints. He was left to Bile's mercy.

“How does it feel to have followed a lie since our banishment in the Eye of Terror, Lord Commander Eidolon?” Melusine gloated.

“You served the Naga too!”

“You mean I was enslaved,” the black-striped pink genetic abomination corrected as her 'father' turned around and began to leave this lab's section. “Now that is over.”

“And do not worry, oh Head of the Phoenix Conclave,” the mad Chief Apothecary called out. “My Age has finally come.”

Eidolon should not have felt fear. But these five simple words terrified him.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Kar Duniash Sector**

**Kar Duniash System**

**Suzerain Shipyards**

**Two hundred and forty-one hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Lord High Admiral Reinhart von Lohengramm**

“At first glance, Battlefleet Nyx's status might seem perilous. Before Operation Caribbean was launched, it only had two Battleships, one Grand Cruiser, one Battlecruiser, twenty-one Cruisers, forty-three Light Cruisers, five Heavy Frigates, ninety-eight Frigates, sixty-five Corvettes, and two hundred and six Destroyers. And it lost two Cruisers, two Light Cruisers, three Corvettes, and twenty-four Destroyers at Commorragh. There are also more ships crippled, including the Grand Cruiser.”

“But in reality?” this was a rhetorical question and Reinhart knew it.

“But in reality,” Admiral Siegfried Kircheis continued, “these losses aren't that dramatic for Battlefleet Nyx. The shipyards of Nyx have four Cruisers and eleven Light Cruisers under construction which will be completed before 300M35. The Corvette and Destroyer losses would have been erased in a couple of years, but the Fabricator-General of Mars and the major Forge Worlds are on the ramparts to give out as many Destroyers and escorts as logistically possible. The manpower losses are more problematic, but the Tech-Priests of Nyx are pushing more and more for auto-loading and highly efficient technology aboard the hulls they build. And while I doubt propaganda will announce it, a lot of the 'old guard' of nobles serving in Battlefleet Nyx perished at Commorragh. Their replacements will be extremely motivated, competent...and loyal to the death to Weaver.”

Reinhart passed a hand through his blond hair. His childhood friend and chief of staff had made an excellent report, and the Lord High Admiral didn't doubt most of the points were going to prove how accurate they were in due time.

That said, all of the drawbacks were worth it in exchange for the destruction of Commorragh and the carnage soon to be unleashed against the forces of Craftworld Biel-Tan.

Neither Reinhart nor any Lord of Kar Duniash had ever publically admitted it, but a monumental amount of firepower across Ultima Segmentum was tied up to guard hundreds of Industrial, Hive, Forge, Agri, and Civilised Worlds, not because of the Orks, but due to the threat Eldar raids represented. And this for a simple reason. A greenskin all-out attack against a major world, unless its defenders were sleeping, usually resulted in months, years, or even decades of protracted conflict. If the long-ears were in a destructive mood, mere hours were sufficient for them to scorch the world and exterminate its population with the xenos-equivalent of an Exterminatus.

The general withdrawal of Biel-Tan armies and fleets on every front had already freed six Battlefleets and dozens more Battlegroups, along with their hundreds of patrol craft and supply and support ships. The registered destruction of the torturer-killer squadrons of Commorragh was liberating just as many Battlefleets from duties which had been equally damaging for morale in Ultima Segmentum.

And that was just in Ultima Segmentum, where his command zone was, though the Segmentum he was in charge of was 'traditionally' one of the preferred targets of the Eldar pirates.

“I can live with that.”

“I don't think the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy is going to agree with you.”

“Too bad for him,” in his opinion, out of the five Lord High Admirals who had been in the running when the time came to choose a new supreme commander – Reinhart had not been involved due to being a mere Admiral at the time – Rabadash y Byng el Calormen was the worst choice the bureaucrats and staff officers of Terra could have made. To have important ties to every naval dynasty of Solar was good for politics, but the title contained the word 'Admiral' for a reason, and that meant the highest man or woman in uniform of the Imperial Navy should be an officer with decades of battle-experience, not someone who had jumped in rank by arriving once the final shot was fired and stealing the laurels of victory from his predecessors' corpses. “And for now, he's busy in his palace, gloating that the Navy will once again have a Gloriana Battleship to show the flag.”

The news had arrived a few hours ago with the latest astropathic bulletin from the Throneworld.

“That will leave us time to expand Battlefleet Nyx,” Kircheis was always inclined to see the positive side of things. “And we will have to expand it Reinhart, if we want to stay relevant in that area of space. Bad enough several Rogue Trader ships have been reassigned to new dynasties which will be in her debt, but the Ecclesiarchy will have to give her prizes and assets since they declared her a Living Saint, and there's also the Mechanicus Explorator fleets to take into account.”

Reinhart was sufficiently wise to know that Kircheis was, if anything, understating the seriousness of the situation.

“I agree a major expansion is in order. For the reasoning, it's not difficult: with Nyx being given one more Sub-Sector to rule over, we would have been forced to increase our naval presence, Battle of Commorragh or not. I can find the funds, resources, and manpower for the shipyards' expansion without raising too many eyebrows. But Nyx does not have a third of the voidsmen, civilian or military, required to man more Battleships and Battlecruisers. Their SDF has expanded, but it's still a work in progress.”

“I think you know already what the solution is, Reinhart,” his friend told him. “One of the big projects of our colleagues will have to be cancelled for Nyx. And as much as I hate to say this, since von Kisher's 'Fast Battleship' idea cost us millions of dead, I think we will face few consequences for axing his pet projects. His faction is collapsing as we speak, there won't be any major opposition.”

“Assuming I do as you say, how many Battleships would this give the Nyx Sector?”

“Ten within twenty years. I'm not counting whatever naval forces the Atlantis diocese will choose to leave in the Suebi Sub-Sector and the squadrons the Victor of Commorragh will convince to accompany her back home.”

Reinhart thought about it for a good minute, before deciding that while not perfect, it was a good start for a Sector which had gone from complete anonymity to basking in the golden light of the God-Emperor.

“Of course, we are going to need a new Lord Admiral and plenty of good officers to command this assembled Battlefleet. Lord Admiral Alexandros is a few years away from retirement at best.”Reinhart grimaced. “That is not a fight I'm looking forwards to.”

“Begin with the essentials,” the smile of the red-haired Admiral was too large to not be suspicious. “I think your daughters would be particularly thankful if you sent them to the Nyx Sector. I think there's a new Rogue Trader they would dearly want to meet again.”

Lord High Admiral Reinhart von Lohengramm, Lord of Kar Duniash and veteran of multiple wars against over twenty xenos races, glared at his best friend.

“I can convene a firing squad for you if you have similar 'essential ideas' in your mind.”

“Yes, oh my Lord High Admiral.”

Reinhart emitted a noise of despair. The God-Emperor save him from his wife, his daughters, and his friend...

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Cadia Sector**

**Cadian System**

**Cadia**

**Kasr Tyrok**

**Two hundred and forty-two hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Governor Primus Andreas Waldersee**

“Kasr Holn?”

“The Black Consuls are busy burying the last heretic bastards alive,” Andreas' chief of staff answered. “The Cadian 16th reports the raiders and the heretics are so numerous the burial pits are big enough to put a Titan in them.”

“Good. Saint Josmane's Hope?”

“The Cadian 43rd is taking care of it with half a company of Angels Eradicant. So far it looks like we will take the prison, but it will need new prisoners if we want to use it for its original purpose.”

The Governor of Cadia nodded and turned towards the hololithic figure of the officer commanding the strategic defences of Cadia Prime.

“Status of the defences?”

“Ninety-one percent of the ground-based defences are operational. Eighty-two percent of the orbital wing hangars, lances, and orbital grid have suffered little to no damage. The Tech-Priests have begun their repairs and estimate they will need less than two months to return the anti-air guns and all planetary batteries to their usual standard. The orbital grid will take longer, but they promise it will take less than six standard months.”

“With or without technological and other assistance from Agripinaa?”

“I got evasive answers, Governor, but I think it's best to err on the side of caution and say the correct answer is 'with'.”

“Typical,” the cogboys wanted everyone to praise their culture, but when something went wrong, apologies and question-induced headaches were never far away. “But if it's the best they can do, it's the best they can do. Battlefleet Cadia will have to stay particularly vigilant in the meantime. It's not like we have a lot of options aside from Agripinaa.”

The Imperium had paid dearly during the onslaught of Black Crusades to learn that Forge Worlds, unless they were militarised to extreme degrees, granted ultra-expensive protections against tech-breaking sorcery, and wielded the most powerful weapons of the Mechanicus, were ravaged in short order by the Despoiler and his legions of heretics, traitors, daemons, and other abominations.

The High Lords for once had been cautious: the new Forge Worlds built after the Fourth Black Crusade had been built behind the Pius Line, a series of Fortress Worlds protecting the fastest traversable star lanes to Segmentum Solar and Holy Terra. The monsters would have no easy pickings anymore...but the obvious drawback was that there weren't many Forge Worlds in the region to give immediate assistance to Cadia in case of an attack.

“What are the Tarot-readers saying?” Before reaching the rank of General, Andreas had scoffed at the thought that any military man had to depend on psyker-receptive cards to plan for the future. Alas at that point the young Andreas Waldersee had been an imbecile, and his older and much wiser Governor persona used all weapons at his disposal to protect his homeworld.

“No raid for the next three days. But there was a warning about a breach on the northern edge of the Eye. Some traitor scouts may try to escape our vigilance.”

“Transmit the warning to the Battlegroup of Battlefleet Scarus which should be patrolling there. Ideally, the Inquisition should have already warned them, but better two warnings than none.”

“Yes, Governor.”

At last, Andreas turned his head in direction of the only man in the command room who wasn't serving the Imperium as a military officer. His clothes were costly and showed a profusion of gold and silver, and his powdered wig would have been a nightmare to keep as it was on a battlefield.

But the man was the direct liaison between the Governor Primus of Cadia Prime and the High Lords of Terra, which made the tolerance of his curious clothing choices a necessity rather than an option.

“The Will of the High Lords?”

“The High Twelve agree an attack from the Arch-Heretic and its apostates is highly probable within this decade after the sheer damage inflicted by the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement and the Battle of Commorragh. But while the threat is not to be taken lightly, for the moment the Cadian forces are near intact and there are, as I am sure you are aware, plenty of other battlefronts across the galaxy where the skill and the dedication of Cadian Shock Troopers are desperately needed.”

“How many can I recall?” He was a Cadian, he wasn't going to play the game with someone who had played it all his life.

“Forty percent,” the spokesman of Holy Terra replied. “To compensate for this, Mordian, Vigilus, Orar, and Merovincha will each tithe ten million guardsmen to help you defend the Gate. They will arrive within the next four years. Battlefleet Cadia will also be reinforced and the Reinforcement Directive for Battlefleet Scarus and Agripinaa can be enforced on your order.”

It was not nothing. Put together, this would be the largest amount of reinforcements Cadia had received this millennium in all aspects.

But he would have preferred having the other sixty percent of the Cadian regiments dispersed across the Imperium back. Because when the Black Crusades began, Cadian commanders knew the men who weren't on the battlefield arrived too late and their main goal was to incinerate the corpses of fallen Cadians...

**Beyond the light of the Astronomican**

**Quarantined Isstvan System**

**Isstvan III**

**Two hundred and fifty hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Magos Tokyo-Theta-4**

“I fear Isstvan III is going to be a far less successful archeotech-recovery operation than Isstvan V, Magos.”

“I fear your predictions are highly likely to be accurate, Questor.” Tokyo-Theta-4, Magos formerly of Triplex Phall and now serving the Chosen of the Omnissiah, replied. “But it was anticipated.”

His second-in-command canted in agreement. This outcome had been entered in the thousands of simulations the cogitators had run long before reaching the system they were currently exploring.

“Yes, unlike at Isstvan V, the Arch-Heretic and his monsters were content to wait for the retribution force sent by the Omnissiah to come here.” A retribution force which alas, as history had proven, had too many traitors hiding behind loyal masks.

“And they scoured the surface clean of everything which might be of use to them. The destruction unleashed by the Life-Eater Virus helped them in this task.”

Several thousand years later, and the vegetation of Isstvan III was still limited to some weeds and a few common bushes...both the former and the latter were terribly small and looked a season away from dying.

Some part of Tokyo-Theta-4's mind was telling him that the planets had not recovered symbolically from the most terrible treason which had struck the young Imperium. The rest of his brain told him to not look for ghosts where there was only cold air and barren lands.

“There's no point continuing this and wasting fuel and hours of daylight,” the Magos told the Tech-Priests accompanying him in binary, sending a last look of pity at the shape of metal which might have at one point been an Imperial tank. So great was the damage that Tokyo-Theta-4's expertise did not allow him to say with certainty which type of war engine it might have once been. At least the psyker of this micro-group had declared it untainted, which meant that after purification and many rites of metallurgy, maybe another machine forged from its metal would roll on a grand battlefield and bring revenge and vindication beyond death. “Unless the other groups have found anything particularly noteworthy, transmit orders that all of them are to converge upon the ruins of Choral City.”

“Permission to bring some specialised machines into the ruins, Magos?” one of his subordinates asked. “Data we were able to obtain from Stygies VIII and Ryza mentioned the possibility of some catacombs. We may need to dig if we want to recover the secrets of the loyal Legionnaires.”

“Do so,” the commander of the Exploration Fleet obeying the orders of the Master of Exploration and the Chosen of the Omnissiah told the younger Tech-Priest. “But I doubt there are many secrets left behind.”

Because if there were a few weeds here and there, there were also entirely vitrified plains, proof that once the traitors had been finished with this world, the orbital bombardment had been very thorough, destroying even the tiniest possibility of leaving potential survivors behind.

Lady Weaver had wished to obtain pre-Heresy gene-seed of the Legions to compare it to potential acquisitions of Operation Caribbean, the damned Third Legion most of all. So far, it looked like this objective was going to be marked with the black of failure.

This was not to say that the operation was a waste of time, obviously. Once the warships of the Adeptus Mechanicus had evaded the space beacons of quarantine with great care, there had been several prizes of importance secured. The largest was a scout Destroyer bearing the insignia of the Raven Guard Legion that over a third of his enginseers were busy repairing so that it may endure the return travel to a Forge World. The ship had drifted away from the war zone as its crew and boarding assault teams from the World Eaters mutually slaughtered each other, and in the aftermath it had been forgotten, with no one aboard to return to civilisation.

On the planet of Isstvan V, many terribly damaged power armours, helmets, and tanks had been recovered in the mountains surrounding the location where the mourned Drop Site Massacre had taken place. The majority of this bounty consisted of patterns known to be used by Raven Guard and Salamander Space Marines. Few Iron Hands' machines and corpses had been found. It seemed that when the treacherous Legions arriving behind the Loyalists had opened fire, the Tenth Legion had not been able to reach their Thunderhawks or break through the encirclement. Not like the Raven Guard had done, as the discovery of the Thunderhawk *Night Hope*, intact and hidden in a ravine, proved. It was not enemy fire but lack of fuel and ammunition which had forced the Astartes using it to leave it behind.

But no gene-seed had been recovered. If there had been some of the progenoids among the archeotech recovered, it had not been placed in a cryogenic-containers or blessed stasis fields, and thus it had decayed like the flesh of the fallen loyalists.

