Weaver Option Update 19 August 2020

**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 fast 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 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 M3 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 totally convinced He walked among humankind in M3, M22 and several millennia in-between,” replied serenely the commander of Army Group Caribbean. “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 ancient traditions and lifestyles of Ancient Terra, though I won’t speculate on his reasons.”

“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, 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 to 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 answered back with only a short moment of mental calculation. “The line of productions are already functioning, they will just need to be expanded.”

“Assuming the first prototypes of the new ‘Brunhilda supremacy fighter’ justify their data-performance, 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 reparation rights and exchanges of smaller but yet extremely profitable technology templates.

A melody began to play two compartments away, sign the members of the ‘public’ invited for the judgement of the Sons of Sanguinius had begun to take the seats awaiting them.

“The Bacta-“

“I will negotiate with all the Space Marines Chapter 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 alone. “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 lancing in pain or she had some debt creditors 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’s hall by a dark backdoor, certainly one placed by the Pavia pirates while the Malta Starfort was still in their possession. As a result, they were spared – for now – the inquisitive looks of the crowd, and it was for the better.

Because there was 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 were already creating 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 Princeps, Mechanicus Archmagi, and other senior dignitaries used.

The dark-haired Rogue Trader knew enough to acknowledge that if everyone under the rank of Ship Captain or equivalent was ordered to leave this room, the numbers of people leaving would be counted with two hands and 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 who had suddenly decided to return back to 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 golden wings radiated golden energy, making all her surroundings somehow dull and hastily prepared. Nothing stood comparison when was given 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 best, 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, it was secession.”

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

“Fortunately for your future, you returned to the Imperium out of your own volition. Late, very late, but no one had to drag you in chains to Holy Terra for your judgement. Therefore, under the condition the High Lords validate my judgement, I sentence your entire Chapter to a Penance 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 Penance Crusade, your shame and your crime will be considered paid in full and a new Chapter will be rebuilt with 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 discovered like the rest of the spectators that the Chapter’s sigil had been scoured 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 the name anew.”

There was a lot of movement afterwards. The noise levels also soared. Plenty of Space Marines were satisfied, but there were loud grumblings 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 the answers to everything on this earth.

The rest of her head told her she was stupid to think her worthless hide would be spared. A Space Marine Chapter was worth far more military power 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 was no golden scales, and one couldn’t miss the fact the Living Saint had drawn her personal crystal sword.

“When I was told there was Rogue Traders working for Sliscus, my first reaction was to think it was a poor attempt at irony,” the golden-winged woman began, unhappiness evident on her face. “My second reaction was to order the Inquisition to put all of you under 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 and if she shivered a second after, 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 move and the Living Saint continued.

“Scarlet Kade.”

She was the sole member of the nine Rogue Traders to be in chains, the guards had to force her to kneel. The reason for this caution was not to be searched very far. Dyed dark red hair, crimson eyes, crimson red armour, cadaveric white skin and modified eyes and ears; for the average citizen, the woman would have been acknowledged as an Eldar. “You were taken aboard the Eldar cruiser *Smile of Red Stars* once the Mechanicus boarding batteries had neutralised your crew’s resistance. Slave trade, genocide, 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 a thousand times to die.”

“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 given to 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 ugly 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 by ten your suffering. 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 part by part, 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 thing 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-interested as his. Guards, take her away.”

At this moment, the rumours that the Eldar of Commorragh had called their judge by the nickname 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, the schedule of major convoys, and eliminated everyone who might reveal her crimes.

“First Duke Jeffers has acknowledged the shame you have brought to 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 watched Oprah like she was a dirty cockroach.

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

All fight apparently sucked 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 before hand 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 to the Imperium 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,” immediately disagreed her judge. “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 warranting torture, you will hang tomorrow.”

Vanessa Armengarde was taken away, and Magdalena could not help but feel minor 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 worse than they had imagined.

“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 hairs, 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 cancel the debts and call it a day?”

“No.” Lady Weaver replied curtly. “Since you were a fairly gifted Rogue Trader before falling in 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 thought of relief at the confirmation their golden-winged judge had not come to only utter execution’s notice after execution’s 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 a 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-researched 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’s 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 the Holy Ordos of His Most Divine Majesty’s Inquisition. Shiva was to be burned alive, and her guards had to drag her forcefully out of the hall.

Eunomia Vhane wasn’t spared. 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 recalled for five full minutes the assassination of several adepts, sabotage of important manufactorum and Forges while she was obeying Sliscus orders, and the rape of an Ecclesiarchy Cardinal. The last crime – which had happened on year ago or so – would be ‘rewarded’ by crucifixion 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 kneeled, 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 visage 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, and when it touched her skin the pain seemed to be miraculously dissipating 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 one-third remaining were much reduced in intensity and width.

