**Extinction 11-5**

**Avengers**

*I will arrive too late.*

*I know it.*

*The practical, now that my forces have broken through the first fortresses, is obvious.*

*The Iron Warrior rearguards have fortified hundreds of worlds, and the Word Bearers have added their strength to theirs by preparing countless traps with their never-enough cursed daemonancy.*

*We are crushing these Astartes and the Traitors gathering behind them.*

*We are destroying dozens of capital ships, liberating the enslaved populations forced to work themselves to death in many major shipyards, and as the rumours of our victories spread, offsetting our losses with ships long-believed lost in the Ruinstorm.*

*Provided we can keep up this momentum, I can make the theoretical that we will have liberated over two-thirds of Ultima Segmentum in the next ten standard months.*

*It should be welcome news.*

*It really isn't.*

*Time, this force even our genitor is powerless against, is slipping through my fingers and working for Horus and his Traitors.*

*It should not be so.*

*I have studied the moves of the Traitor I won't call brother any longer.*

*For all the immediate advantages given to him by the victories in the Isstvan System, Horus failed to exploit them through the conquest of many important Clusters and sub-fractions of the Imperium, instead throwing everyone who fell for his lies against the walls of Segmentum Solar and the Imperial Fists defending them.*

*As a result, even in Obscurus, the Segmentum which has suffered most from his treacherous deeds, he has only a limited number of nodes under his* *control.*

*He can lose all of them within a decade if my theoretical about the losses they took at Beta-Garmon before pushing for Terra is accurate.*

*Horus has lost the war.*

*His actions are madness incarnate.*

*And none of it provides any reasons to rejoice, for if ultimate victory is denied to him, the treacherous Warmaster still has the will and the strength to destroy the homeworld of our species before I arrive.*

*Sometimes as I retire after a day of battle, I dare to hope.*

*But the numbers don't lie.*

*It is three loyal Legions against nine, and in warships and other military forces, the calculus is even worse for my brothers.*

*Dorn is a master of defence. The Khan can strike like lightning itself. And Sanguinius is Sanguinius.*

*They have billions of valiant soldiers under their command, and years to fortify Terra.*

*But the Traitors have committed over ninety percent of their theoretical remaining order of battle to besieging the Cradle of Mankind.*

*They have emptied whole Fortress Worlds to the last man and woman. Whole fronts have collapsed after only a show of force because entire Armies have been recalled by Perturabo and Mortarion.*

*And for all its madness, their strategy is proving effective.*

*I will arrive too late.*

*I hope I'm wrong.*

*I hope somehow, Dorn has been able to think of something that will decimate the might of the Sixteenth and the Fourth Legions before they can land on the soil of Terra.*

*But each time I calculate the numbers, these hopes are dying.*

*The muster which destroyed the Ork threat on Ullanor was small compared to the one the Traitor Warmaster has rallied around him to accomplish this perfidy.*

*I may arrive too late.*

*But if I can't arrive in time brothers...*

*I swear it, on everything I've ever held dear.*

*If I can't arrive in time to save you, Terra, and father...I will avenge you.*

*I, Roboute Guilliman, Primarch of the Ultramarines, Lord of Macragge, Master of whatever remains of the Five Hundred Worlds...*

*I will avenge you.*

*No matter what it takes.*

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

Thought for the day: Follow the Emperor, and the glory of victory shall be yours.

**Lord Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

Iskandar had never believed himself to be a very sentimental warrior, but he couldn't help but grimace slightly when walking past the debris which had a while ago been rare minor xenos artefacts decorating one of the avenues leading to the main bridge. The items had been seized by pure chance from the collections of an Imperial world during one of their campaigns out of the Eye of Terror, and though they were of minor importance, there had been some hidden potential that waited to be revealed under the right circumstances. Since these trophies weren't dangerous per se, they had been placed under secure wards here, waiting for their most interesting aspects to be activated.

Apparently, this moment would never come.

Iskandar didn't know if it was the agony of Khaine, the power of Sacrifice, or some other overwhelming and destructive force that was responsible, but the artefacts were reduced to tiny fragments, utterly devoid of any trace of psychic activity.

It was a real waste, and not just because it was one more secret denied to his curiosity.

Wordlessly, the Lord Vigilator indicated to the three-armed overseer that he and his mutants could remove the mess. There was nothing to salvage, and the danger was minimal that even one of the wretches he could see trying to hide away from his eyes would provoke something disastrous.

Sighing softly, Iskandar returned to the bridge, where the damage had already been cleared away, though of course the wards and some of the more...esoteric protections still needed to be replaced. And they would, though it likely would take a lot of effort.

Ezekyle, however, had not moved a single step since his departure.

His brother was still examining the severed head of what had been an Eldar God.

An examination which was conducted silently and without touching, a frown of concentration on his face.

"Quite an interesting piece of evidence, isn't it?" The Lord of the Black Legion asked rhetorically once he was by his side. "We have before our eyes the proof a God can indeed die..."

"Honestly, Ezekyle...I would have preferred not to experience such an *interesting event*." Iskandar cleared his throat to express his disapproval. "We have several large compartments, including this bridge, which were consumed by the aura of murder of that xenos deity. The clean-up of this mess is going to take ages, and I'm not even talking about the rivers of blood the bolter-fodder spilled. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I preferred crystalline statues and angel-themed apparitions. They were a bitter reminder of our failure during the Siege, but at least they didn't push our slaves and the rest of our servants into a murderous frenzy."