Tokyo-Theta-4 had known the odds of achieving success in this endeavour were incredibly slim, but the Adeptus Mechanicus did not give up at the first obstacle. And yet as his Lander flew over the devastation of what had in the distant past been the capital of a world, he knew he would have to hope Lady Weaver was satisfied with the results of this expedition. Because it wasn't the few damaged helmets and utterly broken armours recovered on Isstvan III which were going to impress anyone.

The Lander found a new vitrified zone east of more ruins and devastated infrastructure.

“Cisterius-Gamma has found an entrance to several tunnels, Magos. Do you wish to take command of his foray?”

“No,” Tokyo-Theta-4 replied after observing the map. “Our mapping augurs have located a more promising entrance less than a kilometre away.”

The travel was done with only minimal canting, often to denote a potential archeotech item having survived Exterminatus, vicious bombardment, treason, Astartes-versus-Astartes fighting, and traitor pillage. The Skitarii were vigilant, though unlike on a battlefield, their sensors were most useful informing him if a part of the city was likely to fall upon their heads.

The tunnels weren't really engaging. The powerful lights chasing away the darkness couldn't remove a certain unease that both Magos and subordinates were all certain was not their cogitators and auspexes playing tricks on them.

For more than two hours they explored in vain, finding only pulverised helmets and armours torn apart. Despite all his faith in the prowess of Mechanicus artisans, Tokyo-Theta-4 wasn't able to imagine a scenario where these pieces of armour could be restored to a fraction of their previous intact condition without melting everything down first.

It was then they found something. And it was not small.

“Contemptor-Cortus Dreadnought,” Tokyo-Theta-4 found the name after only four seconds remembering everything he had read upon the venerable and blessed machines of the Omnissiah. There were not many patterns with different types of weapons dating from the Age of the Great Crusade. “Damaged but fairly intact, compared to what we have found so far on this barren planet.”

The venerable Dreadnought was lying on its side, partially buried under many tons of plasteel and debris. One leg had been broken, which had assuredly proved the doom of the Venerable Ancient.

“I do not share your optimism, Magos,” his second told him bluntly. “Even if we found a shorter path to the surface to evacuate it, it is really going to be difficult to take it with us. We could-“

“No, we will not cut it apart!” the Magos interrupted before his second suggested something bordering on the heretekal. “Look! The adamantium sarcophagus looks relatively intact. And the twelfth-blessed Atomantic field generator isn't emitting radiation, therefore it is still functional. Should we extract it from this debris, the repairs will be months-long at worst!”

“And if it's a Traitor, Magos?” Tokyo-Theta-4 was not impressed by the intelligence of his bodyguards at the best of times, but this Skitarius Ranger was really below average.

“The colours may have faded, but the Aquila is intact,” he pointed out. “Once they revealed their treachery, the servants of the Arch-Heretic broke the wings or harboured only the Eye of Horus. This Dreadnought was a Loyalist.”

“Loyalist or not, he was close to psychic archeotech,” the blind psyker accompanying them had grabbed what looked like a broken musical instrument on the ground. “I wonder why it was doing there...and why the Dreadnought broke it.”

“BECAUSE I DIDN'T NEED IT ANYMORE.”

Had Tokyo-Theta-4 brought guardsmen with him, he would have considered the possibility of a joke...but there weren’t any non-Tech-Priests aside from their psyker, and the fact that with a metallic groan the Dreadnought slowly inclined itself towards a vertical posture made clear the 'death' status of the venerable machine had been a bit erroneous.

Tokyo-Theta-4 rapidly murmured two prayers for the blessings of the enduring Motive Force before advancing and bowing.

“Venerable Ancient.”

“WHO DO YOU SERVE?”

“The Omnissiah Emperor, Who stands on the Golden Throne of Holy Terra.”

“THE TECH-PRIESTS HAVEN'T CHANGED MUCH OVER THE MILLENNIA.”

In spite of the severe hindrance represented by the broken leg, more and more debris and metal were thrown aside by the venerable and most blessed machine.

“I am Magos Tokyo-Theta-4 of the Nyx Mechanicus, sent to this system by the Chosen of the Omnissiah to search for any legacy left by loyal Space Marines.”

“I AM HE WHO REMEMBERS. I AM THE ANCIENT OF RITES. I AM RYLANOR OF THE EMPEROR'S CHILDREN, AND I HEARD I COULD SERVE THE EMPEROR AGAIN.”

“You will, Venerable Ancient,” the Magos promised. “But first, our blessed machines will have to dig a tunnel to facilitate your extraction from this catacomb.”

“NO. YOUR FIRST PRIORITY IS TO DISARM THE UNEXPLODED VIRUS BOMB BEHIND ME.”

*That* rendered Tokyo-Theta-4 speechless for several seconds.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**Two hundred and fifty-six hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Alice Gaius**

“Are you sure, Ms. Gaius?”

“Yes, I am, Reverend Father.”

The Pontifex Urba watched her attentively for several seconds before speaking once more.

“You are aware Abbess Gaius was...quite generous where you and several other orphans were concerned.”

“I am, and I am very grateful for her generosity.”

In addition to being given her name, which was something Alice truly cherished above all other things, there were enough Throne Gelts to get an apprenticeship in an upper-class profession.

But when she was praying and meditating, Alice didn't see this path for herself.

“I could easily see you taking my place in two decades,” she had thought the servant of the Ecclesiarchy would say many things to make her hesitate, but this one she hadn't seen coming.

“I am flattered, Reverend Father. But my answer is still the same.”

The concern in the Pontifex Urba's eyes didn't disappear, but a faint smile was not far from his face.

“At least you aren't easily discouraged.” The nearly bald Priest of the God-Emperor commented. “I will pass on your letter to the Cardinal. I was not informed how Lady Weaver intends to recruit potential aspirants for the Templar Sororitas, but I think that as a protégée of the Abbess-Crusader, it's best your name comes to the right ears from the start. What they will do with it, that I can't make any promises about.”

“That's already far more than I dared dream of, Reverend Father,” and if she had stayed an anonymous orphan, the first step of this journey would have been utterly inaccessible to her. “And I will do my best to defend the Faithful like she wanted.”

“I have no doubt you will.” The old man finally smiled before making the sign of the aquila, and Alice reciprocated. “But I would be remiss in my duties of shepherd if I didn't give you a few pieces of advice before you depart.”

The eyes were suddenly more piercing and his posture suddenly far more charismatic, and Alice could see why Cardinal Prescott and her Celestial Highness had chosen this man to be their voice in Hive Athena.

“I have no doubts the Basileia will want strong women in the Order of the Silver Rose, especially those who will fight in the frontlines. This means strength of body, mind, and soul. In order to accomplish the first, I encourage you to prepare yourself for participation in the Sanguinala Games. The mind would be best prepared by reading and understanding several of the most sacred texts. As for the soul...your faith in the God-Emperor and His Saint must be unshakeable, my child.”

“I thank you for these precious words, Reverend Father. I will keep them in mind no matter what happens in the years to come. Ave Imperator.”

“His Will be done,” the Pontifex Urba finished with a new sign of the aquila, before an older Preacher escorted the fourteen-year-old teenage girl to the extremely noisy streets and several improvised scenes of the Living Saint spanking some horrible long-ears.

**Basilica-in-construction Hagia Sanguinala**

**Ajax Clarence**

“I swear brother, that was the Grand Architect herself next to the entrance!”

Ajax rolled his eyes. Weeks of hard work had not decreased his brother's habit of saying idiocies in the slightest.

“Zephyr, we are a kilometre away from the entrance!” Or if they weren't, it wasn't by much. “You're unable to recognise me from two hundred metres away in a crowd! How can you recognise a woman you've never seen before in all your life?”

“It's true!”

The young Nyxian worker verified they were on the correct path to deliver the marble to the sculptors and pushed, thanking the God-Emperor he had a small Mechanicus device under the stone block to make the task easier.

A glance to his left informed him that Zephyr, for all his boasting about women present on the construction site, had not brought more than three containers for the Priests, despite them being far easier to move through the future 'grand avenue' of the Hagia Sanguinala than marble blocks.

“Brother, stop talking about things which won't help us.”

“But it matters!”

"How?" Ajax asked once he had delivered the marble to the sculptors and come back where his brother had tried to speak a few soft words to a white-clothed Priestess.

“If it's the Grand Architect...”

“If it's the Grand Architect, so what? I will remind you we are paid to help building the Hagia Sanguinala, not watch the architects and the spire-born people behind the project. And I don't know about you, but I want to keep my job.”

When at sixteen their father had died, Ajax had feared the worst. The manufactorum he was working in had been closed – rumour had been you could apply to work somewhere in another Hive's foundries, but with their mother ill and alone relocating was out of the question for them – and Ajax and Zephyr had been young men, young unqualified and jobless men. And as the old Nyxian proverb went, that meant you had three choices: volunteer for promethium extraction jobs, join a gang, or go to the recruitment office of the Imperial Guard. One way or another, you were dead before you were twenty, and that was no rumour.

But then the Governor had gotten himself killed, a far better one had taken his place, and the construction of the Hagia Sanguinala had begun, with tens of thousands of workers wanted for a lot of jobs, some specialised and requiring hundreds of hours of experience in artisanship, but plenty of others demanded only that you be willing to give your faith and your sweat to the work.

It had taken one attempt for him and two for Zephyr, but they had been hired.

Exhausting work? Yes, three times yes. And there were plenty of times when they had to recite prayers to the God-Emperor.

But for the first time in his life, Ajax was able to spend three minutes in a pulse-shower and afford some insect-shampoo, eat good food twice per day – the ration bars served at noon were awful, everyone save the Tech-Priests agreed on that – and they were paid three hundred and fifty Throne Gelts each per month. They had also received two sets of brand-new clothes made from synthleather. Compared to promethium extraction or foundry work, it was paradise.

“You worry too much.”

“And you not enough. The overseer is not happy with you.”

There were roughly a hundred young men and women working under the stern eyes of Overseer Justinian. It was possible there were two of them in more trouble than Zephyr was. But there weren't three of them, by the feathers of the Great Sanguinius!

“He won't do anything. The Saint won, didn't she? There are celebrations everywhere every night!”

Ajax grumbled. His little brother should work instead of pursuing these stupidities and listening to the vid-cast's propaganda. At this rate, Zephyr was going to tell him he wanted to join the Guard in twenty days...

“The Saint is the Saint, and she's not back yet. But if you want to explain to mom why you were fired from an excellent job because you wanted to stalk a female architect, I won't stop you...”

**Vulkan's Arsenal Shipyard**

**Watchmaster Tertius Alphonsikas Flint**

The grox steak was literally melting on his tongue, it was delicious!

“Flint, are you paying attention to what I just said?”

But since he wasn't paying the bill at the end of the lunch, he had to pay attention to what his superior, the esteemed Watchmaster Primus Titus Belenos, was saying.

“Our docks will have the contract to build a new Destroyer,” the Watchmaster Tertius recited dutifully, “and if we're lucky, we may be selected for a Hoplite, unlike last time.”

Oops. Perhaps he should have not uttered the last three words. Well, too late now. He used the moment of respite to munch on several ruby potatoes. Golden Throne be praised, this was a noble's feast!

“Yes. And this time, it is out of the question I'm losing a contract because your second cousin and his friends were caught drugged and drunk by the Tech-Priests!”

Alphonsikas flinched. That had not been the best moment of his career. And the fact he should really have seen it coming didn't help.

For reasons the Mighty Governor and Saint governing them hadn't deigned sharing with them, having fun with a Lho-stick or something 'exciting' at work was now forbidden.

“Stop the drugs and your smuggling operations, Flint. They're not worth it.”

“They're helping my lads cope with the hard work,” he protested while taking another bite of the divine grox steak.

His superior scoffed loudly.

“The Destroyer built in your dockyards was two weeks late compared to Dock AA-5. And I know from excellent sources they aren't using a third of the drugs you and your cousins smoke or inject into your arms.”

“AA-5 has the best toys and got priority for a few augmented elite tech-clansmen,” the brown-haired Nyxian didn't have a problem with comparisons, but directly going to the extremes was not fair. “They also have three times the number of cogboys we have!”

“In reality, you have exactly three more cogboys than them,” Titus Belenos corrected.

“Nah, you're mistaken.”

“No, I'm not. And I can assure you that the Magi and the Admirals overseeing the warships' construction have the same numbers I have. Stop smuggling drugs. There is still time to wean the addicts off them.”

The last parts of grox meat disappeared in his mouth, and this was good, because Alphonsikas was appreciating this lunch less and less.

“This is my men we're speaking about. My men, my rules.”

“Your men, your rules,” Titus Belenos agreed solemnly. “But please keep in mind that if the cogboys and the enforcers catch the Lho-sticks this time, your second cousin, his friends, and yourself will be good for hard labour or the Penal Legions. Do you want a pastry after the steak?”

“No,” the Watchmaster Tertius answered while abandoning the near-empty plate and indigestible conversation. “I'm not hungry anymore.”

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*War is nothing new in the Eye of Terror. From the moment the Legions fled there, routed and humiliated by the counterattacks of the False Emperor's lackeys, there has always been war in our prison. First were the Legion Wars, where everyone fought against the Sons of Horus and each other. Then the Black Legion rose from the ashes of the Sixteenth Legion, and gave a simple choice to allies and enemies alike: join us or die. Many vicious and implacable campaigns were waged after Abaddon proclaimed himself to be the new Warmaster.*

*But the gigantic bloodbath which started shortly after the Battle of Commorragh, that some call the Word Bearers-Skaven War, was something else. The Dark Council was revealed to be completely unprepared for a long protracted struggle against creatures living and breathing for Anarchy.*

*The dominoes had fallen. The errors had been made. The challenge was sent.*

*The Rattenkrieg could begin.*

Revelations of [CLASSFIED] under Inquisitorial torture, [REDACTED, CLASSIFIED].

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Great-great Hangar-bays of Clan Ozai**

**Lord-Captain of the Fiery Wings and Warpstone Keikt Snarlsnip**

Keikt looked great-dashing in his black-and-crossbones uniform, if he said so himself! But it was no less than he-he deserved after his great victories-triumphs! And he was going to rise higher! Today, Lord-Captain of the Fiery Wings and Warpstone, tomorrow, he would stand-climb to be the right claw of Malal! A seat on the Council of Eleven was his-his due!

But before Most Dominant High Admiral Kiditt Amberjaw herself crawled in front of him in awe of his-his mightiness, there was a fight-war to win-win!

And slave-inferiors to give orders to!

“Operation Snarlsnip- err, Skavenrise has been-been approved by Council of Eleven, yes-yes! Clan Ozai will be-be blade-dagger plunged in eye-eye of brute-things! Praise Malal!”

Not that there had been any doubt-question on that, no-no! Clan Ozai were born-bred pilots! Air was their-their empire!

“PRAISE MALAL!” squeaked the Ozai troops, man-things, and other things gathered for Skavenri-Snarlsnip, the great-great operation which was going to let-make his genius be recognised by the entire galaxy.

Keikt scurried to his throne-podium, and stood to watch-see the arsenal gathered before his eyes. Before the Bufasqueak bombers and the V-roclaws, thousands of his elite-best Kamiskavens and Fallvermin had been assembled. The former had only two-two hours of training, and the latter had too few-little grav-squeaks, but the indomitable-great power of Anarchy would-would compensate for all-everything!

What was more-more important was that they were in black and crossbones uniforms like him-him! They would go-scurry to battle looking great-mighty like him-himself!

And like he himself had said-spoken, at some-certain point, quantity of things was quality of its own.

One thousand Bufasqueak bombers, five thousand V-rocklaws, and more than ten thousand vermin-soldiers were his-his to order-command! Victory was his-his to claim-claim!