“How?” She breathed.

“Bacta would have removed the scar entirely if the scar was 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 she was spared.

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

“My body and my soul are yours.”

Without even a glance for the Victor of Commorragh, Magdalena doubted that this had been part of the script...

**Marshal Werner Groener**

As far as Werner had been able to ascertain, ‘Admiral’ Sliscus had not held a body type or a particular series of looks above all others to choose the women sharing his bed on a decade-per-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 an 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 on their way out of 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 didn’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 the survival of when the Blackstone Fortress ended the threat of the Arch-Enemy. Your behaviour and your actions are 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 proscribed artefacts and xenos items.” The hand of the Basileia caressed the hilt of her sword, but it was not drawn...for now. “You say your body and your soul are mine. I am 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 will be 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 please?” The red-robed council member of the Nyx Mechanicus left the ranks of the Tech-Priests and gave 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 of better of days...but before all things, it sang of *Sacrifice*.

Lady Weaver descended the steps once 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 in the two women’s bodies. Alyena Sinblade moaned and collapsed, her dark-haired judge finally relinquishing her grasp upon her hand and giving back 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 five Arch Cardinals nominally enforcing the holy will of the God-Emperor over each Segmentum, 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 having a rank of Cardinal, Arch-Deacon, or any of the senior positions allowing you a seat in the Holy Synod.

Since obviously seating a huge number of people in a ‘simple’ council room was evidently impossible, the Holy Synod had taken to convene 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 hall-gallery betrayed the jealousy of the man at having been denied a voice in the affairs of the Imperium. At least half of the structures, the paintings and the 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 going to say he was the one who should replace them. This would be idiotic. He was twenty years younger than Pelagius, though admittedly in far better health than him – his career in the Frateris Templar was long behind him, but this had allowed him to build a constitution which hadn’t yet gone in smoke with 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 the belly.

“Let us pray, brothers, sisters,” droned Pelagius. By law, the Ecclesiarch should have made the prayer on his knees, but it had been over 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 put 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 deserved. 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 forwards, and the Cardinals and the 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! It 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 Pavia System 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 blink 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 ridiculous 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 much commented.

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.

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 black holes between Ophelia VII and Nyx.

The votes passed one each 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’s 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.” The ‘unlike you’ was not uttered, but the Nyxian noblewoman and the four or five pilots waiting behind the other survivor of White Squadron were sure to hear 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 examinee needed to have. 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 were at the top of the list. Noble, infuriatingly noble, noble pedigree, female, not horrible to look at, noble...”

“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!”

This sounded...lacking for an excuse.

“What is the damage to his Thunderbolt?” Freya called 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 would be able to recycle from it.

“HA!”

“My Thunderbolt is still in 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 aren’t you recognising 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 denounce 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. It is nothing against the reputation and the 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 civilian support’s rule may be rescinded if I think the local rulers aren’t up to the job or I think 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!’ – 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 after.

“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 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 a first-rate 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.” In another mouth, it might have sounded like boasting. In the young General’s voice, it was the truth.

“We will contribute with 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 excitation mounted 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 representation 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 to have 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 your rewards your generosity deserves,” the Regent of Nocturne told their benefactor while making a gesture 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 the purity of the gemstones, many 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 deserves your House being added to this list,” Forgefather N’Varr told to the blushing golden-clothed woman.

Followed a list of the ore, metals, gems and the 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 it 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 Apothecarium 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 difficulties, 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 they mustn’t see every month.

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

“I appreciate the gesture, but isn’t the majority of Nocturne wildlife in its great majority reptilian?”

“It is, Lady Weaver” Corr intervened for the first time in the conversation as one of the foremost hunters 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 a stinger capable to pierce effortlessly ceramite and plasteel. The Pyre-worms and the Serrwyrms will also fall into insect category from the criteria you gave us, and these species are both incredibly armoured and resistant to a considerable range of deadly environments.”

It was a pity he hadn’t as much picts and 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 pass a messenger-guardsman and the meeting ended here and there. Naturally, this meant the other part of the Salamander’s reward to Lady Weaver was going to be presented.

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 we will destroy the plots of the enemies of Mankind wherever we go.”

Corr was proud to say it was a Salamander who first advanced and kneeled in front of the golden-winged heroine.

“I, Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr, pledges 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. And the first, honour obliged, were the Imperial Fists.