The damage to the *Vengeful Spirit* had been relatively light, given how bad the intervention of the Gods and their enemies had been. But at least that was over now. The apparitions of blood and mayhem inciting the foolish mortals to experience war and murder? They were going to be way harder to remove from the Gloriana Battleship...assuming they could be removed.

"True," his brother kept his eyes on the decapitated head of Khaine, who, even in death, was scowling. "But that wasn’t the question you returned to ask me."

"Why didn't you kill her?"

A chuckle escaped the lips of the Warmaster.

"What makes you think that I have that power?"

"Please, brother...I have seen you fight things way more dangerous than that...angelic effigy of the Ninth Primarch. You could have, and you should have."

"Totally incorrect for the latter, and partially true for the former," Ezekyle Abaddon answered with an amused expression. "Could I have killed Weaver? Yes, but not permanently. Be it in a year or a hundred by the entropy governing the galaxy outside our prison, she would have returned. And then the trap would be sealed."

"The trap?"

"Think about the symbolism, brother. I was, no matter how far I have walked away from it, a warrior of the Sixteenth Legion. I waited until it died before the Black Legion rose to wage the Long War, but I was a son of Horus...and our father, in the end, slew Sanguinius. And Weaver is the inheritor of the Blood Angels' legacy...and *Sacrifice*."

Now that it was pointed out, Iskandar Khayon wanted to kick himself in the head for not noticing it himself.

"Should you have fought her seriously..." his knowledge and experience were enough to get a very bad feeling where it would lead. "I suppose it would be an eternal cycle of conflict between the Black Legion and the Successors of the Ninth? Though there isn't a Ninth Legion anymore, so the symbolism is weakened..."

"Brother, the key word is that there's not a rebirth of the Ninth Legion *yet*."

The Lord Vigilator of the Black Legion didn't like the sound of that at all. When it was analysed in strategic terms, there was no doubt that the breaking of the Legions which had remained loyal to the False Emperor had been an enormous boon to the Black Legion and all warbands committed to fight in the Long War.

"There will be more questions, and I will answer them when the Ezekarion is present to hear my words...but I will answer truthfully and without evading your first question now."

"Oh?"

That was certainly going to be good.

"The first and most important reason I didn't attempt to kill Weaver is because she is going to rid us of *Lorgar*."

Iskandar Khayon had excellent self-control, but even he, hearing this, couldn't hide his utter astonishment.

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*Our cousins are in dire need of a history lesson.*

*And who better than I, the magnificent Duke Sliscus, to give it to them?*

*Yes, yes. If you've found this treatise, I'm most likely dead.*

*So what?*

*The Craftworlds' holy and pretentious Farseers often lead cohorts of dead warriors onto the battlefields of this boring galaxy.*

*Why wouldn't I let you profit from my vast and superior knowledge before I return to more pleasurable activities like getting several Princesses pregnant with my seed?*

*Let's begin with the most important lesson.*

*Our history is dreadfully incomplete, and the Gods of our Pantheon – most are dead by now, if you were sleeping during the last few millennia – are not and never were our friends.*

*All the Aeldari Gods were created for one sole purpose, and this purpose is War.*

*Yes, all of them.*

*Vaul was created to forge the weapons the Aeldari armies would need to win impossible battles. Asuryan was the God-King and Supreme General of our race's Hosts. Morai-Heg would make sure the life-energy of our souls wouldn't go straight into the belly of a C'Tan.*

*Millions of years and uncountable prayers couldn't change that fact.*

*At their heart, the Gods remained as the Old Ones wanted them to be. A thin veneer of honour and boredom was plastered over their divine essences, but that was all.*

*Ultimately, the Gods should have reminded us who and what we were.*

*But it was only Khaine which stayed true to its purpose.*

*It was corrupted by the Nightbringer at several dark moments of the legendary first conflict, yes.*

*But in the end, Khaine always rejects corruption, sooner or later.*

*Do you know why, my dears?*

*Because Khaine is a marvellous, crazy, bloodthirsty warmonger.*

*And if the Last Emperor and his mother had had any pride, they would have worshipped the Bloody-Handed God.*

*They would have made us the children of Khaine.*

*We would have made the fall of the Empire a truly bloody spectacle, one dooming us to acknowledging this truth: that there is only war.*

*But they chose Excess.*

*And so from the luminous balconies of Craftworld palaces to the dark pits of Commorragh, we are the children of Isha.*

*And we forgot everything about our past.*

*Children of Isha...it is a truth. But it also proves they ignore* the *truth.*

*Isha is a many-faced Goddess. Yes, she is, in many ways, the Mother. She is the deity of Fertility, Harvest, and Healing.*

*But does anyone today really pause and consider WHY she was made so?*

*It wasn't because the Old Ones loved our cheerful personalities so much, I assure you.*

*No, Isha was like that because it was her role to maintain enormous numbers for our elite armies. The more Aeldari warriors to send to the battlefield, the better. The faster one Aeldari fighter was healed, the quicker he or she returned to the battlefield.*

*But even that wasn't enough.*

*When the Yngir began to overwhelm the Old Ones' fortress-refuges no matter how ingenious the stratagems put in place to stop them, Isha was used for a far more direct role.*

*Female Aeldari warriors, after all, were far too valuable to consider taking them away from a battlefield for the time it took them to live through their pregnancy.*