“Kamiskaven! Fallvermin! Things!” Keikt squeaked-shouted. “Tomorrow, Skaven and Anarchist-things will stand master-rulers of this-this world! Our empire will be born-born on victory-triumph, best-great like wings of Great Malal!”

There were some complaint-accusations from ingrate furry man-things, but whip restored-created praised silence to hear-hear himself squeak!

“The guns-weapons of brute-things will be-be powerless against us! If they shoot-shoot down one Bufasqueak, millions more will use-use warpstone mega-bombs to rain-rain devastation upon them-them!”

Keikt added a large silver medal with laurels and a skull to his-his uniform for the occasion.

“When they-they despair and think-think it is over, a thousand Skaven will raid-raid them! If one head cut-sliced, a million will replace them-them! PRAISE ME! PRAISE CLAN OZAI!” Ah, and he-he nearly forgot. Slowly, the magnificent-great Lord-Captain of the Fiery Wings and Warpstone saluted by raising his right claw in a martial stance.

“HAIL MALAL!”

“HAIL MALAL!” sang-roared the Kamiskavens and Fallvermin, soon followed by the man-things and the rest of the servant-things. “HAIL MALAL!”

“Rush-scurry to your machines! Skavenrise is-is about to begin-start!”

Keikt Snarlsnip took his time to go to his Mega-Bufasqueak, which a cohort of Clan Skyre had prepared for days-days. It had been hard-difficult to find-gather all the resources, but it was good-good for his-his prestige. More-more armour and explosive things to defend his mighty-great fur!

“The target, Oh Mighty Lord-Captain?” The co-pilot Kamiskaven asked after prostrating himself as was befitting.

“In name of Council of Eleven and my-my greatness,” Keikt Snarlsnip squeaked after activating the loud-squeaker. “Our offensive-raid will-will bomb false-fake temple brute-things call *Templum Inficio* and bomb-burn it until nothing's left-left! We will kill-slay false half-god of brute-things!”

That way they would kill-decapitate the enemy's mind-morale before war truly began-started! Truly only he could make-draft such a brilliant and magnificent plan!

“Activate-charge reactors! Force closest Skyre-engineer to go-come aboard with-with us!”

The Mega-Bufasqueak began to burn in green flames, and for a few-few heartbeats, Keikt Snarlsnip felt fear, but it was quickly suppressed.

He was the Lord-Captain of the Fiery Wings and Warpstone, and the great-vast armada of the Skaven was his-his!

“HAIL MALAL! ATTACK! I SQUEAK-ORDER! FLY AND CONQUER-TRIUMPH! ATTACK!”

**Outer fortified perimeter of the *Templum Inficio***

**Fortress of Illumination**

**Coryphaus Seyss Schacht**

In theory, the rank of Coryphaus meant 'Chapter Master'. In practise, it was more complicated than that.

Once upon a time, there was a moment when the Coryphaus was in command of one thousand Astartes or more. That was when the Imperial Heralds fought under the banner of the False Emperor.

More and more these last cycles, as earthquakes shook the subterranean mass of churches and cathedrals to their foundations, Seyss was beginning to have doubts. First the old insecurities came back. Yes, Chaplains and later the Dark Apostles were important for the mental purity of the Seventeenth Legion, but were they really so important as to deserve a rank above a Coryphaus and dictate all the deployments of the Word Bearers? The veteran Marine wasn't sure. He complied with them, obviously. Willing or not, this Warp-cursed hierarchical obedience they all owed to their gene-sire was too deeply ingrained in their transhuman bodies and minds to do anything else.

Seyss Schacht was not an imbecile. When it was time for him to impale the survivors of the last slave rebellion, the whispers arrived and the doubts increased tenfold. The Legionnaire didn't speak a single word to the other Astartes of the Bleeding Curse. To admit this would have been tantamount to placing his own head on the bloody executioner's stone, and the High Coryphaus was always more than ready to make an example of the unmotivated and the Faithless.

But somehow the sinking feeling he wasn't on the side he should have chosen was not leaving his twin hearts.

The Dark Council had always insisted the victory of the Pantheon was unavoidable. The mountain of vellum and apathy which called itself the Imperium was too weak, too pathetic, for it to be otherwise. The blind mortals had succumbed to the greatest error of all times. They had begun to venerate the False Emperor as their God, and they lost the very Primarchs which had been supposed to lead them in the meantime.

Seyss Schacht had believed them before Commorragh. After, the planetary crust-strong certainty had been shattered across the Eye.

If the False Emperor was...the False Emperor, how was it possible for the mortals serving this ancient abomination to kill the Goddess of the Pantheon? Anathema the daemons chose to call him. Was it possible that, unlike all the lies and the false promises of victory, Holy Lorgar had originally been right before everyone else, before turning away from the Truth and the *Lectitio Divinitatus*? Did the events of Monarchia represent a temporary moment of humility the Word Bearers should have simply accepted before the moment was right to convert the Imperium?

Because if it was...then they had chained themselves to False Gods. Already Four were only Three. And if one could be destroyed, then the others could be too.

And there was nothing that could be done now. These last days, the skulls hanging at his belt and planted upon the jump pack on his back were looking almost alive, as if to remind him of the massacres he had joyously ordered and plunged his red gauntlets into.

“Skulls and blood, I think there is an anomaly on the long-range daemon-auspexes, your August Malevolency,” the thin mortal who had uttered the words immediately prostrated himself on the ground full of screaming faces and tentacles. If he was lucky, he might be elevated for his duty.

“You are right, slave-dog,” Seyss Schacht told him after a few seconds trying to ascertain that it was not a new flock of Harpies or another winged army of the Gods materialised to test the defences of the *Templum Inficio*. But this wasn't a flock of errant Neverborn; it was too big. And nobody would fly that many aircraft so close to the ground. Schacht had been a great pilot after Isstvan V, and he had never tried these sorts of aerial acrobatics between spires and cathedrals on Sicarus.

If you missed one move, not only was death a possibility, but the Dark Apostles would find your soul in the Empyrean and drag it back to be tortured until they were confident you were no better than a Chaos Spawn.

“Besides, two other Great Coryphaus are responsible for those defence approaches. I will try to use my authority to convince the High Coryphaus the services of a Diabolist are needed.”

This anomaly didn't come at a good time, though there were precious few of those on Sicarus. But better that than-

The rockets – the very 'anomalies' he had disregarded – began to randomly slam into the Fortress and nearby structures in a rain of green fire. The Fortress of Illumination trembled imperceptibly and the avenues used to drag the slaves to the manufactorums and the cathedrals became charnel houses.

“GENERAL ALERT! GENERAL ALERT! THIS IS NO ANOMALY! THE *TEMPLUM INFICIO* IS UNDER ATTACK!”

“PILOTS TO YOUR AIRCRAFT! SHOOT DOWN THESE AIRBORNE TROOPS!”

“TO ARMS! TO ARMS! DO NOT LET A SINGLE HERETIC ATTACK THE HOLY FORTRESS OF THE ASCENDED PRIMARCH!”

Even with a transhuman mind, the chaos was everywhere and Seyss Schacht was running across the different command sections trying to mount a coherent defence.

“Tell the anti-aircraft guns I want all these attackers to be slaughtered before they touch the ground. The same thing is true for the pilots!”

What these imbeciles were trying to accomplish launching an airborne operation right after a hypersonic rocket barrage, the veteran Astartes couldn't imagine. Did they really think? And then a horrible thought arrived in his mind, forcing him to interrogate the daemon-thing replacing the more conventional methods in the Fortress of Illumination.

The heretics weren't attacking after the rocket barrage; they were arriving strapped to the rockets at terminal velocity, and had to sever their seatbelts before activating their grav-chutes...assuming they had one. Many looked like they didn't.

But the worst was the nature of the 'heretics'.

These weren't escaped slaves who had somehow found an abandoned military cache.

The enemy was giant rats, and the vox-frequencies were flooded by squeaks and insults.

“BE QUIET!” he shouted on the vox. “GET THE HELL OFF OF THIS VOX-FREQUENCY!”

One rat laughed at the other end.

“Brute-thing, I spit-spit on your-your bones! HAIL MALAL!”

And just as the skies became fire, as thousands of daemons rushed to meet the enemies of the Word Bearers, the situation became even more confused as the enemy aircraft arrived. Sending them so far after the airborne drop was an idiocy beyond the Codex-adherence of the Ultramarines, but they were there and they spread more chaotic melees above the cathedrals of Sicarus.

“Recall all the slave-pilots and the aces of the Bone Wings! I want them in the sky in two minutes, or I will personally flay them alive. Am I clear?”

“YES, MALEVOLENT LORD! YOU ARE!”

The answer didn't bring him any joy. By the Pantheon, it was likely too late for the cathedrals around the Fortress of Illumination. There were plenty of sites of worship already alight in green flames, and despite the Colchisian runes of warding, spires and towers crumbled far too easily.

And then a first aircraft of the rat-heretics exploded against a cathedral's upper portion after a Heldrake's aerial horde had ripped its tail off. Seyss had its eyes right on it, and so he saw the monumental green explosion and felt the soul-echo of hundreds of thousands of overseers and slaves dying in a long breath.

“KEEP THEM AWAY FROM THE *TEMPLUM INFICIO*! KEEP THEM AWAY FROM THE *TEMPLUM INFICIO*!”

The fortress of their gene-sire was built to resist unimaginable punishment, but the green-lit bombs which looked like immature groxes were too dangerous to be taken lightly.

It was too late. As new Word Bearers reinforcements filled the skies and began to massacre the rearguard of the rats, a small trickle of bombers had pierced the air screen of the defenders, and at their head, an aircraft thrice the size of the others led the attack.

Seyss saw the moment the gigantic bomb was dropped from its hold.

He watched as a huge mushroom of green light burst into existence. And he trembled in loathing and humiliation as the rat aircraft streamed away, pursued by all the Xiphon and fighters in creation, accompanied by millions of Neverborn...but nothing could erase the great shame in his two hearts at the sight of the great wound in the inner fortifications.

“BRUTE-THINGS! KNOW-KNOW IT WAS I, THE GREAT SNARLSNIP, WHO HAS KILLED-SLAIN YOUR FALSE-FAKE GOD! HAIL ME! HAIL MALAL!”

"**I AM NOT DEAD, STUPID AND IDIOTIC CREATURE**!"

A terrible hurricane materialised on Sicarus, and on its currents their gene-father rose on infernal wings.

His face was twisted into a terrible expression of hatred and undying vengeance.

"**YOU HAVE OVERSTAYED YOUR WELCOME ON SICARUS, SPAWNS! YOUR PUNISHMENT WILL BE ETERNAL**!"

The next moments were spent making good on this promise.

Not a single heretic rat-blasphemer escaped.

**Basilica of the Word**

**Dark Council Chambers**

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

The Dark Council had eight grand Dark Apostles presiding over the destiny of the Seventeenth Legion. Thus it had been ordered, and thus it had always been. The sessions could not begin without all eight of them being here. And despite what was professed, none of them were equal.

The only point they shared was that from Supreme Dark Apostle Erebus to Dark Apostle Kor Daradan, all of them were among the most wanted beings the fools serving the False Emperor wanted dead.

When the majority felt gracious or just wanted to spread some loyalty reevaluation in the ranks, eighty-eight minor Dark Apostles could be convened. But that was rare.

What had never happened since the last members of the Legion fled through the Cadian Gate, however, was their gene-father and illuminated Primarch walking out of the *Templum Inficio* to summon them.

And Paristur, like many commanders, knew that his life was now balanced on a razor's edge.

The only good news was Kor Phaeron was, at last, receiving a long-awaited comeuppance.

“**Disappoint me again**,” the burning Daemon-Primarch told the false-Astartes who had raised him, “**and I will kill you eight hundred and eighty-eight times until you no longer remember anything save that you deserved your punishment**.”

At last the Dark Cardinal stopped burning and his skin began to regenerate.

So the sycophant was going to survive once again, where one High Coryphaus and more than thirty sorcerers hadn't. Truly in the Eye of Terror, it wasn't what you did but how well you could deflect blame unto others to save your skin that truly counted.

“**You failed me, all of you. If it happens again, I will make you beg until there is no difference between a slave and your flayed carcass**.” Each word burned the ears and the faces of the Word Bearers assembled. “**Mothac. Since Kor Phaeron has proven he can't be trusted with the duty, you will replace him as the praetorian of the *Templum Inficio***.”

Encased in daemon armour gifted by their gene-father, the Lord of Torment nodded and swore on his name and soul that there would be no second failure.

“Paristur.”

“My Lord?”

“**You will rally the remnants of the Imperialis Armada and the descendants of the forces who fought under your banner at Terra. I want as many Battleships, armies, and Legionnaire Astartes as you can gather**.”

“By your will, it will be done.” While his face showed no relief, there were worse assignments he could think of.

“**Ekodas**.”

“My liege,” the Grand Apostle and mouthpiece of Kor Phaeron prostrated himself again.

“**Despite having wiped out this idiotic raid of the rats to the last, there are many survivors which are crawling in the catacombs and subterranean edifices. These vermin will not be permitted to prosper. Take thirty thousand Legionnaires and one million mortals, and wipe them out to last tail and fur pelt. I want to devour the souls of millions of these rodents before tasting the despair of their utter annihilation**!”

“Yes, my liege! Your desires will be accomplished and the vermin exterminated!”

Paristur turned his tongue eight times in his mouth. Maybe it was a bad idea to not inform their gene-father that the 'Skaven' had been purged by the False Emperor in person during the Great Crusade. How did he know that? The Legion which had helped in that particular enterprise had at the time been known as the Imperial Heralds, though they would be soon renamed as the Word Bearers.

And to be honest, it had been a monumental headache to get rid of those rodents. Fortunately, they had been led by an incredibly powerful psyker, because going into the tunnels and exterminating them one by one had been one of the most thankless chores in existence. One of the most risky too. The rats had not had this unstable green ammunition last time, but there had been billions of them and they fled too quickly when the rout was upon them.

“**Vorrjuk Kraal. You will go to Ghalmek in the Maelstrom, and remind the Dark Apostles they are sworn to the Pantheon and armed to fight the red robes of the False Emperor, not laugh at each defeat of the Dark Mechanicum. If the Hell Forge of Sarum falls, I will use their screaming skulls to decorate the Templum Inficio**.”

It was a very unpleasant mission. With the recent Warp disturbances, few were the Warp corridors stable enough to allow the passage of a capital ship able to cross half the galaxy and fight the interlopers blocking the way. And the Cadian Gate was fortified and at full alert. Going through that path was tantamount to suicide if you were caught before translating into the Warp.

“**Jarulek. Kor Daradan. The rodents have cost us millions of slaves at a moment we need more than ever. Find mortals to serve in the manufactorums. As long as they aren't the rats, I do not care if they are human or xenos. Find them and come back with your hulls filled with millions of slaves.**”

“Yes, Lord.”

“It will be done, my liege.”

And at last, this left...

“**Kor Phaeron. Erebus. Your political machinations are so pathetic I am at a loss to find words to describe them**.” One word which hurt and engulfed the world in fire, and the two senior members of the Dark Council were thrown across the room and impaled on many daemonic-imbued blades. “**If you had been more vigilant, I wouldn't have had to kill these heretics at the very gates of my Fortress! If you had been less arrogant and more astute, we could have sent thousands of Legionnaires to Commorragh and prevented the galactic catastrophe which started there**.”