“I, Huscarl Diamantis of the Imperial Fists, pledges 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.”

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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: Red

*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 Flame 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. 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*

*The Lamenters – former Sons of Sanguinius – have not been authorised to propose a candidate. The position of Baal and Nyx on the subject will be re-examined at the end of their Penance Crusade. 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*

*Death Speaker Ribera of the Executioners Chapter*

*Battle-Brother Garceller of the Iron Knight 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*

*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 includes 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. These 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 will leave Nyx once more.*

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**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 being aware of it?”

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

“If this was 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 from one of the sons of Sanguinius serving as her Dawnbreaker Guard.

“But no, I won’t under your command,” the veteran Ultramarine said 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 words 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 by surprise the Dark City of Commorragh, victory had been far from certain. Several of the Drukhari she had personally killed would have been more than matches 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. 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 bolters 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 on dozens of battlefronts. Allowing you to have one of their battle-brothers would be a neat loss since the Astartes in question would not be available if they need reinforcements.”

“I’m not criticising,” the golden-winged officer said slowly, “but isn’t it a bit risky? I know the Brothers of the Red have decided after their Penance 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 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 chance of that were infinitesimal. At the moment, the brilliant Archmagos was hesitating between Nyx and Mars for his next destinations. Without a viable counter-poison 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, these were his own words.

“Give my regards to Lord Macragge,” Lady Weaver said, “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 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 of 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 his full and undivided attention on 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 trace of the xenos’ bio-weapons. I intend 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...OUCH!” 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 strike in a location no sane man wanted to be hurt.

“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 manifests the will to desire building a new life on this world will be able to do so. Veterans of Commorragh who want to obtain land grants and leave the Guard can manifest themselves 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 as 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 extinction of billions of Eldar. But the Inner Sanctum of the Imperial Palace was, despite all propaganda convincing 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 throw the first bomb.

“The Edict of Restraint is hereby dissolved.”

Samson stayed with his mouth wide opened. There were few constants in the great manipulations and millions of policies the Senatorum Imperialis had to arbitrate on a day-per-day basis, but one 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 young brown-haired young man, but his eyes were betraying the juvenile outward appearance. “You have not the right to-“

The Tribune posed 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 someone want to argue this point?” The squad of Custodes patiently waiting weapons in hand behind the Tribune suggested the answer shouldn’t be negative 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 lesser 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 showing a hairless face, the Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica was assuredly a powerful psyker, but there must be a few skeletons on Holy Terra which were showing better health than him. “I think we can begin with the consequences of the Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement?”

The next ten minutes were a very short sum-up 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 researched by the Inquisition and all law-enforcers.

“This divine judgment allowed the Holy Ordos to have an extremely accurate and disappointing view 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 for the qualification of ‘inflexible granite’. Two metres tall, built like an Ogryn bodyguard, the representative of the Holy Inquisition among the High Twelve was exuding 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 clothes 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 were infiltrated on the Throneworld. It seems that for all our vigilance on 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 implement the creation of a new Ordo, which will be called Hereticus.”

Samson was not aware of the tedious little details the Inquisition’s structure lied 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 his 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 role to the Imperial Guard.

“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 hairs and piercing blue eyes must have turned a few heads on her way to this room. “The Astronomican shines more brilliantly than it has ever done in centuries, and when the Custodes will return the spare parts stolen by the xenos in one year or two, the range and the power of the Holy Beacon will be increased again! Why should we not give the woman who made this victory responsible a Triumph?”

“Because giving one would be tantamount to admit the existence of things like ‘Chaos Gods’, ‘Traitor Marines’, ‘Daemon-Primarchs’, and other things we have worked very hard to convince the plebeians that they 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 confirmed at the Holy Synod 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 gold, 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 worlds – metaphorically this time. “All in favour of an Ovation and enlarging the Nyx Sector to accept the planetary bounties?”

The hand 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 great disappointment, except with 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.

“This 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 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 to convince any Space Marine Chapter to obey this 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 researched was not the one he wanted.

“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 a second organising tragic accidents for them if they decided to go ahead.

“The limiting number of Space Marine is Lady Weaver herself,” Aliénor said to the other members of the High Twelve. In her white uniform of the Gutenberg Captains, the Speaker was like those beautiful flowers cultivated in certain spires...beautiful, but having plenty of thorns and methods to make you bleed. “After all, for every Chapter who is invited on the planets she rule over, this is one world partially or totally falling under the Adeptus Astartes authority.”

“This may be so,” Xerxes Vandire said 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 came to me when one speak of Astartes’ musters. Let’s limit Nyx’s Chapters to six.”