*It was far better to use artificial methods under Isha's guidance.*

*Ha! Ha! Ha! I can almost hear your revulsion now. Yes, the vat-grown Drukhari of today are the legacy of the Aeldari Empire in its first iterations.*

*Yes, yes, your denials, though I can't see them, are...simply delicious.*

*But yes, the technologies many Haemonculi of Commorragh are using in these troubled times were invented and taught by Isha.*

*There are many differences, of course. The Priesthood of the three-faced Goddess could create perfect Aeldari, beings who boasted the same psychic potential and skill as their trueborn cousins. Such is no longer the case today.*

*For all our claims, we have lost as much if not more than the Craftworlds during the Fall.*

*Where was I going before feeling this urge to mutilate your body? Oh, yes.*

*Isha.*

*Isha and why no one of today should call himself or herself a child of Hers.*

*It isn't sufficient to acknowledge her Aspect of Mother. You have to embrace the analytical mind to improve the materials, be they made of flesh or of wraithbone, the cold-blooded Creator.*

*And you have to burn with the fires of vengeance.*

*Because, yes, when the cycles of life and death came in quick succession during the War Which Tore the Heavens Apart, the only thing to pray for was not for Hope, Love, or any of these naive delusions.*

*Our ancestors needed the passion to continue past any faint dream of victory the Phoenix Throne may have once had.*

*This is why, I, Sliscus, doubt we will see any child born in this day and age rise to the name many fools have embraced in the depths of their ignorance.*

*They are simpletons yearning for the love of a mother.*

*But what their long-missing Goddess would likely deliver them, upon returning, would be the wrath of a long-denied Avenger.*

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**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Aurelia Malys vanished in a flash of fuchsia and green.

Taylor was alone.

The purification of the crystal, now with the experience gained in the last several hours, was simplicity itself.

Her fingers touched the crystal.

*She is the High Priestess of Isha*.

*Of all the Muses, save perhaps the Queen of Blades, she was the only one to see the peril hedonism and decadence represented for the Phoenix Court and the Empire as a whole.*

*She is the second oldest Muse, and her network of informants is proportional to her age. Nothing unexpected when as part of her vows to Isha, she has served in thousands of roles, from Wraithbone-singer to Supreme Autarch of the Vengeance Fleet. She was and still is a mother, and her children and grandchildren are legion.*

*Unlike the servants of Kurnous, who believe waiting in their sacred woods for the storm to pass, the Muse is far more willing to take direct political action.*

*But her efforts are in vain.*

*Indolence has already won, and when vibrant speeches are made, it is often done in front of a sleeping assembly...when there is an assembly at all.*

*Giving up at the first setback is not a flaw of the Priestesses of Isha, however.*

*And so there is a succession of unconventional attempts to stop the steady grip of madness contaminating Aeldari society.*

*Great rituals are made to summon the Goddess into existence, to break Asuryan's edict and force the Phoenix Court to realise the ongoing disaster.*

*The Gods don't answer. And the other plans fail one after another.*

*Cycle after cycle, the ranks of Isha's Priestesses begin their descent into oblivion.*

*When Malekith ascends to the Phoenix Throne, the High Priestess knows the time for peaceful measures is over.*

*The Uldanesh noble is the symbol of everything that is wrong with the Aeldari Empire of these times...but approaching him is impossible, even for someone of her talents.*

*She will need an army.*

*Fortunately, part of her duties of High Priestess is to know where some of the most dangerous and vital weapons for the defence of the Empire are kept.*

*Hyper-sophisticated vats have been stored in anticipation of another titanic conflict with the Yngir, so that under Isha's guidance, the Aeldari may have a chance against the star-devourers and their phalanxes of undying automatons.*

*And so the High Priestess travels to Commorragh with her last loyal subordinates.*

*Though the city too is on its way to becoming a succession of hedonistic nightmares, it is not there yet...but that isn't the problem.*

*The problem is that for all the precautions made by the High Priesthood to keep these treasures of the War in Heaven secret and secure, a sybarite noble has been able to locate them and, using dark prayers, break through the ancient protections.*

*To regain what rightfully belongs to Isha, the High Priestess and her followers have no choice but to slaughter the thieves.*

*At long last, the first vat-grown Aeldari are born. But those are imperfect once decanted.*

*Something is deeply wrong. Many of these Aeldari succumb faster to hedonism and corruption than those who were born from an Aeldari womb.*

*The High Priestess, trying not to succumb to despair, notices that there are many psy-relics which have been stolen from the original vaults. Maybe recovering them is the key.*

*There are many thieves in Commorragh, and once again the ever-dwindling Priesthood of Isha goes to war.*

*Sometimes they use their own blades; sometimes they unleash the flawed creations which came out of the vats.*

*But once they return to the labs, the results are always unsatisfactory.*

*Each attempt generates its own lot of malformed horrors, and the 'Aeldari' born this way...there are a few gems, Aeldari who understand how important it is to live while respecting the Gods. But most are not like that.*

*The High Priestess can only despair when for cycle after cycle, tens of thousands of vat-born Aeldari join the ranks of Commorragh denizens...and encourage, not diminish the hedonistic behaviour of the nobility ruling the Webway city.*

*It is a vicious cycle.*

*It is one which leads to damnation.*

*Unlike some other Muses, there is no obvious moment where the High Priestess snaps.*

*But when many cycles later, the summons come from the Phoenix Court, there is no denying that Ynesth, the High Priestess of Isha, has embraced Excess.*