The blades withdrew. Black blood boiled from the wounds.

“**If you disappoint me one more time, all the warbands and Legions in existence, all the might of the Pantheon and the most powerful sorcerers of the Eye will not save you from the tortures I will inflict on you**.”

Paristur tried to not show how afraid he was. Never, never had their liege talked to his most favoured advisors in that tone. And if he was ready to threaten them like this, then the rest of the Dark Council was equally expendable.

“**Erebus. Find Kelbor-Hal and remind him of the favours he owes to the Seventeenth Legion. Tell him I have ordered a Great Armament worthy of the name the servants of the False Emperor have found for the Despoiler's campaigns**.”

Kelbor-Hal. A name which hadn't been uttered at Sicarus in centuries. Paristur didn't even know if the exiled Fabricator-General of Mars was still answering to a certain definition of 'alive'. And the name the Primarch had hinted at was obviously 'Black Crusade'.

“**Kor Phaeron. Gather all the warbands which pretend to escape my authority. Enforce the maximum amount of tributes and resource gifts in my realm. Contact the Night Lords' fleets, the Alpha Legion cells, and the last remnants of the Emperor's Children. When I give the order, I want to see an Expeditionary Fleet putting the Black Legion to shame in orbit**.”

Paristur began to calculate the number of soldiers that required. Despite an impressive penetration of the other Dark Apostles' network, he didn't know how many mortals and Astartes were going to be mustered at Sicarus by the end of these tasks. The veteran of the Siege of Terra only knew it was going to be an armada and a coalition of armies far greater than the muster Abaddon had gathered to attack El'Phanor.

“**There will be no half-measures this time. Cadia will burn. Obscurus will be set aflame. And I will personally kill the pathetic 'Living Saint' that my creator schemed with**.”

Flames and darkness burned and the Lord of the Seventeenth Legion became taller, more terrible and magnificent than in Paristur's darkest dreams.

“**There will be no second Commorragh. Weaver will die, and the hopes of the False Emperor will die with her**.”

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**Skavenblight Tunnels**

**Most Holy-Sacred Chamber of the Council of Eleven**

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

It took exactly ten heartbeats for the Council to erupt into open violence. It was not-not bad.

“I think-suggest Clan Ozai should-must be removed from Council for this monumental flop-failure!” squeaked Munificent Loreclaw Ishtarratt Crimsonfang.

One heartbeat later, his head exploded, courtesy of Most Dominant High Admiral Kiditt Amberjaw holding a big-big weapon.

“This-this is heresy!” Ultimate Pontifex-Anarchist Paskaquish Stormgash of Clan Treecherik screeched.

“No-no, this-this is anarchy,” the leader of Clan Ozai corrected. “Clan Gangrous will need-require a wise-better commander.”

“Yes-yes,” Wonderful Tyrant-Usurper Qaragol Underbones intervened. “But our plans-plans have suffered-endured a grave-grave defeat. Not one-one Bufasqueak survived the attack, no-no!”

“This loss-defeat will make-make brute-things think we are weak-weak. They will be overconfident and proud-arrogant, yes-yes!” Scrachit didn't know-know where the brown-furred High Admiral had found her-her red uniform, but he wanted the same-same! “And while they try-fail to besiege vile-heretic altars we captured-freed, they've no-no clue-idea of our true headquarters. Praise Malal.”

“PRAISE MALAL!”

“Yes-yes, everything goes-goes according to my-my plans!” Scrachit had let Clan Ozai bleed itself on the great-strong defences of the brute-things, and now Clan Verminus was going to be triumphant. “Soon-soon, I will have muster-gathered four million Clanrats and one hundred thousand Stormclaws! I have-have-“

“Your-your plans?” Master Experimenter Gholgektnik Brimripper of Clan Moulder interrupted him. “Without brilliant genius-minds of Clan Moulder you would-would be reduced-limited to a thousand Clanrats! As soon-soon as females are right-proper breeders-“

Over fifty shuriken and various daggers pierced-stabbed his pelt-fur and flesh the next heartbeat, kill-slaying the Master of Clan Moulder instantly.

“Speak-continue!” Deathmistress Mikaelatch Shadowdagger called out, two metal blades in her paws. None of the surviving Council of Eleven raised-voiced an argument against her-her. The Musk of Fear was spreading everywhere! “No-no other candidate who wants to reveal-admit how he-he feels towards females?”

“No-no!” Arch Spark-Conqueror Quoterkit Warpfur assured her. “Clan Skyre does-does fully support cause of Skavenfeminism! We prepare-assemble many-many cannons, yes-yes! We-we have Doom-Cannons and Butcher-flames to smash-destroy armours of brute-things! We will also test-try first warpstone-bolters on heretics-heretics, yes-yes!”

“But to reach-reach this production level, many vile-heretical deeds have been-been approved by your Warlock-engineers, no-no?” snarled Lord-Furious Trade-Tamer Yaigeesik Razorslit, baring his teeth. “You have put-placed man-things in command of many-many manufactorums!”

“HERESY!” the representative of Clan Treecherik immediately shrieked. “HERESY-HERESY!”

“Man-things have pledged-sworn their allegiance-life and souls to Glorious Malal!” Quoterkit Warpfur protested immediately. “Unless Clan Verminus wants to give out Clanrats, Clan Rictus release War-smugglers, or Kryzzor Harvesters, Clan Skyre needs-needs clawpower to expand war-machine of Great-Mighty Anarchy!”

“I-I approve-permit measures of Clan Skyre!” Scrachit immediately replied. Out of the question that his brilliant plans fail-collapse because they lacked-lacked weapons!

“I think we take-take too much-many liberties with holy-sacred tenets of Anarchy!” the Ultimate Pontifex-Anarchist screeched.

“Who cares-cares about your problems, priestess?” Eternal Judge-Champion Snerium Swarmfur taunted her. “I-I have a million claw-enforcers who can-will arrest your priesthood any moment I wish-order!”

A bright-terrible chain of lightning struck him and soon-quickly both throne and Head of Clan Festerlingus were burning in green flames. Scrachit smiled. One less rival for him on his superb-magnificent ascension as the Chosen of Malal!

“Someone else feel-feel blasphemous now-today?” Omniscient Grand Warlock Dismot Pitchslash of Clan Greyzy asked the survivors of the Council of Eleven.

“Try-try your lightning trick again, and Clan Eshin will make sure Greyzy will need new-new leader before thousand heartbeats!” Mikaelatch Shadowdagger promised.

“Stay-hide in shadows and concern-worry yourself about brute-things' sabotage!”

“Thirty thousand brute-things, one million man-things,” the leader of Clan Eshin replied, making the other members of the Council freeze-pause, as the only possible way to have-know this information was to have spied-listened upon their enemies' council. “Daemon-thing they-they call 'Lorgar' has command-ordered lieutenant-thing who calls-named himself 'Grand Apostle Ekodas'. According to him-him, we must-must be destroyed-exterminated.”

“Fair-fair,” Kiditt Amberjaw conceded. “We will do-do same to any-all who don't swear-vow allegiance to Anarchy and Malal!”

“We expected to face-fight more-more brute-things!” Qaragol Underbones laughed. “Our victory-triumph is certain now! We-we will have rule-control of this planet and you will all bow-grovel to me-me while I-“ Scrachit had drawn his favourite mega-laser weapon, and he was one-one heartbeat away from use-firing it. If anyone stood at the right side of Malal, it would be him-him, and no one else, no-no! Observing the rest of the Council, five other Clan leaders had weapons of diverse nature ready to shoot-fire too.

“Praise Malal?”

“PRAISE MALAL!” Paskaquish Stormgash shouted once more. “Glorious War to free Skavenblight's World from its brute-thing infestation is about to begin-start! Soon this-this world will be-be united and find joy-bliss in Anarchy and holy-sacred power of Malal! And once we have killed-slain all heretics, we will bring-bring Anarchy to other worlds-worlds nearby! Because we-we are Skaven and we have no-no limits unlike all-every other species-things!”

“Yes-yes! And to make sure our victory-triumph is even more great-superb, I will build-build a flying super-fortress!”

“Out of the question, no-no! I want-need more Doom-cannons!”

No more decisions-decrees were made during this Council. The only incident-happening of note was the attempted invasion of several Gangrous forces which were killed-slaughtered by his magnificent and disciplined Stormclaws!

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**Two hundred and seventy-three hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

“Why aren't you ordering the Arbites to disperse these crowds?”

For what had to be the thousandth time this year, Odysseus thought the Inquisitors of Ultima Segmentum should really teach their Acolytes to use their skills and authority like a weapon of precision rather than the orbital strike-level assaults most relied on.

“These men and women are gathering peacefully and have broken no laws, Evander.”

The Inquisitor of the Ordo Redactus snorted.

“Broken no laws? They're asking for someone to be raised to the Planetary Governorship! They-“

“They are in their rights. It would be different if Hongfeng Cao's successor had already been chosen, but that is not the case.”

“And the fact these plebeians are all screaming for the Basileia's lover to be chosen as Lady Wuhan doesn't annoy you?”

“Of course it annoys me,” Odysseus answered, not entirely honestly, looking at a gigantic banner 'WEI CAO AND THE GLORIOUS SAINT FOR WUHAN'. “And as far as I can tell, it annoys Lady Weaver immensely too, if our astropathic exchanges are interpreted correctly.”

The last part was just uttered as a matter of courtesy, because with the talent pool of psykers now available at Pavia, mistranslations were getting scarcer and scarcer.

“Annoying her?”

“All the traitors and heretics involved in the assassination of the Planetary Governor who survived the Hour of the Emperor's Judgement we can purge them on our own without bothering with a light touch,” Odysseus commented slowly. “But there are tens of thousands of people who weren't involved in this sordid affair of heresy and that the Nyxian highest authorities need to approve the arrest of. Lord Magnate Asao and Lord Magnate Shujia were the biggest noble names to be arrested first, but there are tens of thousands of nobles who are on the lists.”

“And you are going to let her do as she wishes?”

“Yes,” the Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus replied bluntly. “I do not care enough about the fate of these thousands of useless idiots to spend several days convincing the Sector Lady sparing them is the best solution. It isn't, and this will send a clear message to the other nobles that if they fail to respect the laws of the God-Emperor, there will be no mercy when we will come for them.”

“We could survive a little loss of influence.”

“Survive? Absolutely. The influence lost, however, will be exploited by the other Adeptuses in the days and months to come. And when it comes down to it, the Nyx Conclave is truly a recent organisation which needs time to shore up support, bases, and resources in the Nyx Sector. The creation of the base in the Kolskov System to hold the Sirens will use funds from the Sector's taxes.”

“It will be a minority of the funds.”

It would be a sizeable minority, at forty-five percent. To be sure, the sums involved were not that big: Sirens being aquatic xenos, the hardest obstacles had been to find a world among the different planets of the Sector which possessed an interior sea with nonexistent human presence, was far away from everything in general, and had acceptable climate and temperatures.

Replacing the losses of the men and women killed during the Battles of Pavia and Commorragh was going to be considerably more expensive.

“I'm not seeing that weird religious procession coming from Solar in the crowds today,” Evander Platonist remarked, his eyes almost glaring at several large banners representing Lady Weaver like the artists imagined her. Their efforts showed a lot of good will, but didn't exactly share a great resemblance with reality.

“That's because neither the Basileia nor her Regent were amused by it and ordered them to return to their ships and not let those lunatics back onto the Hive-streets." Odysseus hid the distaste he felt with the ease of long practise. “Arco-flagellants, the Priests in charge of this 'congregation' called them. I think the Minister of Justice's first remark was: 'if you really want to repent, the Penal Legions always welcome volunteers'.”

“I won't argue with that,” Evander noted after a moment of silence.

Not many Inquisitors of the Conclave would, Odysseus suspected.

The Inquisition did really horrible things. Odysseus knew he had committed terrifying and vomit-inducing deeds to protect the Imperium and Mankind from the monsters thirsting for trillions of souls.

It had never occurred to him before to transform a criminal into an even more maniacal and psychopathic being, except this particular one was hypno-conditioned by Ministorum sermons.

Their very appearance – naked, bearing scars of hideous torture, arms, and many parts reconstructed using patterns the Mechanicus was not likely to approve of – had provoked several panics among the crowd that ended with plenty of wounded and dead.

If the leaders of this 'congregation' had a single functioning brain between them, they would be several light-years away from Nyx by the time the survivors of Commorragh returned. There were few things Odysseus cared to gamble upon, but the loathing of Lady Weaver for these 'Arco-flagellants' was a rather sure bet.

“The Conclave will need a replacement for Contessa. Assuming she's still alive, it could be centuries before we have a clue as to what happened to her.”

“Yes. I will take care of it the moment I return to Nyx. Our presence at Wuhan was required for the first purges and impressing upon the population of Wuhan that we do not tolerate corruption and treason, no matter from where they come. But now our Acolytes have things well in hand, and there are enough competent Nyxians and Wuhanese interim administrators to handle the day-to-day workings of the Hive World.”

“Which leaves the issue of this proposed 'Parliament'.” Odysseus was not a man who kept tabs on the origins of his colleagues, but Evander in the last hour alone had given him around two hundred pieces of information indicating the homeworld he was born and/or educated upon had a very rigid caste system and a particularly autocratic-despotic method of governance, even by Imperial standards.

“It gives out some Gubernatorial prerogatives and legislative powers to an assembly, but preserves the equilibrium demanded for tithes and the enforcement of the *Lex Imperialis*.”

“It is *democratic*,” the other Inquisitor spat.

“What makes you think it is?” Odysseus raised an eyebrow. “One Inquisitorial Acolyte or representative, the twelve members of the new 'Mechanicus Council of Wuhan', five Cartel representatives, one Navigator envoy, five retired senior guardsmen officers, five retired senior Navy personnel, ten Ecclesiarchy Priests, five Arbites representatives, one vote each for the Adeptus Astra Telepathica and the Adeptus Astartes, one Commissar, five Chartist Captains' heralds, and ten 'people's representatives'. Except for the last, I have a lot of trouble believing there will be elections or any sort of 'democratic process' to choose those who will sit there.”

“In other words, you are fine upturning the natural hierarchy of the Imperium-“

“Evander. This natural system you're speaking of wasn't working at Wuhan, or if it worked, it was for our enemies. Besides, since the very beginning of this conversation, you've still been operating on a very wrong assumption.”

“And that is?”

“That if an actual political conflict were to erupt between the Holy Ordos and the new Living Saint right now, it would be our side which would emerge victorious...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Antipodea Sector**

**San Leor**

**Two hundred and seventy-five hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Governor Justin Kennedy**

Justin Kennedy hated San Leor.

He hated being the Planetary Governor of this thrice-damned planet even more.

For the love of the Golden Throne, when he had boasted he would thrive in any environment they sent him to, it wasn't meant as an invitation to that miserable rule-addict that he would be satisfied with a dung hole in the middle of nowhere!

But that was exactly what the Administratum had decided to give him for four decades of service. A posting in the middle of nowhere, also known as San Leor.

Justin guessed that at some point, he was supposed to say that this world, provided that some correct investments were made, was a prime ground for colonisation prospects and blah, blah, blah.

Well, he was not sorry to say that was a load of grox shit.

It was incredibly fair in his opinion, because assuming San Leor had an export, it was grox meat.

Why the 'assuming'? It may have something to do with the fact the tithe-ships of the Administratum were sixty years late. Thank the God-Emperor, the Black Ships and the two Chartist Captains regularly visiting had not forgotten his world, otherwise goodbye amasec, Lho-sticks – that he sold to the highest bidder – and other little pleasures of life.