“Lady Weaver will certainly have reached this number, if she didn’t overtake 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 pointing the words ‘she doesn’t deserve this’ around the Custodes.”

“Nine,” Felipe de Rivera spoke 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 healing miraculous 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-“

“You would be dead before leaving this room,” Lord Berlin Chimera told him. The two men stared at each other for several seconds, and Rabadash was the first to look away. “I will send several Inquisitors after this reunion to assess the production levels of Bacta and how we can increase it to answer Imperial needs. One point I won’t budge over is the fact the Holy Ordos will have the priority over Aethergold.”

“This is...” Rovere began to say something before closing it in front of the granite face of the Lord Inquisitor.

“This 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 door closed.”

“We may add to the defences of Cadia a Gloriana Battleship too,” the Fabricator-General said, 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 what the Most Divine 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 in. 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 for his lips. “We must speak of one the biggest issues which come up from 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 has the gall to call it a ‘wild celebration’. Anyone in favour to censor them?”

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

**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 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 make walks with Pilou XI and his ten predecessors had been workable. The mastiffs had been the salivating mascots of the Lucifer Black Regiments Paul had been assigned to, and one could always divert some paperwork in the hands of a naive subordinate before going across military camps and rear-area towns after an enthusiast mastiff doing its best to break his 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 lazy and indolence incarnate.

Paul von Oberstein drank the rest of the cup posed on his office, grimacing at the taste. Infect. After several days of deep thinking, he had decided to invest in one of these 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 beverage he could prepare from Munitorum recipes. As for engaging a private butler, it was best not to think about that. The last he had found 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 irony; Paul had achieved what his naive and young teenage male’s 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 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 to his ears.

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

“You can escort him to my office, Koln,” Paul gave a last disabused glance to Pilou XII before removing half of the mountain of vellum and data-wafer on 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 working office. And no, it was anything but an exaggeration. Even by the standard of the Catachan Jungle Fighters – which for the record had long-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 joke the man was an ork which had somehow manage to paint its skin brown when he first arrived to 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 were generally learning 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 or his regiment managed to fight their way through an ork WAAGH and sabotage a Gargant, explode the main ammunition depot of the greenskins, reducing to ashes in a few seconds a third of their effectives, and then go challenge the Warboss in personal combat...and emerge triumphant, the Star of Terra and the thousands of medals he was rewarded 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 for 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 some shortly deceased people, the heretics struck down during the Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement, may have known about Commorragh before the others. “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 in duel monsters like Drazhar and the other Eldar champions is one I can follow on the frontlines. You gave her a second Star of Terra, or so the rumour tells.”

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

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

“One day I will shoot this 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 while 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 oath was 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 automatically 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 arrived. Paul von Oberstein was not willing to do that, not yet at any rate. “And according to the messages she sent me, the Basileia of Nyx intend to return temporarily to the Nyx Sector before creating a new Army Group. The Munitorum having proven its incompetence giving her a useful staff, she went directly to me for a new one.”

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

“The first thing on top of Lady Weaver’s list was a training officer able to understand soldiers who went into 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, one hundred thousand officers duelling for the seat?”

“Try three million and you will be much closer from 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 as soon as possible for Ultima Segmentum.”

It would also avoid the 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 idiocies Paul was sometimes forced to lend Catachan Jungle Fighters to, giving to 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.

**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 provided you were not near a Warp Storm or an extremely powerful psychic phenomenon, these communications were highly reliable.

Of course, these communications remained extremely slow. If you were on the same planet as your interlocutor, the debate would suffer no delay between the moment you stopped speaking and the seconds where the other man or woman began to develop 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 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 celerity 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 astropathic communications to get around the problem, but those were most often used for the intergalactic 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 Ansible of the Jovian Shipyards was such a marvel. The Tech-Priests who had examined it preferred to call it by other names like ‘Supra-Dimensional Quantum Entanglement Communicators’, but Marianne had never like the cogboys’ terms, no matter how accurate. One couldn’t underestimate how crucial this infrastructure taller than a Hive’s spire was vital 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 coming from the Throneworld 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 search whether this was true or not.

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

Marianne, being the daughter of one of the High Twelve, was among these rare 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 stopped amazing her.

“Daughter,” if they were 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 did 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 was 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 transferred as we speak,” replied her mother with a negligent wave of the hand. “Expedite your departure. I want you on our 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 one actually existed. Most of her career had been spent playing the exciting and dangerous 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 go unanswered. 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 are making possible the Imperium works more or less as intended. Now that there is one who is disposed to listen, we must intervene. The Adeptus Mechanicus has alas an advantage, but outside of technology, their field of competence wanes.”