*And the Dark Gods laugh, for unable to understand how far she has fallen, the Muse still believes she is the best solution to end Malekith's reign.*

*How much of this is madness and how much is her arrogance will never be fully determined.*

*The only thing certain is that Ynesth is the one to volunteer to fight the Queen of Blades first.*

*As much as she has honed her skills during her tenure as High Priestess, this is a fight she can't win.*

*Ynesth is dying on the black sands of the arena before anyone in the public can ask out loud how much one is willing to gamble on the outcome.*

*But when the Queen of Blades is banished after the last lesson handed out to Hekatii, Ynesth is not dead for long.*

*Morathi, as a final mockery, decides to use some of the same machinery dating from the War in Heaven to reincarnate her a final time...all for the amusement of Slaanesh, of course.*

*Corrupted beyond redemption, the twisted arcane resurrection device does its work...and when the cocoon-shaped vat opens once more, it is to welcome the arrival of a true monster into this galaxy.*

*Ynesth the Dark Genesis is born, and the living races of this galaxy will have a trillion reasons to curse the legacy of the Aeldari Empire.*

To say watching and listening to this story of an Aeldari fall to Chaos had been pleasant would be a lie.

On the one hand, the High Priestess had clearly tried to prevent her race from falling to Chaos.

Something that even Aenaria Eldanesh had failed to do, when it came down to it. It was true the Queen of Blades had saved her fellow long-ears too many times for her to be blamed for it; after all, one being couldn't prevent billions or trillions of individuals from making stupid choices except by killing them.

On the other hand, at no point had the High Priestess realised that Slaanesh was toying with her. That her last attempt to undo the damage was damnation-in-the-making, not salvation. That everything in the vaults of Commorragh had already been corrupted and should be put to the torch, not used.

There weren't a lot of choices left now that Aurelia was gone. Trying to locate the Astronomican here would be like ringing the dinner bell for all the predators of the Eye of Terror and-

"You are hesitating."

The crystal became transparent before exploding, revealing Ynesth in all her glory. This was the High Priestess of Isha as she had been before being corrupted: long red hair the colour of a young fire, black eyes seemingly containing the light of old stars themselves, and a body which clearly belonged to a warrior. Her skin was not ivory or silvery; it was as if it had merged with Auramite.

And yes, obviously, she was naked.

For once, it didn't bother Taylor. In her memories, she had seen what the Dark Genesis looked like, and the most flattering thing one could say was that there had been uglier Haemonculi killed at Commorragh. Everything was preferable to something like that.

"I am. Forgive me for my bluntness, Muse...but I was far more sympathetic to some parts of the story of Lhilitu. The beginning of your tale, I could approve of. But after you arrived at Commorragh, your actions weren't a cure. They were the disease."

And the symbolism was incredibly obvious. Ynesth had participated in making Commorragh an irredeemable pit of monsters. And millennia later, the insect-mistress had played a major role where the annihilation of the Dark City was concerned.

"I realise that now." Ynesth surprisingly agreed before stepping forwards. "I was...I was arrogant. We were all arrogant. We were the Priestesses of Isha, weren't we? We were convinced our Goddess was still protecting us. That she was smiling upon our actions. We believed our sacrifices would be vindicated in the end. But they weren't."

"Well, she paid a terrible price for it." And that was likely the understatement of the century, bravo Taylor.

"She continues to pay for it," Ynesth corrected. "While most of what I learned after my penultimate death is vague or absent, the Princess of Excess took great pleasure to inform me that Isha took refuge in the Garden of Decay so that the Doom of the Aeldari could not devour her too."

"I see." That was an interesting piece of information to have. Unfortunately, it wasn't likely anyone would ever be in a position to exploit it. Hell, in many ways, it made things more complicated. If Isha had been 'kidnapped' by Nurgle, her order to 'give back everything' would likely have been enough to free the Goddess Ynesth worshipped long ago. But since she had run into the Domain of Nurgle of her own volition...

"I see." The Lady General repeated. No wonder the clowns of Cegorach were so prompt to replay the tragedies of their own race. They really screwed up like no other race had ever done before them. "And I suppose you have a proposal?"

"Let me atone for my mistakes." The Muse replied. "I will sacrifice my life and the power gained from it will lead you where you need to go once you will have escaped this Warp prison. This world where you have landed? There are ruins nearby of a Temple dedicated to Isha. There were many loyal souls there before...before I betrayed them all."

"And the drawbacks of that method?"

"You will gain...a new Aspect."

"By Aspect, you mean I will be able to gain your craft in rejuvenating and giving birth to your species?"

"More than that...far more than that, my Empress. You will gain my essence and the memories I will duplicate of my time before everything turned to ash...only unlike the young High Priestess you just imbued with Lhilitu's essence, you are a Demigoddess. Your appearance is not so limited compared to her anymore. You will become...something new."

"That still sounds too simple."

"If you weren't Empress and you didn't have something to assimilate me inside you with, it wouldn't work. For better or worse, I am an Aeldari. You were not. But thanks to the abnormalities of recent events, the rules have proven...surprisingly flexible."

"I understand." She curtly nodded as the ancient being came so close to her their bodies almost touched. "Your **Sacrifice**...should the impossible become indeed possible, I will tell the tale I know to your people so that they may remember it. Do you have anything to add?"

"A last request, actually," Ynesth bared her teeth.

"What sort of request?" A mischievous Eldar was rumoured to be a headache, and this one had been far more powerful than the average monster...