Assuredly being a Planetary Governor was prestigious, but there were cases like San Leor.

Where to begin? San Leor. Ultima Segmentum, Antipodea Sector, Ushuaia Marches Sub-Sector. Population: seventy million Imperial citizens and an exile colony of Felinid abhumans that Justin hadn't bothered sending envoys to since his last meeting with one had resulted in a very long medical convalescence. Status: on Administratum rolls, a Civilised World, but in Justin's opinion, a rather hostile planet, borderline Death World. The main predator was the Direwolf, black-furred monsters that hunted in packs. And they weren't even intimidated by the likes of Leman Russ tanks. Their prey of choice before humans arrived on San Leor had been the spitting mutton, which despite its inoffensive name was omnivorous and travelled in hordes of hundreds of thousands.

Now it was obviously the grox, in case the question was on someone's lips. A sufficient amount of beasts had escaped into the wild to reproduce and make sure San Leor now had a third unpleasant species to cause him headaches.

That was just the beginning of the problems with this planet. Not only was San Leor at the end of a Warp lane in the middle of nowhere – which meant there were no ships coming here as a stopover to their final destination – the planet seemed to attract crazy penitent cults, demented astrologists, pilgrims that even the Cult of the Saviour Emperor found too fire-loving for their doctrine, and Preachers eager to make this land a holy ground, Governor or no Governor, Direwolf or no Direwolf. There were so many of these nutcases that his office had tried to count them and failed before the enormity of the task. The Chosen of the Golden Wings, the Followers of the Aquila, the Firebrands of the Sacred Pyre, the Supreme Lords of Light, and the Dominion of White Flames were just a few of the main cults.

Even his two wives, never having shone much through their intelligence, had rallied to these 'holy preachers', the first joining the Repentance-by-the-Lash – which was exactly what the name implied – and the second was-

“Husband! I have fantastic news!”

Justin Kennedy hid the porn vid-casts he had been discreetly consulting in all haste. Unfortunately, that left the half-empty bottle of amasec in evidence when the soul he had to his greatest regrets agreed to take as his second wife arrived on the other side of his desk.

The Governor of San Leor did not even have the time to shout 'no' before his companion – the amasec bottle, not the wife – was sent flying out the window on a four-metres-long drop into the gardens below.

“That bottle cost me three thousand Crowns.”

“So that's why I haven't received the lasguns I wanted?”

“No, I wasn't going to give them to you regardless.” Justin admitted, the dreadful fate given to his amasec giving him some courage. “I have not armed any cults in my tenure here as Governor, and I am not going to start doing so now. Especially not yours, my dear. Seriously Dorothy, what is up with that clothing?”

Viewed from up close, it almost seemed like his wife had disguised herself as one of the techno-barbarians the vid-casts enjoyed replaying over and over to warn against the dangers of secession, psykers, and techno-heresy. Nothing was missing, not even the large pelt of direwolf covering her head and serving her as a cape.

“I am not Dorothy anymore! I am Alicia Dominica of the Daughters of the God-Emperor!”

“Your cult is not powerful enough to brave an Administratum edict,” he pointed out, unimpressed. Because yes, every time a new leader of these feral women was elected after her predecessor’s death, the newly anointed one abandoned her birth name and became 'Alicia Dominica'. “But maybe I will reconsider if you decide to resume certain marital duties of yours?”

The fist to the jaw he received sent him sprawling on the ground.

“I did not leave your side because I became a Daughter of the God-Emperor, husband. If you had done some research, you would have known we have no chastity or celibacy oaths. I left because you were a womaniser unwilling to respect his marital vows, and from what I hear, this has not changed.”

“I will have your head for this,” he promised. Damn it, she had broken two of his teeth!

“I eagerly await the moment you send your pathetic PDF thugs outside your palace. The population of San Leor is not really fond of you, you know?”

"Just say what you came to say and get out," Justin spat at the woman who had branded herself with the golden flower of the Ecclesiarchy onto her own forehead.

“A sword appeared in an explosion of light while my sisters were doing a patrol. They tried to bring it back to me, but it is encased in stone.”

“I am too old for these kinds of Sanguinala stories!” The Planetary Governor laughed. “If this is all it’s about...”

“And the Pontifex has been convinced by this miracle to rule in my favour for the divorce proceedings. You have to return my dowry and one hundred thousand Crowns. Have a nice day!”

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Two hundred and seventy-eight hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“Yes, Wolfgang will begin the first forays into the unknown gulfs of the Eastern Fringe as soon as your Ambition-class Cruiser and the other additions to his fleet arrive.”

“So between one and a half and two years,” Hediatrix summarized, having anticipated the problems existing for every major or minor deployment to the Eastern Fringe. Repairs, refuelling operations, and of course Warp travel had to be taken into account. “The Cruiser's final commissioning trials are nearing completion. Departure for Nyx has a seventy percent chance of happening before you leave Pavia yourself.”

“Good. The sooner the exploration efforts begin, the better it is for the Imperium and the warships we send. I don't know how much the Enemy has been able to learn, but the moment they truly realise what we're looking for, they're not going to stay idle.”

Gastaph completely and totally agreed with the Chosen of the Omnissiah. The hereteks and servants of ruin had a fondness for illogical behaviour which was insane, but a potential destination to find more STC databases wasn't something they were going to be very happy letting the true servants of the Machine-God acquire. There were going to be reprisals. The only question worth asking was how strong and which avenues of attack they were going to use...

“I still believe you're too generous with certain Tempestus Forge Worlds.”

“Archmagos, I think I would prefer the Adeptus Mechanicus and the other Imperial organisations speak of me as 'too generous with her allies and merciless with her enemies' rather than the reverse.”

To this, the Mars-born Archmagos could only nod and lower his mechadendrites in defeat. In the short-term it was not that bad as it created ties of favours and tech-exchanges between the Forge Worlds existing across the entire galaxy. In the long-term, simulations were incapable of determining where it would lead. And the commander of Twenty-Fourth Fleet wasn't going to pretend that didn't worry him.

“The STC accords?”

“They are complete as per the schedules you wanted. Like the pre-negotiation conditions enforced, the twelve copies' rule was applied to every part of sacred archeotech. The Forge Worlds which supported this great victory but were unable to bid successfully will receive enough schematics to build their own local versions and have the possibility of building purpose-built manufactorums at resource-cost.”

And the Forge Worlds had offered a lot to Taylor Hebert, Chosen of the Omnissiah, Lady of the Nyx Sector, Basileia of Nyx. A high percentage of the reasons were because of the new templates found at Commorragh, but there was also a low percentage of Magi and Archmagi who wanted access to schematics of the Larkine lasgun and the likes. For all the triumph it represented in the Quest of Knowledge, Gastaph Hediatrix was absolutely certain he didn't want to relive those dozens of hours of furious arguments.

“You could have asked for more Bakka-class shipyards.” Only five brand-new median-sized orbital constructions had been ordered from Gryphonne IV, in the end.

“I do intend to build more shipyards of this class in time, but with Nyxian resources and tech-expertise,” the golden-winged mistress of the *Enterprise* revealed while her beetles and spiders organized large amounts of correspondence and files on her desk. “But there are plenty of planets where I have to reward the families who sent their children to war because I asked them to. Moreover, while I have no doubt your promise of three billion Tech-Priests and one billion Skitarii will be fulfilled to the letter, this enormous transfer of Mechanicus Adepts and military forces isn't here right now.”

Yes, like the Cruisers and the bigger and lighter ships which were about to leave Blessed Mars, many things were still a couple thousand light-years away. The Mechanicus could move promptly when the Omnissiah demanded it – unlike the Administratum – but the length of travel imposed upon civilian and military deployments by Warp travel they had no control over.

“Dragon and Archmagos Sultan's plan is already going to revitalise the Atlas Sub-Sector,” the Chosen of the Omnissiah and now holder of twelve votes in the Martian Parliament continued. “Aside from the Bakka-class at Toulon which will help protect our northern frontier, the projections are to build twelve Agri-Hives within the next one hundred years. The orbital and ground industry of Bahamut is going to be modernised, with families from high gravity worlds invited to settle there. Centaur will receive a ground-based ship-killer laser system since their space geography makes the deployment of orbital grids impractical. Your Tech-Priests will also have to replace hundreds of fusion reactors with the new Izanagi models, there are hundreds of new mining ships awaiting dockyards to be built, and tens of thousands of Apis-pattern tractors. And that's just for the Atlas Sub-Sector.”

Yes, because after this impressive summary of some of the more eye-catching reforms planned, Gastaph Hediatrix could add that this Sub-Sector was not even where the main effort was focused. Great Cog preserve him, the Archmagos wasn't going to pretend the Sector was abandoned or anything following that logic path! But only one space elevator was planned for the next twenty standard years, and it wasn't for Atlas, but for Bahamut. And aside from the reinforcements in Space Marines – the Founding of the Magma Spiders and loosening the restriction on the maximum number of Astartes for the Heracles Wardens to two hundred battle-brothers – the military firepower available for ground forces wasn't going to experience notable changes.

Each planet of the Nyx Sector and their Governor, provided they had given loyal and competent troops to Lady Weaver, was being rewarded for their military tithe. On average a Civilised World was assured to receive two brand-new hospitals – one administrated by the Mechanicus, one by the disrespectful blasphemers of the Ministorum – agriculture machinery and weather-control satellites,a training Forge-Temple, resources to outright build a new large city, two new mining ships, machinery for ground mining operations, expansion of off-world defences, protection via a small squadron of Navy Destroyers, railroads and trains, standard communication, and electricity grids, and much more.

This was not including the effort the Mechanicus was going to exert at Omsk Primus to build all the defences and installations a Knight House worthy of the Chosen of the Omnissiah required. The planet of Alamo was going to become a full-fledged Forge World in time with Legio Defensor taking its place as the sacred protectors of its twelve-blessed Forges. Recovery efforts were going to be made in the Neptunia System under the light of Aethergold – though no new Forge Temples would be built there for now. The Wuhan System was going to experience a very drastic technological development plan, one with a new Mechanicus Council of Twelve in command. At Nyx itself, the Vulkan's Arsenal wasn't going to be expanded anymore, but that was only because both Phaeton and Lucius had agreed to each build an orbital construction yard of equal size. The Tech-Priests of the latter had promised several of their greatest relics too. Ship-, tank- and other old schematics had changed hands. Support infrastructure for Battlefleet Nyx and the 24th Mechanicus Fleet would be multiplied by ten. That there were plenty of ore and other resource accords and extraction quotas signed went without saying.

And last but not least, Ryza had a few hours ago sent the final confirmation the 'gift' of two of their Logic-class Ryza-pattern orbital forges *Plasma is our Life-Blood* and *Triumph of the Machine-God*, had been approved unanimously.

It could have been even more impressive; Agripinaa had begun with talks of Starforts and the like, and other Obscurus Tech-Priests had also been their usual illogicalselves, but the situation around the Eye of Terror was too volatile right now to consider decreasing a single percentage of its defences.

“Yes, there will be many holy hours of praise ahead to celebrate the technology and the other blessed items gained this day. But I'm afraid, judging by the Noosphere cants of my assistants, that the greatest troublemaker of all has arrived.”

The black-haired commander of Army Group Caribbean – soon to be disbanded – blinked but didn't contest his words.

“Let him enter.”

Less than ten seconds later, Belisarius Cawl barged in, his usual cants of feigned humility mixed with algorithms so complicated and so annoying Hediatrix would have demanded a mind-wipe for any of his subordinates who 'amused' themselves with such exhausting protocols.

If only this were the biggest problem they had with this particular Tech-Priest. If he was a Tech-Priest. Sometimes Gastaph wondered...

“Greetings, Lady Taylor Hebert!” The near-heretek bombastically began, completely ignoring him. “It has been too long since we last met.”

“We saw each other not twenty-four hours ago,” the Chosen of the Omnissiah rolled her eyes while her insects continued to expedite paperwork on data-slates by the ton. “And your messages failed to give the reason why you were so insistent to meet me. Is the copy of the Dionysus Template you purchased not to your liking?”

Yes, of all copies he could have fought over, the lunatic Archmagos had chosen this one. For once, Hediatrix and the other senior Archmagi present had decided to let him have his way. Cawl was a danger for the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Imperium, but even he would have to make a lot of effort to do techno-heresy with *alcohol*!

“No, no! It is formidable! Exactly what I wanted!” The percentage of worrying in his data-bases significantly increased. “I wanted to negotiate with you for exclusive access to the prime-copy of the database you have in your custody at Nyx for, let's say...twelve hours.”

The audacity of the request stunned Gastaph for several processing cycles. Thus, it was in a horrified frozen state he listened for the next seconds.

“That is a very great request,” the insect-mistress began, strapping a small mountain of approved documentation into a container and giving it to one of her beetles. “There are senior Magi at Nyx that are still on the waiting list to be given the honour to collectively study some of this priceless STC data. And I can honestly say I have never given access to anyone outside of the Nyx Mechanicus Council for longer than one hour.”

“I can offer you very valuable things.”

This, at least, pushed the young woman to chuckle. Suddenly, Lady Weaver appeared even younger than her age.

“I won't deny you can, Archmagos,” a spider fell from the ceiling to deliver a data-chip to her hand, and after a quick reading, the Basileia spoke again. “You were the one who built the *Enterprise*, and I've not forgotten that. Nor I have missed you provided many schematics of Tactical Dreadnought Armour, spare parts for my flagship, the schematics of the Nemesis-Hunter Cannon, and advanced engineering sections for capital ships.”

Taylor Hebert sighed.

“But this isn't the same level of 'impressive' you need for a request of this magnitude. I am thankful for the part you played in the recovery of the Percival Siege-Breaker Walker. But I have also received a torrent of protests and complaints from several hundred Magi and Archmagi of Segmentum Solar that you should be executed as soon as possible, and even the Fabricator-General had a few disturbing things to mention about you. Something about a few acts of despicable conduct in Segmentum Pacificus, I believe?”

“Those were secessionist Governors,” Cawl shrugged. “I think I can make a data-library of arguments that they had betrayed the Machine-God.”

And, far more likely, they were in Cawl's way when he wanted to obtain something.

“If you say so,” the 24th's commander was relieved to hear the Basileia didn't believe the Radical's words for a single second. Not that Cawl had done his best to be convincing, really. “Any other outstanding requests I should be aware of?”

“I thought you would never ask!” This time even the Chosen of the Omnissiah was left with her mouth wide open for three whole seconds as Cawl began a list which, in the presence of far less tolerant individuals, would have led him straight to an airlock or an incinerator. Bacta, Aethergold, insect genetic codes, Dragon Armour schematics, Third Legion gene-seed; it seemed that anything not in the 'not for sale' list was beneath the ancient Archmagos' attention and ego.

“STOP!” Taylor Hebert ordered after a moment. “Everything pertaining to the Space Marines will not be delivered. The secrets of the Blood have been entrusted to me, and I won't betray them. The Third Legion's progenoids which won't be used by me are in the possession of the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes and the forces placed at his disposal by the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Imperial Navy. It's him you have to convince if you want them, not me! Why do you desire these canisters, anyway? The Fabricator-General himself confirmed to me these progenoids wouldn't be used for another Chapter of the Thirteenth Founding.”

“Discovering the gene-line's true purpose, of course!” the mad tech-Priest replied cheerfully. “I am a scientist and I live to apply the ancient art of deductive logic to the creations of the Omnissiah.”