Marianne didn’t wince, but she wanted to. What her mother was speaking about looked like to her 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 this wealthy Industrial World, alimented by recently discovered Vanadium and other heavy metals-rich Mining Worlds. “My position would be so much stronger if I can show additional incentives.”

“While in other circumstances I would acquiesce, in this instance time is really of the essence, daughter. Ophelia VII and other potential source of problems 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 form.

“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; 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 would be firmly secured for the next decades in the Senatorum Imperialis, and it was not out of the realm of possible 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 for the currency of the Mainz Sector, the Gutenberg Ducat – was a Saturnine-class ‘Freighter’ largely 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 on a 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 should 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 grants you a swift and safe journey.”

“And may He smiles on your enterprises here.”

The full irony of these last words wouldn’t be fully revealed 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 woke up. And it was strange, because she didn’t remember ever falling asleep.

Seconds later, her memory began to surge back at the forefront of her thoughts. There were many disjointed flashes, but it was sufficient to express a scream of utter loathing.

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

They were going to pay! She was not Elena Kerrigan...

Sophia’s thoughts stopped as she witnessed the impossible. Standing in front of her was now a tall young woman with vivid red hair and an extreme athletic body. She was green-eyed, and her appearance was one her mind had a lot of time to assimilate as the Callidus Temple brainwashed her.

“You can’t be here,” Sophia rushed the illusion – and it had to be an illusion! Elena Kerrigan was just a ghost, the result of thousands of psycho-indoctrination sessions and Polymorphine her body was subjected to! She wasn’t real!

A terrible blow in the chest sent her on the ground, breath knocked out.

“You are pathetic,” the red-haired woman spat, before executing a series of acrobatics Shadow Stalker had always thought beyond her and sending her flying once more when she tried to return to a fighting position on her legs.

Strangely, her body’s clothes – which looked like a variant of her old costume, weren’t damaged by the impacts. The pain each of the hits gave her was far too real, alas.

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

“If I had my crossbow-“

“You really assimilated of our training, don’t you?” the synskin-covered Apprentice retorted. “Crossbows are inferior to Neural Shredders. And a real assassin uses each and every weapon at its disposal.”

“Easy to say when you have the advantage!”

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

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

The next instant her opponent transformed into shadows. By reflex, Sophia transformed too...and screamed when a small torch of light went through her. Immediately she went corporeal again...and received an uppercut in the jaw.

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

On the crystalline floor which seemed to be the ground wherever they were, Sophia spat and tried to find some strength, but the punishment this not-her had given her had cut her breath and weakened 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 became a blade of shadows. “I am going to solve this problem once for all. I will be pure and I will deliver death.”

“You do not determine the guilty, Assassin.”

Sophia blinked. Somehow, she was sure they had been alone, the illusion-assassin and herself. But now that she was aware of her surroundings, it was evident they weren’t.

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

This was the dark knight of all dark knights. This was a king of darkness, and his fists were soaked in a red material which was certainly not syrup.

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

Sophia expected a triumphal evil laugh. Maybe there would 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 spoke, a disappointed voice arrived to their ears.

“After my son Konrad, I didn’t believe there would be other people who would see me like this.”

“Who-“

Two metres away, Elena prostrated herself.

“Your Majesty!”

Sophia wasn’t easily afraid, but right then her blood did its best to freeze in her veins. This was the God-Emperor of the Imperium? Oh-

“The one and only,” the dark knight answered like he could read each and every one of her thoughts. “And yes, I can.”

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

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

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

“You have a point,” the tall and threatening bat-colossus admitted. “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 was not voiced like it was special, but somehow, the giant...the Emperor made it special. The psycho-indoctrinated Kerrigan abandoned her prostration pause and went to stand by her side. Sophia didn’t know if she had to be glad of this or furious.

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

“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 tried to transform into shadows...and realised it didn’t work.

“My realm, my rule.” The Supreme Lord of the Imperium informed 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 watched petrified as under the endless crystalline floor, a gigantic worm of darkness was apparently trapped in a multitude of golden chains and webs.

“Yes, it is your Shard, or whatever term you want to apply to the xenos entity allowing 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 had been able to somewhat put a lid on her loathing, but the mention of Skitter was too much. How dare he-

“Because you are weak, unimaginative, cruel, and unable to resist a single second your worst impulses.” The Emperor corrected like she was a two-years-old child. “You disgust me.”

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

Her legs began to levitate over the crystals, and her body went 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 into...and there are those who don’t.”