The Muse was incredibly fast; before she could try to stop her, Taylor found that her hands were touching the Auramite perfection of Ynesth's body in a very intimate manner.

And it felt...right.

"Oh, I just want you to, the first time you use your new Aspect, show it to the Queen of Blades...and make sure a lot of people are there to enjoy her surprise."

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**Cataclysm of Macragge**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Magna Macragge Theatre**

**Surviving Word Bearers: 4,777**

**Living Primarchs: 2**

**Chaos Spawns: 0**

**Surviving numbers of the Lost and the Damned: approximately 666,000**

**Chaos Knights: 15**

**Surviving Ultramarines and Successors Present: 302**

**Other Loyalist Space Marines: 713**

**Surviving Ultramar Auxilia: approximately 830,000**

**Imperial Guard reinforcements: approximately 27,000,000 (first wave, second wave, and third wave)**

**Loyalist Imperial Knights: 90**

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Optio** **Septimus Gracchus**

"*Not today*."

For several seconds, the Angel and the Arch-Traitor stayed still.

They were like statues as the Traitors died under the relentless spider and Space Marine assault.

It was like watching a huge pillar of evil towering over a fire of gold and red.

The heretical mace and the holy crystalline sword were stalemated.

It was difficult to breathe.

And then they moved.

The first clash shook the shrine, and Septimus Gracchus felt himself being thrown back.

But as he was cast aside like a twig in one of Macragge's storms, his eyes remained on the duel.

Or rather, what his eyes could perceive of it.

The weapon of the Living Saint was so fast it was only really visible when it met the Arch-Heretic's own, and even then...there were flashes of crystal which made it seem like an illusion.

All the while, neither the gold-and-ruby shining Angel nor the fiend had moved a single finger's width away from their original positions.

That brutally changed without warning.

There was an enormous shockwave, and then the Optio of the Ultramar Auxilia realised they hadn't yet *seriously* begun to fight.

An entire wall of darkness materialised behind the Arch-Heretic. The loyal servant of the God-Emperor created an army of crystal insects without any gesture. Flames of gold burned, forbidding the Damned One from advancing further towards the Shrine.

The two enemies had taken each other's measure.

And now they escalated.

Septimus believed himself courageous and brave.

But when the storms of the light and heresy clashed, he, like every Auxilia survivor, ran to take cover behind one of the intact statues.

They had sworn an oath, but at the moment, they were more useless than the stupid speeches of the Prefects after the military parades they had endured in the last several months.

There was another powerful explosion, one which again made him fear for the integrity of the entire structure, as the damaged ceiling began to lose more and more marble pieces, and some of them were quite massive.

And in the middle of this devastation, the Living Saint and the Arch-Heretic began to soar.

The Angel of the God-Emperor was flying on her golden-red wings.

The Arch-Heretic was...the Damned was flying too, Septimus guessed, but it looked/seemed more as if it was swimming in a sort of black miasma...and the Optio quickly looked away, because there were *things* in that darkness, *things* that made him really afraid.

The duel accelerated and grew more violent as they gained height.

There were no more insults or challenges. Save the explosions and the noise of the weapons meeting each other, they were fighting in silence.

It was both terrible and beautiful.

The clashes shook the very foundations of the Fortress of Hera.

And the moment the Angel rose above the ceiling level, it was like looking at a pyre of golden flames and crystals.

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Macragge City**

**Battle-Brother Marx Fischer**

Battle-Brother Marx Fisher of the Black Templars had not been pleased when the Marshal had ordered that he would support the guardsmen with his arms and will instead of fighting side by side with the rest of the Crusade.

But now the Astartes veteran understood.

It had been a test of his faith.

Unlike many battle-brothers, Marx had not been blessed to arrive in time to participate in the fighting at Commorragh. But the guardsmen he was fighting with had.

"CULTISTS INCOMING!" He roared as another heretic leader raised an accursed object some one hundred metres away. "We need-"

The entire street disappeared in a rain of blood, and countless abominations rose from the pools of red liquid which hadn't been there a moment ago.

"STAND FIRM! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

Marx's chainsword immediately plunged into the throat of one of the daemons before claiming another kill. And then another.

Unfortunately, the heretics were calling up the monsters faster than he was slaying them...

"Where are the snipers? I want this heretic's skull blasted apart!"

"They're coming, Sir! There's only-"

One enormous statue of the Primarch of the Ultramarines – a life-sized one, as far as Marx could judge – chose this moment to collapse...right onto the position the heretics' leadership were using.

The Black Templar thanked the God-Emperor for this superbly opportune intervention, and redoubled his attacks on the red-skinned abominations.

"They're getting weaker," Marx grunted while slaying six more daemons, "I think we will be able to push for the Ceramite Manufactorum again soon."

"Sir, we were slaughtered the last time we tried to reclaim it. It's an excellent defensive position!"

"Yes..." the son of Dorn was forced to agree. "Unlike many locations in this city, it was built by some faithful and loyal mind."

But there had been no time to inquire where they had to take position before the heretics struck and the walls fell. The reconnaissance units had arrived too late, and by the time they were finally on site, the Ceramite Manufactorum was conquered by the Archenemy.

"Where are the tanks I requested?" Marx demanded when the daemonic tide was no more and his chainsword had claimed around twenty more heretic skulls. "We need a proper armoured fist to remove the heretics from their new stronghold!"