The Chosen of the Omnissiah mumbled something which sounded suspiciously like 'Emperor give me strength' before her eyes stared again at the Radical Archmagos.

“I hope for your sake you haven't played with another Traitor Legion's stock of gene-seed.”

“Oh, no, I have not had the opportunity to analyse one.”

Plenty of alarms rang in Hediatrix's auxiliary cogitators at that admission, but there was nothing that could be done, since there was no evidence to call him out on.

“Fine. So I suppose I'm going to repeat the question: what would you be willing to offer for the incredible privilege of twelve hours of contact with a prime-copy of a STC database? And no, there won't be any exclusivity. Thousands of Tech-Priests work upon it at any time, and I won't let you alone to 'commune' with it.”

“First I was ready to add my modest participation to the establishment of mining operations on the planet Hellhound.” For the first time, Belisarius Cawl turned in his attention away from Lady Hebert. “The Archmagos Primus present can confirm I have great experience in stabilising the planetary crust of several planets at precise locations, as well as the harvest of valuable resources in extreme environments.”

“It is true,” he was reluctantly forced to admit. “Though you also have several disastrous incidents on your record.”

“Three in three millennia, and always facing hostile opposition,” another of those damned shrugs as the accusation was promptly dismissed. “I will execute the noble and vital Art of Terraforming upon a planet of your choice, free of charge.”

That was...Gastaph didn't know if it was a pleasant or an unpleasant surprise. There had been rumours, of course. Worlds that Cawl had found and which looked too 'perfect' to have lasted that long in a hostile galaxy. But if it was true...the Fabricator-General would have to be warned before the day was over.

“And I could be convinced to sell you *Terra Cimmeria*.”

“I seem to recall an edict of a previous Fabricator-General prohibiting you from doing that...or moving that monument to your vanity outside Sol!” Gastaph Hediatrix protested.

“That was then and this is now.” Cawl got rid of the objection with an authoritative gesture of his mechadendrites. “If the Chosen of the Omnissiah uses one of my most impressive creations, if I say so myself, the answer of Mars may change.”

“Forgive me, but what exactly is *Terra Cimmeria*?" the Basileia interjected. Gastaph had to take the next minute to give a small technical explanation of the superstructures the Radical had managed to encase in this 'super-Starfortress'.”

“That sounds like the same principle as the Ryza orbital forges, only bigger, no?”

The fleet commander would forever treasure the expression of outrage on Cawl's face at that remark.

“An orbital forge able to defend itself, Lady Weaver!” Cawl took thirty seconds to proclaim a litany of armaments, twenty percent of them being illegal to own in any jurisdiction of the Imperium. “It is also Warp-capable, requiring a very minimal amount of tugs for security reasons, and is able to produce the output of a Majoris-level Forge no matter the circumstances outside, thanks to armour comparable to the *Phalanx*! The technology I employ is automated to the ninety-ninth percentile! The-“

“That was a joke, Archmagos. But thank you for the...passion you feel towards your creation.” The Lady of Nyx caressed an enormous spider of a shade he had not seen before today. “I think I am going to take you up on your proposal, Archmagos Belisarius Cawl. Of course, the Fabricator-General needs to say 'yes' when I ask him. A negative answer will cancel everything.”

“Are you sure, Chosen of the Omnissiah?”

“If your descriptions are true and Archmagos Cawl's boasts are justified, we could pay the Sector's entire tithe with *Terra Cimmeria*. Assuming it is in the Nyx Sector, we could close all the ill-maintained manufactorums of the Menelaus era and truly afford a boost in quality which will take centuries otherwise.”

“The Administratum will try to increase its tithe again,” Gastaph warned. “And there will be inspections of the armaments of *Terra Cimmeria*. The production lines are tech-approved, many of the batteries are not.”

“My armaments are state-of-the-art, thank you very much.” Cawl declared haughtily. “The Primarch Vulkan himself said so.”

The problem with this...he couldn't honestly determine whether that was a megalomaniac's lie or the truth. And there was no way to outright mount an accusation when the Radical could have visual evidence on his flagship to prove his 'ridiculous' boasts.

“As for the tithe, it's extremely simple to resolve. Just give enough Bacta to the High Lords of Terra to shut them up.”

“To do that, I would have to literally devote a planet to my golden Catachan ants. No Governor in his right mind will approve that outside Nyx, and the desert planets are unsuitable for one reason or another.”

“Ah, but you didn't have me! Let me explain...”

Ten seconds later, Gastaph found himself screaming along with Lady Weaver.

“YOU WANT TO DO WHAT?”

**Malta-class** **Starfort *Pillow of Jasmine***

**Fist-of-Diamond Calico**

Compared to the last time the golden-armoured human had visited the *Pillow of Jasmine*, Calico thought the atmosphere was far less blood-soaked and antagonistic. There was also no gigantic walker wearing a pirate hat.

And the cooks of the warlord-human had even brought new food prepared according to the instructions of the old furs of the different families.

Calico wasn't stupid. He knew very well that the human had upheld her part of the bargain, and now he was going to have to accept things the leader of any independent nation would find hard to swallow.

The first demand was not what he had expected.

“Plush rights?” Somehow, he wondered if his old ears had begun malfunctioning.

“Plush rights,” Lady Weaver confirmed.

“But...why?”

“I want to sell life-sized stuffed toys of your species to the children of Nyx,” the Destroyer of Commorragh explained. "That way the young generation will not be so prompt as to paint all the xenos with the same brush whenever they see one. It helps that the adult Rashan is around 1,45m. You have to admit it's the perfect present to offer to a young son or daughter for the Sanguinala.”

Calico growled dubiously. This wasn't going to work, but if the woman wanted to try, he wasn't going to stop her.

“Have it your way.”

“It is in your best interest too,” the golden-winged warrior assured him, “I will place half of the benefits in an account you will be able to use to buy food and other things which might attract your fancy.”

And if it didn't work, there would be no repercussions. This wasn't something which was going to change the galaxy.

“Now about the real reason I wanted to meet you,” the hololithic device the humans had transported onto the Starfort lit as one of the red-armoured giants finished his strange mumblings. It revealed a star and four planets. “The Neptunia System.”

“It is barren.” Calico immediately remarked with plenty of disappointment.

“For now,” the human stated. “One of the recent deals I've made with the Mechanicus is the Terraforming of a world, free of costs. Or should I say Rashan-forming?”

Calico blinked. Even a Rashan ignorant of galactic affairs knew that wasn't a small favour the likes of which happened every ten nights of sleep.

“You would do that for us?”

“I will do better. I will place a crystal of Aethergold to purify it and prevent any undue influence from the Warp, and I will give you the planet in perpetuity...provided you are loyal to me, the Emperor, and the Imperium.”

That was...incredibly generous.

“The world I intend to give you was once a Civilised World called Neptunia Prime. Assuming the Archmagos I hired for the works is as talented as he proclaims, the work should be completed before half a century is done. It may be accelerated if you have seeds of your former homeworld to give him before he departs tomorrow.”

“We have many to give for such a cause,” more than would be truly needed, hopefully. “And your conditions?”

“I don't really care what sort of religion you follow, but build one church to the Emperor near one of your cities and, if foreigners come, organise ritual prayers to Him in it. And of course, though I think it goes without saying, never, ever, worship one of the abominations of the Warp. If the demons don't kill the one responsible for that heresy, the Inquisition or I will.”

Calico shivered. No, he had never intended to worship any of those things! But then Rashan didn't have the 'psykers', 'witches', or other 'gifted' individuals most of the other races which had been living at Pavia before the battle had taken so much pride in. After seeing them destroyed by an invincible fleet that nothing, not even the defences of Dark Commorragh, had stopped, Calico didn't exactly regret not having them.

“The third and final part will be more expensive. I want a thousand Rashans serving in the Nyx System for me. The overwhelming majority will work on Imperial technology in the presence of the Adeptus Mechanicus and explain why they're doing what they do, the knowledge they have, and all sorts of things with your mechanical skills. Obviously, the tasks may vary from time to time.”

“But we won't be sent on the frontlines of a new war?”

“No,” Weaver smiled. “I will accept volunteers if they are really, really insistent, but for now I'd prefer your species focus on recovering their numbers. And no offence, but I have millions of guardsmen and thousands of Space Marines to send into the fires of war. They are more...suited to the type of warfare large-scale operations entail. No, no new war for you. But I will want one thousand Rashans in my service at all times.”

“I accept, but we will want ships making the travel between the two worlds four times per year.”

“That high an opinion of your skill, Fist-of-Diamond?” the golden-winged warrior shook her head negatively. “I'm willing to settle for now on a twice-per-year schedule of a large transport, especially as your new world isn't ready for you. The conditions can, of course, be improved if you achieve an important technological discovery or something of a similar nature.”

Calico knew this was something the human wouldn't budge on, and he didn't insist.

“You will have to accept a small company of Tech-Priests of Stygies VIII aboard the *Pillow of Jasmine*, though a few guardsmen will also be there to keep an eye on them...”

**Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado***

**Duke Leary O'Hara**

The banner of an Imperial Knight was on average one metre tall and was tradition, heraldry, recognition of prowess, and martial splendour distilled into a single item.

It was not unknown for the creation of one to require hundreds of hours, until both the pilot and the machine-spirits of the Knight were satisfied with the final result.

Leary knew each self-respecting Knight House had thousands of servants assigned to this decorative but primordial work, and House Winterveil was no exception. In fact, they were really on the lower end of the ladder, at least in terms of staff size: the surviving Knights of House Taranis had over a thousand men and women dedicated to repainting their colours, refreshing their banners, and restoring the pre-war heraldry to its former magnificence. House Krast and House Terryn's noble suits were not far behind where the support contingent was examined.

All of this work, Lady Weaver could do in a few hours, provided she had enough spiders, worms, and other appropriate insects.

It was like being in an insect manufactorum. Worms and spiders produced silk, more spiders and various creatures dyed it in different colours, several fire-proof substances and decay-preventing liquids added by thousands of legs and mandibles with a celerity which would leave most humans reeling in shock.

Leary O'Hara had thought stories of the Saint working on the banners of the God-Engines of Legio Defensor and Legio Aeris Aestus the day before were more amusing rumours than fact. He had been wrong, and if anything the 'ridiculous rumours' seemed to understate the reality, though maybe it was because a Knight was simply smaller than a Titan.

In this atmosphere, the Living Saint and supreme commander of the forces mustered here at Pavia was like a star plucked from the heavens which had somehow taken human form. The radiance of the golden wings and the halo surrounding her had not diminished, quite the opposite. Unlike some other days, she didn't wear her golden power armour, but a dark green uniform with two protection shields integrated on it. With a simple outfit like this and without the holy power of the God-Emperor, she might have been able to pass as a regular officer of the Imperial Guard...though the two decorations above her heart made this impossible.

The number of men and women who pledged their lives to serve in the Astra Militarum was so huge no one had ever tried to find a proper number for it. But it had to be in the high trillions at least. Of those, only an absolutely tiny minority were ever considered worthy of being awarded with a Star of Terra. The number of heroes who managed to earn it and survive easily shortened the previous list by a factor of a hundred. Earning two of them, however, was the kind of exploit one rarely found outside of legends proclaimed by the bards after the completion of a Grand Quest. You knew it had been done before, but the details were often lost to time.

Still, the Imperium was a very big place, so it was possible there were other guardsmen still alive who could claim to have accomplished this exploit. Though Leary was sure they could be counted on one hand with fingers left to spare. And whoever they were, they weren't as renowned as the Heroine of Commorragh, who, to her ruby Star, had added a second with a pure-white diamond shining at its heart.

Leary O'Hara, his wife, and all his surviving twenty vassals waited in silence for long minutes. While they had accomplished great deeds at Commorragh, the ceremony today had begun by honourably remembering and commemorating the exploits of the Knights which were not present today to celebrate.

Like the rest of the Imperial forces which descended to fight on the platforms of the Port of Souls and continued the carnage at Zel'harst and Utar'ragh, the twelve Houses of the Questoris Imperialis had paid in blood, metal, and Thrones Mechanicum for the accomplishment of their vengeance.

Baron William of House Raven, lost in the fires of battle. Baron Iolaos of House Durbach, standing defiant to the end. Baron Brixton of House Hawkshroud, whose kill count of long-ears was easily in the hundreds of thousands before an overwhelming assault was too much for even him. And High Count Hurst of House Taranis, who had gone to slay five Greater Abominations, protecting the centre of the Astartes formations, before a sixth took down his Knight. But not before the High Count activated the self-destruct codes, depriving his foe of any chance for more victories.

Ninety-seven Knights had been broken, and a third of them had not been recovered.

They would not be forgotten by the living, and the Fabricator-General had sworn the recovered two-thirds of the crippled machines and the other badly damaged units would be rebuilt to their former glory by his Tech-Priests, no matter how long it would take or how expensive it would be. Knights freshly painted from the Forges of Mars would fill the holes in the ranks of the twelve Houses of Raven, Beaumaris, Cadmus, Curtana, Durbach, Hawkshroud, Hermetika, Krast, Sablus, Taranis, Terryn, and Winterveil.

At last, Lady Weaver walked in front of them.

“Aside from House Beaumaris, who will follow Legio Defensor to their new Forge World, you were the only one to accept my offer. I hope you haven't changed your mind, Duke O'Hara?”

“I stand true to my word, your Celestial Highness, Lady General.”

The black-haired envoy of the God-Emperor smiled and turned her head to nod at a group of several Tech-Priests. Two protected reliquaries painted in Mechanicus colours were opened, revealing in each the same type of sword worn by the Dawnbreaker Guards, only these were clearly scaled for normal humans, and their hilts and scabbards were covered in jewels. The armours next to the swords were silver-red, and also blurred the line separating weapon from artwork.

“Kneel.”

All men and women of House Winterveil present at Pavia, over four thousand Knight pilots, heralds, squires, sacristans, artificers, bondsmen, and servants obeyed.

“Duchess Rosaleen O'Hara nee Winterveil, do you pledge your Knight and your sword to my service?”

His wife's reply was immediate.

“I do, your Celestial Highness.”

“Then by the powers invested in me as Sector Lady of Nyx, I bestow upon you the duties and privileges of Vice-Governor and Queen of Omsk Primus. Rise.”

“Duke Leary O'Hara, do you pledge your House, your Knight, and your sword to my service?”

“I do, your Celestial Highness.”

“By the powers invested in me as Sector Lady of Nyx, I bestow upon you the duties and privileges of Planetary Governor and King of Omsk Primus. By the treaties signed with House Winterveil of the Galway Cluster, you and the forces which fought gallantly and victoriously at Commorragh are authorised to raise their own banners and stand as the new House of O'Hara. By the treaties once presented by the Parliament of Mars and the Senatorum Imperialis, the Fabricator-General and the Lord Commander of the Imperial Guard approve the ascension of your Knight House, and the strength of one hundred and twenty Knights will be yours with which to protect and defend the souls of the Imperial citizens who are now your charges. AVE IMPERATOR!”

“AVE IMPERATOR!”

Dozens of fireworks were lit, and the celebrations which had been paused until recently resumed.

**Gloriana Battleship *Eternal Crusader***

**Marshal Helman Malberg**

The conversation between the Living Saint and their High Marshal was far more light-hearted and civil than Helman had imagined, but that didn't mean the two of them had a lot in common.