Dark eyes pierced her, and in them Sophia saw her death.

“As it is, you are a dangerous liability, worse than the pawn of Tzeentch,” she wasn’t even able to twitch, and the godly-powerful force was getting more and more powerful. “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 nothing but your fault.”

And then there was pain. Sophia screamed.

She screamed, because the torment was too much.

She screamed because there were souls screaming. The entire universe was pain and screaming.

Oh God, it hurt! Make it stop! Make it stop!

When it finally did, the parahuman formerly known as Shadow Stalker cried with joy.

“This is a minuscule fraction of the pain I endure on the Golden Throne every day,” the Emperor commented like it was boring news. And Sophia knew she had nearly a heart attack hearing it.

“How? How...how can you...”

“Because he’s the God-Emperor,” Elena murmured.

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

The dark knight regressed. The dark armour and the terror helmet disappeared, replaced by a simple brown cloak and at last Sophia was free to watch the Master of Mankind’s face.

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

Sophia looked away. It was...it was too much. The faint golden aura surrounded Him was far less risky in comparison. It took her several seconds to return to a calmer state, and to realise the mind-which-wasn’t-her was speaking.

“Surely there are possible replacements, Lord.”

“No, they aren’t. The only one of my sons who could have possibly withstood the storm is dead and 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 tolerable.”

The voice at the end was like those of a very, very old man. And for the first time, Sophia felt real pity for this being which couldn’t be human – how do you endure such a torture for millennia? – but who definitely was no God.

“Now for you two.”

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

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

Under their feet, the gigantic worm of darkness continued 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 added. “Of course, I can always order Weaver to wipe the Temples I find offensive when she will come to Terra.”

Sophia had 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 was suddenly far more...joyous. “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 become one. Believe it or not, you have enormous potential...but you have wasted it until now. Solve this. Become something the hero you pretended to be in your world.”

There was a flash underneath, and the worm disappeared for a second, replaced by a sublime angel of shadow. The Angel of Shadows, with capital letters. But it did not last long, and the worm came back.

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

When she was escorted outside to Xanaria Lythis, there was 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 at the time he wore the colours of the Sons of Horus. It just wasn’t his specialty. Naval tactics and strategy imposed to have a certain outlook on life and opportunities, as well as a behaviour completely opposite to those 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 wasn’t the latter, he had the skills of 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.

An 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 coming 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 throw to the orange-armoured sorceress to his left. He knew it was a childish comment; after all both she and him were part of the same warband: her enemies were his enemies and his enemies were her enemies. 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 loud they are insulting each other into the aether too. No, Captain, they are certainly not united.”

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

Boros was not going to assume immediately Malicia had betrayed his warriors, but he would be a fool to not assume 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 non-existent 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 on 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 stated 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 Chtonia was not awaiting an apology, and Malicia didn’t give any. “I needed the pacts inside the Starfort to contact the Changeling and take 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 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 eighth-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 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 for several minutes empyreal breaches which would have stayed open for a couple of milliseconds. 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 particularly thankful for an easy feast of souls!”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Urum**

**Consortium Headquarters**

**Lord Commander Primus Eidolon**

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

It had been one of the rare experiences where the Lord Commander of the Emperor’s Children had truly 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 suddenly the realisation you were absolutely powerless, and the insane Chief Apothecary could do exactly what 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 lab. His fears were justified exactly three seconds later.

“GOOD MORNING TERRA!”

Eidolon screamed as a high voltage coursed through his body. Surprisingly, while his voice should have provoked 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 head,” the female being giggled.

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

“Now, now. Is it how an officer of the Third Legion call a friend?” The pronunciation of ‘friend’ was extremely familiar, and as he watched the body of his tormentor, Eidolon felt a sinking sensation in his two hearts. The thing in front of it had two legs and two arms, but its face was elongated like an Eldar, and the ears were typical of the xenos. None of the Eldar however boasted the combination of a pink tail and black hooves. And no baseline human had such a fuchsia-pink skin with black strips. Add the presence of the black horns in the silver hair, and what was 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 so long ago in the service of Slaanesh.

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 out 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 which was childish and genuine. “For the first time in an eternity, I am free!”

It was likely the case she was free from the control any superior daemon could exert upon her, if the flesh of her new body was truly protecting 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 with dear Fabius about his loyalty issues.”

Melusine raised one of her fingers innocently.

“You mean, the warband the Consortium intercepted half-dead fleeing for their lives? The warband my father convinced to join him in exchange of certain Warp-purging treatments to save their souls? The warband whose most loyal members to your cause are as we speak psycho-indoctrinated by hypnomat and reshaped to more efficient and aesthetic-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 defence fleet had been sufficiently strong to overwhelm his naval forces and the Astartes commanding them, the damage was worse by several orders of magnitude than his worst contingency planned for.