"I'm sorry Sir, but the latest tank column was seen rushing eastwards! Command relays their apologies...but they have to prioritize dealing with heretic super-heavies."

Marx gritted his teeth, but said nothing. If there really were super-heavies threatening a breakthrough eastwards, he couldn't blame the guardsmen for choosing to divert their reserves there. The accursed Traitor Seventeenth Legionnaires were damned in the eyes of everything holy, per the will of the God-Emperor, but only an imbecile would deny that they had corrupted relics of the Great Crusade to kill thousands of Faithful with.

"Artillery?"

"It's coming within ten minutes. At least a battery of Basilisks, Sir."

"I would have preferred some thrice-blessed Sphinxes."

And not just because Her Celestial Highness had participated in the design of those noble war machines. The Sphinxes would have brought a heavier payload of destruction down upon the heretics' heads, which would be incredibly useful to obliterate the heretics crawling inside the Ceramite Manufactorum.

"We need to advance and take positions around the ruined museum."

"Sir, may I remind you that-"

"I have no intention to charge again, Lieutenant," doing it once had been more than enough. Not only would Marx currently be busy explaining to the God-Emperor why he had failed to fulfil his battle-oath had it not been for his brand-new Power Armour, but the incident had forced him to assess for many minutes the massive differences between fighting with his battle-brothers and fighting with guardsmen. "But as you can see, when we're not keeping an eye on the heretics, they clearly come up with new ideas. Ideas which result in deadly and abominable surprises for the Faithful, including us."

"I can't argue with that," the Nyxian man coughed behind his helmet, and Marx felt somewhat uncomfortable, because as the dirty and damaged carapace armour became visible through the cloud of dust, it was incredibly clear even guardsmen officers' equipment was inferior to the blessed power armour he took for granted. "Very well, Sir, I will give-"

Everyone stopped speaking or moving at this moment, for over their heads, for the first time, the dark skies seemed to lose whatever potent sorcery they were ensorcelled with.

And no less than three of his heartbeats later, to their north it was as if a beacon of the God-Emperor Himself had been lit.

"By the Golden Throne!"

Marx recited a prayer of salvation, for yes, indeed, the Golden Throne of Terra be praised.

They had endured the storm.

The heretics had unleashed everything they had, but now the God-Emperor had heard their prayers and intervened to punish the Traitors.

"Remember! No Pity! No Remorse! No Fear! DEATH TO THE HERETICS! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

"FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

**Above the Fortress of Hera**

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

If she hadn't travelled to the *Vengeful Spirit* before fighting the Traitor Primarch, this duel would likely have ended in her defeat.

Of course, if she hadn't gone to the Eye of Terror, her chances of arriving in time to prevent the Primarch of the Word Bearers from sacking the Fortress of Hera and defiling Roboute Guilliman's corpse would have been extremely low.

As it was, her arrival had been 'just in time'. One minute later, and the insect-mistress knew she would have been too late.

This was just an afterthought.

Taylor struck with every part of her strength, and with what had happened to her recently, it was a fantastic amount of power.

She hadn't had time to verify it, but she knew that with what had imbued her, she could now manipulate tiny objects of fragile crystal without breaking them in one hand, while bending plasteel in the other.

Between the Shard of the Sanguinor, the last echo of Sanguinius' death, and Ynesth's last gift, Taylor was...

She was *complete*.

She wasn't going to use the words 'as she was destined to be', because the parahuman woman wasn't sure the Emperor, for all his precognitive abilities, had seen *that* coming.

"Why are you fighting for him? He does not care about you! You are just a weapon he will discard the moment he no longer has a use for!"

Taylor evaded the sorcery attack which smelled like carrion and excrement to her senses, and counterattacked.

There was no point wasting her saliva here. Lorgar was going to die.

Strike.

Counter-strike.

The mace missed her by a hair. The super-reflexes were really something priceless. Too bad everything else didn't come with a manual, and this battle was the wrong place and the wrong time to start experimenting with her new skills.

"He will sacrifice you in the end, like he intended to sacrifice us!"

Taylor giggled, and for all the wind gusts around them and her helmet smothering the sound of her throat, the Traitor Primarch heard it.

"YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY?"

Strike.

Strike.

Avoiding the enormous mace again.

And yes, it was funny.

Lorgar was already dying. Drawing the power he did right now was killing him. The Lady General didn't know who had given him the wounds able to bypass the super-regeneration, though given the 'taste' of it, her bet was on Elena Kerrigan aka Sophia Hess. Although there was something Eldar...

Strike.

Parry.

The shockwave they created was phenomenal, and for two seconds they were carried away by it.

The Traitor Primarch's injuries weren't limited to the obvious ones, however. The darkness he used to fly and fight her on near-equal terms was born from the sacrifice of his Legionnaires’ souls.

Lorgar was drawing the agony of the Word Bearers Lisa had destroyed when bombarding Illyrium into his body.

It gave him a reprieve...but the cost was terrible.

Taylor could see the power corroding his very soul.

And the Ruinous Powers' leash, in the meantime, was interfering with the abominable rivers of corruption spreading through his veins. Corruption so self-destructive even a Primarch wouldn't survive it for long.

"We will win! We must win! Ours is the only chance humanity has to survive in this galaxy! This is the Primordial Truth!"

A spoiled child. That was the kind of being which was responsible for the most devastating conflict fought since the Cybernetic Rebellion and the Age of Strife.