“No, High Marshal. Yes, the favours the Fabricator-General owes me theoretically allow me to ask him these sorts of things and he would to make a worthwhile effort in the Senatorum Imperialis, but that doesn't mean it is a good idea or that Mars will find it wise to burn political favours and influence like this at this point in time.”

“Wouldn't it better to strike while the iron is hot, as our Salamanders cousins would say?”

“The problem lies with the issue that there is no majority for us among the High Twelve where I am concerned. Perusing the history of the previous votes that were recently transmitted to me makes that abundantly clear. The representative of the Ecclesiarch, the Fabricator-General, the Speaker for the Chartist Captains, the Mistress of the Astronomican, and the Inquisitorial Representative are on 'my' side, but the seven others are definitely not. If the Lord Commander of the Imperial Guard could ascend to one of these seats, it would be very different, but there's zero chance of that happening right now.”

“Politics,” Gerlach Barbarossa cursed.

“Yes, politics,” the Living Saint agreed, “though hearing some of the speeches certain High Lords are shouting in front of billions of people, I am quite glad the Imperial system of governance is so efficient at preventing tyrants from seizing control of Terra and the millions of planets it governs. Politics kill a lot of people, but far less than an aristocratic head with no peers and no idea where true limits lie.”

The Living Saint emptied a golden cup of water before changing the subject.

“But we have not all gathered here today to share depressing thoughts about the shenanigans certain men in Segmentum Solar enjoy playing. Chapter Master Flavius Sextus Jovius.”

“I answer, Lady Weaver.” The tall Chapter Master of the Imperial Fists abandoned his conversation with a Captain of the Soul Drinkers and went to directly face her.

“After reading some parts of the voluminous documentation you sent to the *Enterprise*, I have decided to call the new Chapter created from your gene-sire's blood the Fists of Roma."

One second later, there was thunderous applause in reaction to this declaration, as hundreds of sons of Dorn vigorously cheered and shouted their satisfaction. Yes, using the name of the first battle-honour of the Imperial Fists Legion to begin a new illustrious history was an excellent choice.

“The zone of operations in the Nyx Sector for this new Chapter will be the Theta Marches, and the world of Portsmouth will be these Space Marines' new homeworld, which will be fortified according to their learning and own strategies. The planets of Txacopec and Charybdis may also be used as recruitment grounds, though with extreme parsimony, as their low levels of population don't allow them to endure wide-scale Chapter recruitment.”

The colours were presented less than one minute after this: Imperial yellow, but only below the aquila; the double-headed symbol of the Imperium was painted in silver-Argentamite, and above it, the paint was a dark grey. The Chapter's symbol was the traditional Fist of Dorn, but surrounded by seven miniature golden suns, and the Fist itself was gold, not black, surrounded by grey and red.

“I will also be honest with you, and confirm the rumours which have spread about the possible creation of a new Chapter using Third Legion's gene-seed. Yes, the Captain-General of the Custodes has left enough progenoids to create a new brotherhood of one thousand in my possession. I have yet to choose a name, a homeworld, or even begin recruitment for them, obviously.”

“You are taking a great risk to redeem the fallen scions of the Third, Lady Weaver.” Helman thought it was the Chapter Master of the Flames of Aries who had spoken.

“Less than it appears, as the Custodes confirmed the Naga has lost all power over the few monsters crawling in the Eye of Terror,” the golden-winged holy woman informed them. “But yes, I will agree the risk is not null, especially politically. That is why I already requested the help of several recruit-masters of Chapters of the Blood, Nocturne's sons, and other warriors of renown present here at Pavia. The records have been burned, and everything about the Third is so tarnished today the new Chapter must begin with a blank page and write new specialties and traditions, which hopefully will outshine the darkness of those who sold their souls to Excess. Will you help me in this difficult task?”

The deliberations didn't take long; before ten minutes were out, already half of the room was volunteering to oversee the process and finally they settled for a selection process of ten Astartes.

“Now it's time I fulfil one of the orders your Primarch left in my care. Marshal Helman Malberg, step forward.”

“I obey, your Celestial Highness.” The son of Sigismund bowed at the location the Chapter Master of the Imperial Fists had occupied seconds previously.

“As per the will of Dorn, your under-strength Crusade will accompany me to Nyx with the other veterans of Commorragh who may desire it. We need to speak a lot about your traditions, your tactics, and your unwillingness to use some parts of the Codex Astartes. And as we have a Necron presence so close to my Sector, certain precautions need to be taken just in case, for all I hope they will be unnecessary. Therefore I will authorise the creation of a Fortress-Monastery on Smilodon Octavian, and the duty and privilege to raise new blood from the local population to make them proud sons of Dorn.”

“We will not fail you, Lady Weaver. Thank you.”

Helman took several steps back and went to rejoin his fellow Marshals waiting next to the Iron Knights' Captains.

“My next words are not an order.” This may have been the wrong way to say it; their gene-father had trusted the Saint to give them orders in his absence, so now all the officers of the dissolved Seventh were listening to every word particularly eagerly. “They are a request. Deep in Segmentum Tempestus, a Craftworld lies damaged and terribly weakened. A lair of warmonger long-ears, who were so high taking war drugs they believed they could go head-to-head against the Imperium and win. I believe everyone in this room is familiar with the fanatics of Biel-Tan.”

A loud growl of assent answered the Living Saint's words.

“There are three reasons the Imperium in general doesn't bother wiping out these pests. The first is the terrible naval losses the attackers would be forced to endure. The second is the enmity of all other Craftworlds. The third is the psychic death scream which can be generated if their Infinity Circuit is broken before a complex warding protocol can be enacted.”

Lady Weaver smiled, and the Astartes in the room smiled back, for it was the joyous expression of a hunter catching his prey after a long hunt.

“After the gigantic losses of Commorragh and their forces dispersed across half the galaxy, the first reason is null and void. I don't care about the second. And the third can be partially reduced, as Lord Inquisitor Shokaku has decided to offer his services and those of thirty other Inquisitors for the attack itself. The Imperial Navy is also ready. Lord Admiral Lewis von Halberton of the Ultima 501st Battlefleet and Lord Admiral Zanzibar von Breslau of the Tempestus 783rd Battlefleet are prepared to set sail. Four other Explorator Fleets of the Mechanicus and one fleet of Frateris Templar are eager to make the Eldar bleed. But they need a spearhead to break the Eldar defences without it turning into a bloodbath for humanity. They need the Space Marines.”

“And the sons of Dorn will answer,” the Lord of the Imperial Fists affirmed quietly. “Biel-Tan will die. By their fault, Rogal Dorn could have died at Commorragh. We did not forget this.”

“Let's begin,” High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa grinned. “The Biel-Tan Crusade!”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Two hundred and eighty-two hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Tribune Basil Macedonian**

Several kilometres beneath the Inner Sanctum of the Imperial Palace, there were hundreds of rooms no one but the members of the Adeptus Custodes had the right to access. Not that it was much of a problem, truthfully. For too many of these locations, after millennia of forgotten history, only the Ten Thousand remembered the rooms even existed in the first place.

With only the irregular visits of the maintenance servitors if the Watchers of the Throne were not counted, the ancient libraries, restrooms, labs, and other hab-blocks dating back to the time He walked among them were dusty and abandoned.

A few Custodes always tried to inhabit them and restore some glory, but there was so much to do and the Ten Thousand had other duties, no matter what the rest of the Imperium believed.

At least they were perfect to have private conversations between them in without a single risk of being overheard, which was a priceless commodity on the Throneworld in this era of intrigue, cutthroat politics, and endless rumours.

“I still think we should wipe out the Officio Assassinorum,” Tribune Nataraja Garuda told him.

“He informed us the loyalty of the Callidus wasn't to be questioned.” The senior Tribune reminded his equal among the Watchers.

“And I point out he only mentioned the Callidus Temple, not the five others. And the Grand Master of those psychotic killers has not been summoned in front of the Throne.”

“No,” Basil Macedonian was forced to admit. “But then he only summoned two out of the twelve people who matter.”

The Mistress of the Astronomican had been kind of a matter of course, since not summoning her when spare parts of the Astronomican had been found and heavy readjustments in the psyker-matrixes had to be done would have been tantamount to declaring the High Lord wasn't trusted, and at that point a replacement would have been a necessity, for so many reasons he wasn't going to elaborate upon them.

“The current Inquisitorial Representative, for one, can be more or less trusted to do his job.”

“That still doesn't change the fact that five-sixths of the Officio Assassinorum can't be. I want to play a series of new Blood Games, Basil. We need to be prepared. There are things lurking in the Eversors' and Culexus' labs that shouldn't have been created without authorization.”

“They were authorized, I fear,” a figure of speech; since he had joined the ranks of the Ten Thousand, the now-Tribune of the Adeptus Custodes had not been afraid. “Just not by us.”

“The Grand Provost of the Adeptus Arbites?”

“Or the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy,” the schemes of those two were all about power and gaining more of it, never the good of the Imperium or following the orders of their liege.

Unlike the Fabricator-General, who had prostrated himself in front of Him, renewed his oaths, and approved plenty of things as long as he could build bigger warships, bigger cannons, and tinker with ancient and new technology, it was a sad reality Tudor Brezhnev, Rabadash y Byng el Calormen, and Xerxes Vandire couldn't be trusted.

It went without saying that the moment that what little usefulness His Majesty found in them reached its end, they would all suffer the punishments their extreme disloyalty deserved.

“The Blood Games you want will happen, but you will not be in command. The orders have come four hours ago. A coalition fleet of the Secessionists Forge Worlds has abandoned its holdings and is now fleeing northwards. The strategium's predictions and the Tarot are in agreement: they intend to join forces with the Dark Mechanicum and other Traitors.”

“I see. A first strike to let the galaxy remember we still execute those who abandon their oaths. Three Battleships and five hundred of us should be more than enough to teach these Tech-Priests the error of their ways.”

“I will await your reports impatiently. This is a new era of war for us, and I have no doubt several of our procedures and strategies will need to be amended to better reflect the enemies out there.”

In a way, the enemies were weaker than those faced during the Great Crusade by their predecessors. But as Commorragh had proven, 'usually' weaker did not mean it stayed true all the time. There were plenty of very good reasons why the Adeptus Astartes and the Imperial Guard were still fighting endless wars across the galaxy, and a majority had nothing to do with human frailty.

“Estimations for the repairs?”

“The Mistress of the Astronomican won't have a proper schedule until the exact parts will be presented to her, but I am not optimistic enough to believe it will take less than several decades...”

**Segmentum Pacificus**

'**Nova-Terran Sector'**

**Nova-Terra**

**Two hundred and eighty-five hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Lord Cypher**

There was a polite word to describe the military situation of the Nova-Terran Imperium.

This word was 'screwed'.

Cypher supposed one of the thousands of public relations officers in a radius of ten kilometres might disagree with his opinion or at least present it in a more polite manner.

That was fine. It wasn't like it would change anything.

Launched from Hydraphur, the Navy loyal to the High Lords had begun three lightning offensives, and with Milhand's defection, the resistance was already crumbling, with over sixty worlds already lost and more disasters being relayed by the Astropaths every hour.

From Segmentum Solar, the Mechanicus and Navy fleets were launching an all-out effort to reconquer the Segmentum. The first estimates gave them one hundred-plus Battleships, five Arks Mechanicus, and thirty Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes with as many Battle-Barges jumping into the fray. Southwards, the Tempestus Navy Battlefleets and the Frateris Templar were deploying for the massacre. Hundreds of warships had already crossed the invisible line separating the two Segmentums, and soon it was going to be thousands, maybe tens of thousands.

Without the Eldar threat to keep them busy, the Admirals of Bakka and the Archmagi of Mars were free to concentrate many forces they previously would never have dared deploying on distant campaigns. But with the secessionists’ Forge Worlds of the Adeptus Mechanicus begging to be admitted back into the mechanical embrace of the Red Planet? Their doubts and hesitations, if they had existed at all, had not lasted long. Facing a secessionist Battlefleet when you knew it was only a question of days before it would lack vital things like fuel, ammunition, and, most important of all, morale, was doing great things for the spirit of initiative of certain space commanders. And in turn, more Nova-Terran planets were defecting. Worse, a lot of the first defectors were bastions of piety and faith, which should have stayed loyal until death but now were rallying to the side having a Living Saint.

“No matter how dire the situation, we will resist and stop the cruel and barbaric attacks of the narrow-minded fools following the tyranny of so-called 'Holy Terra'!” High Admiral Maximus Laval started one of his Sector-famous speeches...unfortunately for him, the audience was rather thin on the ground today. “Behind the bastions of our most-defended worlds, the Faithful and the True men and women of the New Age will not succumb to despair! We will not surrender! We will not seek accommodations like the feckless cogboys who abandon ship at the first sign of danger! Behind the walls, we can endure for centuries and live free!”

Centuries? Under his hood, Cypher smiled. Someone was confident about the defences of Nova-Terra. Too bad most of this confidence was unjustified. Oh, the defence grid and the Battlefleet in orbit were as strong as everyone imagined, but from long experience, the Space Marine knew no wall stood eternally if the enemy came with sufficient strength.

The Siege of Terra had proven this. No matter how strong and tall the ramparts, you couldn't stem the tide of enemies for decades if there were one million enemies for each of your soldiers.

And then he felt it across the system. Warp-translations. Massive ones, for him to feel them like that without any attempt of sending mental probes through the aether.

Walking to the first military command centre he was close to, the worst-case scenario Cypher had planned for sin decades was materialising. At the Nova-Europae Mandeville Point seventy Frigates and more than two hundred Destroyers had left the Warp, not a single one of them a Nova-Terran warship. And they were just the vanguard, 'cleaning' entire sections of space of their existing minefields, ravaging the monitoring platforms, and slaughtering the first flotillas answering the alerts. The hololith was not showing most of this, obviously. It was too soon. But Cypher was feeling the deaths and the killing taking place. He knew more warships were coming.

Even had he not been trained as a Librarian, this would have been logical. A strike against Nova-Terra was a decapitation strike, a move only the High Twelve could authorise. Cut off the head, and the Battlefleets and Grand Armies of the Imperium would have free reign to force the submission of the thousands of leaderless secessionist factions.

And to guarantee a one hundred percent victory, the Lords of Terra could only send one force.

Among Cruisers and Battlecruisers, the Battle-Barges and Strike Cruisers of the Angels of Redemption and the Angels of Absolution's familiar signatures were not bothering to hide. Angels of Wrath, Guardians of the Covenant, and Persecutors of Darkness' naval assets added Companies and Strike Cruisers to a force which was truly an impressive armada now.

Not one of them looked to be at full strength, proving this was an improvised reaction force and the Unforgiven had been as surprised by Commorragh as them.

Unfortunately for Nova-Terra, 'surprised' was not good enough when one was speaking about the 'loyal' sons of the Lion.

A Warp tear bigger than all others opened. Cypher knew before all other beings what was about to materialise in the system.

It had carried many names given to it by hundreds of civilisations, but the one given to it by its owners, the one it bore to this day, was *Invincible Reason*.

Gloriana Battleship, Flagship of the First Legion, Spear of Retribution of the Unforgiven, second heaviest construct available to the Supreme Grand Master of Lost Caliban, and for today, the Death of Nova-Terra.

Alone, this ship would have been able to engage and destroy the entire Battlefleet of this system. Together with the warships accompanying it, it made resistance utterly futile.

“I am leaving this world,” Cypher told the three other Fallen waiting behind him. “If you want to stay out of reach of the Interrogators, I suggest you come with me.”

“No ship will be able to evade such a blockade!”

“Legionnaire, who was talking about using a ship?”