“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, a brilliant mind of Chief Apothecary transported 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 said Fabius was attracting more attention than the Phoenician, but the long silver hairs and the noble face of ancient Europa’s nobility presented 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 to prepare their damned Blight,” the fact Bile was staying calm while Melusine stared adoringly at him. “In fact, maybe I did all along and the ball of raging feelings you all called a deity continued to blind me after I rejected her and all her stupid games. And yes, I’m aware you didn’t know, my dear Eidolon. I already hypno-interrogated you hours ago.”

Somehow, this didn’t provide even a shadow of satisfaction and relief.

“But now the blinkers 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 refugee flee the conquests of the Black Legions and the other warlords. I should really send a present to Weaver and the Emperor soon...though I have no idea when the latter is. Ah, well. It’s the intention 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 outcome.”

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 weakness 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-stripped pink genetic abomination replied as her ‘father’ turned around and began to leave this lab’s section. “Now this 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 sight, Battlefleet Nyx’s status might seem perilous. Before Operation Caribbean was launched, it had only 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 confirmed, “these losses aren’t that dramatic for Battlefleet Nyx. The shipyards of Nyx have four Cruisers and eleven Light Cruisers in construction which will be completed before 300M35. The Corvette and Destroyers losses would have been erased in a couple of years, but the Fabricator-General of Mars and the major Forge Worlds are on the ranks 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 sensitive 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 in 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 the fullness of time.

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

Neither Reinhart nor any Lord of Kar Duniash had ever advertised it, but a monumental amount of firepower across Ultima Segmentum was forced to guard hundreds of Industrial, Hive, Forge, 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, could result in 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 equivalent of a xenos 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, supply and support ships. The registered destruction of the torturer-killer squadrons at Commorragh was liberating as many Battlefleets from duties which were damaging for morale in Ultima Segmentum.

And it was just in Ultima Segmentum, where his command zone was, though the Segmentum he had the 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 on that.”

“Too bad for him,” in his opinion, out of the five Lord High Admirals who had been in the contest when the time came to choose a new supreme commander – Reinhart had not been involved being a mere Admiral at the time – Rabadash y Byng el Calormen was the worst choice the bureaucrats and the staff officers of Terra could have made. To have important ties to every naval dynasty of Solar was good for politics, but in this title there was an ‘Admiral’ somewhere, and that meant the highest man or woman in uniform of the Imperial Navy had to 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 predecessor’s corpses. “And for now, he’s busy gloating in his palace 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 this 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, underestimating 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, the resources, and the manpower for the shipyards’ expansion without raising too many eyebrows. But Nyx has not a third of the voidsmen, civilian or military, 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 hate to say this, since von Kisher’s ‘Fast Battleship’ idea cost us millions of dead, I think we will face fewer consequences by axing his pet projects. His faction is collapsing apart right now, there won’t be any major opposition.”

“Assuming I do as you say, how many Battleships this would 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 it was not perfect, it was a good beginning for a Sector which had gone from complete anonymity to 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. “This is not a fight I’m looking forwards to.”

“Begin by 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 alive the last heretic bastards,” Andreas’ chief of staff answered. “The Cadian 16th reports the raiders and the heretics’ corpses are so numerous the trenches 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 have 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 no damage. The Tech-Priests have begun their reparations and estimate they will need less than two months to return to the anti-air guns and all the 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 and say the correct answer is a ‘with’.”

“Typical,” the cogboys wanted everyone to praise their culture, but when something turned wrong, apologies and question-inducing 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 mean time. It’s not like we have a lot of choice aside from Agripinaa.”

The Imperium had paid dearly from the onslaught of Black Crusades to learn that Forge Worlds, unless they were militarised to extreme degree, granted ultra-expensive protections against tech-breaking sorcery, and obtained the most powerful weapons of the Mechanicus, were ravaged in short order by the Despoiler and his legion 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 travel 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?” Andreas had scoffed before reaching the rank of General that any military man had to depend on psyker-receptive cards to plan for the future. Alas on this point the young Andreas Waldersee had been an imbecile, and his older and much wiser Governor persona used all the 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 traitors’ scouts may try to escape our vigilance.”

“Transmit the warning to the Battlegroup of Battlefleet Scarus which should be patrolling there. Hopefully, the Inquisition should have already warned them, but better two warnings than zero.”

“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 is highly needed.”