He was a petulant child who had decided that if reality didn't conform to his ideas, then worshipping eldritch abominations was a perfectly sane course of action.

This...this deserved an answer. And this was a weapon she could wield against him.

"So you say. Personally, I have another name for it. I call it the Primordial Lie...imbecile."

Lorgar howled in hatred and charged her again.

They clashed above the Fortress of Hera, and the Ruinous Powers' hisses of hatred reached her ears.

**Valley of Laponis**

**General Lorelei Moltke**

"The Webmistress is here! Our victory is assured! All praise the Webmistress!"

Lorelei couldn't help but smile slightly at the exuberant outburst of the Adjutant-Spider that had been assigned to her. In this, really, she did far better than her officers. Many cheered loudly and completely ignored their duties.

"Thank you, Adjutant-Colonel Solaria." The Mordian female General replied. "We appreciate the good news."

Though really, the spider's words were just the final confirmation they needed. For all the kilometres separating them from the Fortress of Hera, you didn't need magnoculars to see the enormous explosions of golden power clashing with heretical sorcery.

No doubt was possible, Lady General Taylor Hebert was really here.

The 'how' would have to wait...no matter that the miracle was going to be on every tongue in the next five minutes.

"Her Celestial Highness is fulfilling the duties the God-Emperor gave her." The veteran of Commorragh told her staff. "It's time we do ours. Everything is ready?"

"All Mechanised Brigades are in position, General."

"Artillery support stands ready to send the heretics to hell!"

Lorelei Moltke took a few seconds to observe the choreography of hundreds of regiments before her eyes. For them to be here was a triumph of logistics. They had had to use secondary roads on very uneven terrain, build logistical nodes in mere hours, and, last and hardest, watch as the battle for Macragge City raged without intervening.

But everything was worth it, since it had allowed them to position a reserve of half a million men and women on the flanks of the enemy.

"In His name," the female General said formally, "open fire!"

The enormous roar which followed was of five thousand artillery pieces simultaneously proclaiming their loyalty.

Many gunners had had over twenty minutes to make their calculations; the hastily dug-in heretics bearing the colours of the Volscani Cataphracts disappeared in Knight-sized explosions.

This was just the first salvo. Less than thirty seconds after the first one, a second was in the air. Rockets from the Vermilion Dawn-class launchers were then deployed, the loud shrieking screaming promises of death.

With each salvo, ammunition depots and dozens of vehicles belonging to the Traitors were annihilated. Hundreds of pyres burned. The heretical artillery – what little there was left of it after the forces on the ridges had bled it across the entire Laponis Valley – died before any significant counter-battery fire could be made.

It wasn't really a battle. It was a massacre.

After the third salvo, what she had waited for was relayed by the extremely excited Adjutant-Spider.

"General! The enemies of the Webmistress are routed! Many are abandoning their trenches!"

"Confirmation, General! Their defences are no more! They're fleeing towards Macragge City!"

"In that case, it is time." No General worth his rank was going to give their enemy the opportunity to rebuild a defensive line worthy of the name...and Lady Weaver would likely demote her if she was so incompetent as to not exploit this initial opening and fail to seize victory when it was offered like this. "One last salvo for the artillery, then the artillerists are to shift for long-range bombardment. All the Tank regiments and the Brigades are to attack at maximal speed. Don't stop. Don't hesitate. Disintegrate their lines. We finish the encirclement here and now, and this so-called Black Crusade dies today!"

"Yes, General! For the Webmistress!"

"For the God-Emperor and His Living Saint!"

**Approaches of the Thurium Gate near Macragge City**

**Dark** **Apostle De Haan**

De Haan had known the forces covering the flanks and rear of the Great Hosts thrown into the conquest of Guilliman's ridiculously decorated capital were too weak to do anything but defend themselves.

But defence was the only thing asked of them, and if the Gods willed, it would be enough.

And for two hours, it had looked like it just might work.

Until it didn't.

Now the Dark Apostle in charge of keeping the disbelievers and dogs of the False Emperor at bay while his other peers ravaged Macragge for the glory of Khorne, Tzeentch, and Nurgle faced disaster.

A humiliating defeat was staring back.

Vorrjuk Kraal had been right.

They had taken too many risks, ignored too many problems.

And now in the valley they had supposedly 'illuminated', thousands of enemy tanks and armoured vehicles were coming straight for their throats.

"By the spikes of the Skull Throne, how can they be here already? With Leman Russ tanks they should be-"

"Those aren't Leman Russ tanks," his Coryphaus interrupted the worthless Captain. "Those are the new tanks that bitch Weaver ruined Commorragh with. Those are Jaghatai Khan tanks."

"An apt name," De Haan had to admit. The vehicles had to push at least sixty kilometres per hour when it came to speed...and the offensive's muster point had been less than forty kilometres away. "What do we have to stop them?"

The answer from his military councillor and favourite warrior was clear, blunt, and froze the blood in his veins.

"Nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing, Lord Apostle." His subordinate repeated with a tone which was filled with resignation. "Lord Lorgar took the last of the Legion’s reserves with him, and judging by what is happening at the Fortress of Hera, we won't get them back. The Hosts we had here are all engaged inside the city. The Hosts which landed at Pharsalus are not showing any signs of life. And the Volscani..."

The Coryphaus didn't end his sentence, but with what the loyal sons of Lorgar saw with their eyes blessed by the Gods, it wasn't necessary.

The Volscani Cataphracts were running away, fleeing to save their pathetic lives.