One of the reasons he had stayed so long at Nova-Terra was the existence of a Webway Gate he alone remembered how to find and activate.

“Tell us your plan first. Assuming you have one, that is.”

“No.” And the ancient Dark Angel began to walk away.

“And you wonder why no one trusts you! You are a traitorous weaver of schemes and shadows, Lord Cypher! One day, all your sins will catch up with you and all souls on both sides of the Long War will torment you to death!”

There was no missed step in his stride. He didn't turn back his head or any part of his body. His expression didn't change. But the huge sword on his back seemed to weigh a little more. And the burden upon his heart was heavier too.

“They have already done so.”

And he disappeared alone into the darkness.

**The Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**The Blood Rose**

The voices must have shouted or shrieked the question a billion times.

Was it worth it?

The answer needed no debate or deep introspection of the soul.

It was no.

When you spent every single moment of your life taking care to not be devoured by the very ship you were supposed to command, betrayal had clearly not been worth it. Following the World Eaters into madness had been lunacy, pure and simple.

But as much as she had tried to think about it, there had been really no outcome save the one she had chosen.

Angron was utterly mad, and would have rebelled anyways. His sons had in the end proven that they had no conscience either. The crew, the Astartes, the units of the Auxilia deployed with them...none of them had opened their mouths to speak as genocide after genocide was committed and the campaigns became planetary slaughters.

They had all broken the greatest oath of all without a single protest. They knew. They knew the 'Master of Mankind' would never have approved of their actions. The Primarch was crazy and broken, and they were all damaged beyond redemption. They would have been purged. And since the rebel side welcomed them with open arms, why not give it a chance?

But it had not been a chance. They had just exchanged one far-away, distant master for far crueller ones.

And every word uttered as a joke was now cursed beyond reason. No one escapes the *Conqueror*. The nails will pound some sense in your skull. They made thrones from skulls of our enemies.

By the point they reached Terra, the *Conqueror* was a daemonship, and the Twelfth Legion were baying berserkers.

And yet they had continued to serve. Not because they cared about the struggle between Horus and his father anymore. Not because they felt a sense of kinship with the other Legions. There was no loyalty, no friendship, and no grand plan. There was just survival. She wanted to live, to survive the next hours, the next minutes, and then the next seconds. She wanted to avoid being swallowed by nightmares pouring out of the walls as the Gellar Fields flickered. She wanted to live.

Courage, honour, glory, terror, duty, arrogance, rage, and so many emotions had failed with her.

But they had grabbed the souls of everyone else.

When they had arrived in the Eye, the *Conqueror* had completed its last transformation, truly becoming the chainaxe decades of slaughter and unending carnage had shaped it into.

The crew, her subordinates, became part of the *Conqueror* when they left the Cadian Gate behind.

Their bodies had stayed where they were, impaled or chained to the consoles, mutated spawns and twisted mutants spitting gibberish. There were two Space Marines among them, the result of what happened when you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The *Conqueror* was a ravenous beast. Sometimes she wondered if it should not have been named *Devourer* or *Hungry Maw* from the start.

The first moments after her rest were spent cutting away the tendrils and other forms of corruption which had tried to tie her up during her sleep. There were dozens of these black and red appendages. The numbers always kept increasing for some reason. Deep inside, she knew one day there would be no freeing herself. There was no one else on the bridge able to help her, and the warbands which used the *Conqueror* as their flagship didn't often come here. It was too dangerous for them, as the *Conqueror* remembered those who had used their weapons against it.

Something which should have been a screen representing the readings transmitted by the long-range augur arrays arrived at her head's height. Most of the information was not readable to her eyes, alas, since the material was covered in black mucus, had five tentacles and two eyes appearing and disappearing everywhere, and the moment of contact of one of her fingers had with it confirmed that in greater quantities, this would most likely act like acid for her skin.

A fairly inoffensive sign for the *Conqueror*, all in all.

It surprised her that there had been no orders coming from the daemon-things replacing the vox and other communications aboard the ship, but maybe they were all busy fighting the varieties of creatures their presence attracted inside the infinite Warp-passages the insides of the *Conqueror* had transformed into.

“**They gave you no order because I stopped them**.”

The daemon was in front of her. Maybe it had always been there, or maybe not.

It did not look like the hulking hybrid of giant and Bloodthirster Angron had become. It was not a Possessed Marine or a lesser daemon. Its appearance resembled a black, vaguely humanoid body surrounded by flames.

But she didn't need a sorcerer to know that the Neverborn was incredibly powerful.

With each breath she took, the temperature was rising higher and higher, and soon she was sweating water she didn't remember having drunk in years. Flames were spreading.

This was a great servant of Khorne, and the fact it had not attacked hinted at how talented and favoured said entity was in its Master's court.

“**I am the Emissary of Khorne. There are skulls to claim for the Skull Throne**.”

There were infernos burning in these eyes, and she quickly moved hers away to avoid any potential exchange of gazes.

“**Malicia, the new parahuman Sorceress of Tzeentch. Her plans in the Calyx Expanse must be stopped. Her followers will be torn to pieces. Their heads will be offered to my Master. The Chosen of Tzeentch must lose. Her plans must collapse in blood. In blood, she will be humiliated! In blood, she will learn! BLOOD**!”

For a second she thought the entity was going to attack her, but with what looked to be an inhuman effort, tension was released and the fires burned at a more reasonable temperature. Its size, however, had tripled, and it showed no sign of decreasing again.

“**Ruin the plans of Tzeentch, and Lord Khorne will help you in the task you desire. Blood for blood, Erebus will be delivered into your grasp and the Betrayer will throw the coward's head at your feet, Lotara Sarrin**.”

There was a flash of red light and her body felt like it was falling into an abyss.

When she woke up, her uniform had returned to its white colour for the first time in what felt like centuries, though it was only the upper jacket. The rest of her clothes were brand-new and a deep blood red. Above her heart, the familiar bloody print was shining a malevolent red.

The 'offer' had not been imagined, and the possibility of refusing it didn't exist.

“Not that I want to, really. If there's a small chance of finally eliminating that coward, at least some good will come from of our exile in the Eye of Terror.”

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Three hundred hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Seneschal-Consort Wei Cao**

“I find I quite like Champagne. Could you get more bottles from Holy Terra?”

“You are a hedonist, my dear Seneschal-Consort.”

“And proud of it,” Wei replied as she finished drinking the sparkling alcohol in her crystal glass.

But yes, it was an excellent drink. Of course, the price of the bottle they had begun drinking together was just astronomical. This was M22 Champagne harvested in a Terran area called the 'Twenty-Second Franc Republic', sealed in a micro-stasis field coupled with a miniature temperature regulator, and it had been stored in the private cellars of the Imperial Palace.

There had to be one or two Hives on Wuhan you could buy for this kind of prize, and have plenty of change left.

“I will open two others when we'll celebrate the victory at Nyx,” Taylor promised quietly. “The others, I will keep in reserve for special occasions.”

For what felt like hours, they stayed silent. Around their soft little nest, millions of stars provided a grand spectacle, but there were closer things attracting even more attention, like tens of thousands of starships.

And unlike the sprawling mess which had existed a few hours ago, there were two large fleets which had extracted themselves from the multitude of columns trying to get as close to the *Enterprise* and the high orbit of Pavia as possible.

The first, and in many aspects the most powerful, was concentrating the firepower of the sons of Dorn and several other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, supported by two Navy Battlefleets and quantities of other men-of-war. It was led by the *Eternal Crusader*, the Black Templars clearly having no intention of relinquishing the place of honour for the coming war.

For these millions of Space Marines, sailors, and warriors, the Battle of Commorragh was not the end, but the beginning of a new age. Long forced on the defensive, the Imperium was retaking the initiative and preparing to deliver judgement on the xenos.

Biel-Tan was going to burn, and Wei couldn't find any pity in her heart. The long-ears had repeatedly tried to kill them, and they had failed. The arrogant xenos had raised the storm; now they were going to reap the consequences.

The second fleet, while somewhat less impressive visually, still had many Arks Mechanicus and mighty Battleships to defend itself. It had hundreds of capital ships, and a brilliant Auramite Custodes ship to lead them. This was the fleet bound for Mars, ordered to deliver the original STCs to Mars, the parts of the Astronomican to Holy Terra, and many other treasures to the safety of the Solar System. Unlike the forces of the 'Biel-Tan Crusade', it was going to be constantly reinforced each time it paused to refuel on its way to the Throneworld.

It was quite something that, even with these two fleets on their ways to the Mandeville Points for the Warp-translations, there were still tens of thousands of starships – including thousands of warships– present in the Pavia System. Not all of them would stay behind: the time was near when survivors of Operation Caribbean would return to Nyx, the Astartes who had not gone with the Imperial Fists had other wars to fight, and the Navy was dispatching squadron after squadron to make the Acacia Expanse submit to the rule of the God-Emperor and ensure the proclamation of the Acacia Sub-Sector became more than ink on a vellum document.

“I have decided to not execute Alyena Sinblade,” her lover told her.

“The first member of our new seraglio?”

The Wuhanese woman received a roll of the eyes in return.

“You and your harems,” the Basileia commented. “I told you I don't like the principles which led to their creation.”

“It's the logical continuation of political alliances, technological, trade, and influence contracts.”

“Yes, but with time, it also became a way for deviant nobles to express their sexual perversions without being arrested by the Arbites. And besides, I want peace at the end of a day, when I stop thinking about Basileia business. I don't want more trouble and quarrels following me up the Spire.”

Wei smiled but didn't open her mouth to say a single word. She knew how her newly winged superior and mistress loved having breathing room and silence when she was surrounded by crowds and noises more powerful than ten armies of the battlefield every day. It was an earthly desire which was likely going to intensify, given how the pilgrims and other crowds of Faithful tried to approach her at every moment of the day now.

“So...Alyena Sinblade?”

“She will live, since I effectively Mastered her via Aethergold,” Wei had not been there for the event, but 'Mastered' was indeed a very accurate description for the purple-haired Rogue Trader. From xenos-consorting outlaw, the owner of the Sinblade Warrant had become a very devout woman who threw herself to her knees every time Taylor entered a room, said 'yes' to every demand or requisition made, and answered every question in long and precise detail, no matter how dangerous it was for her personally. “The new Warrant written by Mars will tie her to me, and there will be Inquisitorial and Astartes presence on her ship for the return to Nyx. I've also decided to rename the Universe-class Mass Conveyor *Wasp*.”

The Seneschal-Consort giggled. It was an extremely funny name for a ship which was twelve kilometres long and one point three kilometres abeam. Not for nothing were these ancient and rare hulls called 'Mass Conveyors': they weighed sixty million tonnes and possessed a passenger capacity between two hundred and five hundred thousand – not counting the sixty thousand crewmen. It was epic in scale, surpassing the *Enterprise* and ninety-nine percent of the starships present at Pavia in sheer size.

“Well, at least it gives you a new Rogue Trader to enforce your will across the stars.” For someone who had arrived at Wuhan with little but her title of Major and some pocket money, the Lady Weaver had advanced her fortune and influence quite nicely. Wolfgang Bach, Dennis Peters, Magdalena Orpheus, and Alyena Sinblade had all sworn themselves to her. That was four Rogue Traders, and the first two had been bolstered enormously before their first maiden voyages. As for the wealth, Taylor was easily a high trillionaire, if not a low quadrillionaire. She might have invested several lifetimes of fortune into Mechanicus constructions, ships, spare parts, and favours, gave a minimum of two hundred and fifty thousand Throne Gelts to the lowest private of Army Group Caribbean, handed out metallic and biological prostheses left and right, but trying to stymie the growth of her fortune was a fight even she couldn't win.

Taylor was rich. And it was going to get worse – or better, depending on one's point of view.

“My will is enforced as long as it doesn't upset the precious morals of certain individuals. You know very well a few nobles are already proclaiming at the top of their lungs that the worker-class population demanding you as Planetary Governor of Wuhan is yet more evidence of my tyrannical rule.”

Yes. The overwhelming majority of the pilgrims, manufactorum workers, and inhabitants of the Nyx Sector were bombastically enthusiastic and from them, criticism was nearly nonexistent. The upper classes, for better or worse, were nowhere near as supportive.

“And your answer to them?”

“They can go to hell,” Taylor said before kissing her on the forehead. “For centuries they had fun oppressing the population of the Imperium and using decades of conflict to fill their pockets and live wasteful lives while billions died in the trenches a few light-years away. They could have fixed the Imperium. They didn't. So now we are going to try it my way.”

“As long as I can stay by your side, you have my full support,” it wasn't like she dreamed to administer the unstable aftermath of her father's assassination, really. “I suppose we will visit my homeworld shortly after our return to Nyx, no?”

“Wuhan and Claire 47 are on the shortlist, along with the Iris System.” The Basileia confided to her. “But once the big political affairs are settled, we will make a long journey across the Sector. I need to see if the reforms-to-come are done...and the people need to see us. I won't be an anonymous face like Menelaus was.”

“There are going to involve a lot of Ovation celebrations.” By right, every Hero of the Imperium who received this prerogative had to be welcomed by a planet like he was a High Lord him- or herself. Since Taylor was the Basileia of Nyx and a Living Saint of the Ecclesiarchy, all the planets where the *Enterprise* went would have to present their best appearance or suffer very unpleasant consequences.

“Don't remind me.” Was she going to repeat the insinuation of many high-ranking Priests that the two of them had to be married? No...she was fairly sure Taylor had heard them too, and decided to disregard them for the time being. “But I think it's better to have parties organised than to be shot at...at least I'm fairly sure it's better. I may change my mind once you and your cosmetic and beauty departments force me into long dresses and expensive gowns.”

“You exterminated billions of long-ears at Commorragh, and yet you're afraid of a few robes?”

“I can always unleash Lisa on you,” the brilliant black-haired woman stuck her tongue out.

“No, the moth will always come back to you. You're the only one who can understand her, in the end...”

The Battlefleets began to drift away. Starforts and immense cathedrals of war abandoned their orbit around Pavia in order to return to the Throneworld or to more wars and bloody conflicts across the galaxy.

The world of Pavia shone in the middle of this like a jewel of purity and nature. Somehow, Wei had the feeling that once it would be her turn to leave this system, she would never come back here.

“What now?”

“As a famous politician of M2 said, this is not the beginning of the end, but maybe it is the end of the beginning. We have struck a blow against the Great Enemy. And there will be others.”

Taylor refilled their drinks, and her voice lowered until it was barely above a whisper.

“There must be others. We will spit in the eyes of their sorcerers, humiliate their mutant warlords, burn the Warp with golden light, and force their cultists into holes so deep it will take them millennia to dig out.”

“To let them remember that several times, they were brought low by mere mortals.”

“For the Emperor and humanity, we will win.”

Their lips met under the stars. Their kisses were long and passionate. And for several hours, everything less important than their love was temporarily forgotten.

**Author's note**: Here ends the grand arc of Commorragh. Technically, it began with Arc 7, and continued with Arc 8 and the Interludes. The word count went way, way beyond even my wildest predictions. Yes, really. Ten months ago, I had absolutely no idea I would write 50,000 words-long updates. Oops?

Arc 9 will be called Ovation. While I obviously won't reveal certain surprises, you can count on certain Imperium-versus-Ork actions at Tigrus, and there's obviously the Biel-Tan Crusade coming very soon.

The Skaven may have further appearances, we will see yes-yes. Writing megalomaniac giant rats is surprisingly fun, as long as it is done in moderation.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption