Weaver Option Teaser 28 June 2020

**Extermination Interlude**

**Commorragh Delenda Est**

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

*If evidence was once more needed of how far we had fallen, the survivors of this massacre and the Webway factions not involved in the fighting were simply unable to give temporary estimates of how many lives the Second Fall had cost.*

*Several Farseers spoke of very vague numbers for cycles, but ultimately, we had to use the human estimates, which for all their imperfections, at least could be reasonably thought to be minimal casualty lists.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*It was a new Age which dawned on the millions of Aeldari disunited across the galaxy. And one we had to accept where we would not play the leading roles.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Oh, my name?*

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

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

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**‘DRAZHAR’**

**‘THE LIVING BLADE’**

**‘THE HIGH EXECUTIONER’**

**ELITE ASSASSIN**

**EXTREMIS-PHYSICAL THREAT**

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

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

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

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

“*The number of decorations, rewards, and celebrations the Battle of Commorragh generated among the Imperium of Mankind was properly phenomenal. The seven Stars of Terra and the two Lions of Terra were what the history manuals emphasized, but there were plenty of commemorative medals, street naming, and monuments for everyone. As a consequence, the fact the Imperial Navy has failed to give the name of Augustus von Kisher to a single starship, no matter the administration in charge, proved that the issue of the ‘Fast Battleships’ was not one a lot of Lord Admirals and naval commanders felt ready to forget*...” Extract from the *Price of Victory* by Victor II Cain, 001M41.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**Twenty Minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

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

**Inquisitorial Acolyte Crixus Taft**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The true Gerard Barlow? The man was enjoying the hospitality of Arbites cells back somewhere in Nyx Tertius. This was what happened when your own superiors and the Nyx government had the evidence you had pilfered in the tithe coffers and laundered money you weren’t supposed to even look at in the first place.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The agent of the Nyx Conclave had made this realisation when the group all revealed cruel daggers which had been hidden by the golden trays they carried and a heretical battle-cry was shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!”

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

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

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

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

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

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Craftworld Malan’tai**

**Mark of Commorragh**

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

Maea woke up screaming.

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

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

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

The visions didn’t stop.

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

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

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

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

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

“DORN LIVES!”

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

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

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

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

But she never heard the laughter of the Dark Prince.

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

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

There was no maw to welcome the dead, for Slaanesh was ***gone***.

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

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

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

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

**The Eye of Terror**

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

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

**Mark of Commorragh**

**Lord Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

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

But for all its secrecy and its tendency about executing the Captains who proposed too little in exchange of their services, nobody doubted Sha’are Mavet was a very minor Hell Forge. The zone where it could be found wasn’t strategically valuable, or had the blessing to suffer less from the Warp-tides causing rampant mutations among slaves and non-slaves on the surface. Its shipyards weren’t able to build Battleships or Grand Cruisers, and should their depots be opened and the weapons inside be counted one by one, Iskandar doubted he would find enough to arm two hundred Space Marines and five hundred thousand mortals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something had happened to Slaanesh and it was...

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Andes System**

**Andes I**

**Five minutes after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Brigadier-General Tao Shujia**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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