“How many can I recall?” He was a Cadian, he wasn’t going to play the game with someone who had played this game 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 and will arrive within the next four years. Battlefleet Cadia will also be reinforced and the Reinforcement Directive for Battlefleet Scarus and Agripinaa can be activated on your order.”

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

But he would have preferred having the sixty other percent of the Cadian regiments dispersed across the Imperium. 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 other 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 highly likely going to be right, 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 millennia later, and the soil 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 search 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 in binary to the Tech-Priests accompanying him, sending a last look of pity to the shape of metal which might have at one point be an Imperial tank. So great was the damage that not Tokyo-Theta-4’s expertise allowed him to answer with certainty which type of war engine it had been once ago. 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 would roll on a grand battlefield bringing revenge and vindication beyond death. “Unless the other groups have found something particularly noteworthy, transmit all of them are to converge upon the ruins of Choral City.”

“Permission to bring some specialised machines in 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 Legions.”

“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’s 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 them.

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 with great precaution the space beacons of quarantine, there had been several prizes of importance secured. The largest was a scout destroyer bearing the Raven Guard Legion that over a third of enginseers were busy repairing so that he 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, many terribly damaged armours, helmet 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 was consisting 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 off 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 left 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 chances of achieving success in this endeavour were incredibly slim, but the Adeptus Mechanicus was not abandoning at the first obstacle. And yet as his Lander flew over the devastation of what had been in distant past the capital of a world, he knew he would have to hope Lady Weaver was satisfied by 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 said after observing the map. “Our mapping augurs have located a more interesting opening 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 uneasiness, that both Magos and subordinates were all certain was not their cogitators and auspexes playing tricks for them.

For more than two hours they explored in vain, meeting 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 armoury could be restored to a fraction of their previous intact condition without melting everything 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 type 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 one 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 shortest 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!” the Magos interrupted before his second said something bordering on the heretekal. “Look! The adamantium sarcophagus looks relatively intact. And the twelfth-blessed Atomantic field generator isn’t emitting radiations, therefore it can still be 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 amazed 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 Aquilas are 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 instrument of music 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 thought about the possibility of a joke...but there weren’t non-Tech-Priests aside from their psyker, and the fact that in 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 IN CENTURIES.”

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 MASTER OF RITES. I AM ANCIENT RYLANOR OF THE THIRD LEGION, AND I WAS TOLD 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 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 are involved.”

“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 was 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 her.

“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 didn’t disappear, but a faint smile was not far from his face.

“At least you aren’t easily discouraged.” The half-bald Priest of the God-Emperor commented. “I will transmit your letter to the Cardinal. I was not informed how Lady Weaver intend to recruit potential aspirants of 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 do any promises about.”

“It’s already far more than I dreamed 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 advices before you depart.”

The eyes were suddenly more piercing and the body 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 a 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. And 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 years-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, this was the Grand Architect herself next to the entrance!”

Ajax rolled his eyes. Weeks of hard work had not decreased at all his brother’s urge to say idiocies.

“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 two hundred metres away in a crowd! How do 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 on 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 than marble blocks in the future ‘grand avenue’ of the Hagia Sanguinala.

“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 upon had been closed – rumour had been you could apply to work somewhere in another Hive’s foundries, but with their mother ill and alone it 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 workers wanted for a lot of jobs, some specialised and requiring hundreds of hours of artisanship, but plenty of others demanded only you to 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 where 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 about it and they were paid three hundred and fifty Thrones Gelts each per month. They had also two set of brand-new clothes in 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 was roughly a hundred-plus young men and women working under the stern eyes of Overseer Justinian. It was possible there were more than two of them more in 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-casts propaganda. At this rhythm, 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**

**Watch-master Tertius Alphonsikas Flint**

The grox steak was literally melting on his tongue it was delicious!

“Flint, are you paying attention to what I was saying?”

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 Watch-master Primus Titus Belenos, was saying.

“Our docks will have the contract to build a new Destroyer,” the Watch-master 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 bad now. He used the moment of respite to munch 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. This had not been the best moment of his career. And the fact he should really have seen it coming wasn’t helping.

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 in 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 have three times the number of cogboys we have too!”

“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 drug smuggling now. There is still time to wean the addicts.”

The last parts of grox meat disappeared in mouth, and this was good, because Alphonsikas was appreciating less and less this lunch.

“This is my men we’re speaking about. My men, my rules.”

“Your men, your rules,” Titus Belenos replied solemnly. “And 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 Watch-master Tertius said while abandoning near-empty plate and indigestible conversation. “I’m not hungry anymore.”