De Haan amended the thought a moment later as several 'Khan Tanks' crushed many Volscani infantrymen under their tracks without slowing down.

The *surviving* Volscani Cataphracts were running away.

The Gods of course were no believers in the discipline the foolish servants of the False Emperor forced the weak to bow to.

But what was repeated across the entire Valley of Laponis was disaster in every manner which mattered.

The Volscani officers were taking the last vehicles and abandoning their men to run away faster.

Some fortified positions armed with Heavy Bolters were fighting to the last round and dying with prayers to the Architect of Fate, the Grandfather, or the Blood God on their lips, but for each platoon which did that, ten others were throwing their weapons away.

This was a routed force.

Its effectives had been insufficient to begin with, and now there was only the shadow of a shadow left.

"The next time we try to recruit mortal warriors," De Haan snarled venomously, the comment made bitter because there was really no guarantee there would ever be a 'next time', "we will base the tests on martial might, not on the symbolism Erebus and the other incompetent backstabbers advised us to accept without question!"

"This is something I fully approve of, Lord Apostle. But before debating about that, may we have our orders? The slaves of the False Emperor are advancing so quickly that we need to...adapt our strategy."

The Horus Heresy veteran's two hearts burned with rage.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

There weren’t supposed to be endless columns of tanks rushing to the gates of Macragge!

Or if they did, those tanks wouldn't be in neat columns, and would belong to the Word Bearers!

"We are going to-"

The first artillery shell landed about fifty centimetres from the feet of Dark Apostle Haan, and what he intended to say was lost forever in the explosions of shells and the screams of agony.

**Above the Fortress of Hera**

**Primarch Lorgar Aurelian**

The Gods weren't giving him enough power.

Weaver was increasing her speed, and the Gods weren't giving him enough!

"You think because you tap into your power reserves, you can evade all my strikes with your speed?" The Primarch of the Word Bearers snarled while using *Illuminarum* as a focus to cast the Curse of the Eight Nightmares...which missed his enemy by over a meter.

Joyous laughter answered, and the sound was both psychic and...something far more than that.

"I am not tapping into anything, *Traitor*."

"Now who's lying?" He tried to mock her, something which didn't exactly became easier to do as the cursed xenos blade went for his throat again. The False Saint was no mistress of the sword, she was too young and too inexperienced. But the sheer versatility of her powers and her inhuman strength more than compensated for that. And so he barely managed to parry before it could pierce his armour.

"I am not lying, Lorgar of Colchis. I am no faster than I was at the start of our duel. **You are slowing down**."

And suddenly it was as if a veil had been torn away from in front of his very eyes.

Lorgar *saw*.

The Gods had not been giving anything to him.

They had...loaned him, for lack of a better term, a part of the **Dark Sacrifice** made by his son Jarulek to keep the Imperial forces at bay.

And Lorgar was many things, but he wasn't able to contain a shard of **Sacrifice** inside himself.

He was *Faith*.

He was the Priest of the Gods.

This was all he had ever wanted. This was all he was supposed to be.

This was-

"Mankind," the Primarch could not control the despair infecting his voice, "needs *them* if we are to survive."

"Mankind," the False Angel whose golden wings had now been modified to include ten brilliant gemstones burning like lava in fusion rebutted coldly, "was really handling itself quite well before you decided to engineer your civil war."

They struck at each other.

And with every blow, his strength faded.

With every parry, doubts assailed his thoughts.

With every wound causing pain and loss of efficiency, he was reminded that he hadn't been in perfect health before accepting this last challenge.

And every time he analysed the situation, Lorgar acknowledged challenging her in aerial combat had been pure foolishness.

His enemy could fly without relying on outside assistance.

He couldn't.

Still, he was a Primarch.

He was the Word Bearer, and he had his pride.

He could-

The crystal sword unravelled into an enormous cloud of crystal beetles, and Lorgar realised too late what was coming.

He tried to evade, erected the most powerful sorcerous shield he could still cast.

It wasn't enough.

His left arm was severed, then disintegrated in a cloud of blood and crystal.

Thankfully he still had *Illuminarum* in his right hand, he could still try to exploit the flaw in her technique and-

The movements of Weaver became blurry.

Fast!

The next two strikes were almost invisible and only his battle-experience developed from the Great Crusade up to this very day allowed him to perceive them.

"They will find a way to-"

The last shreds of power faded, slipping through metaphorical fingers, and left him with...nothing.

His body convulsed in pain.

"Finish me," Lorgar Aurelian, Seventeenth Primarch and Scion of long-dead Colchis, growled. "You want my death for the cause I defended? So be it! Finish me! Prove you are the loyal bitch of our unworthy genitor!"

Weaver...raised her sword in a mocking salute. And then pointed one of her fingers to the Fortress of Hera waiting hundreds of metres below them.

"It is time to fall, *Traitor*."

In that last moment, he prayed to the Gods.

Lorgar prayed to the Gods more fervently than he had ever done in all his life.

And as the sole response, he heard their laughter.

The sound accompanied him for the entire duration of his fall.

**Fortress of Hera**

**Optio** **Septimus Gracchus**

They all watched as the Arch-Heretic fell.

The battle had been difficult to observe, despite all the massive holes which had been made in the ceiling above their heads.

There had been too many explosions, too many shockwaves, and too much light clashing with the heretic's darkness.

But they all saw the end of the duel.

The Angel had clearly inflicted a significant blow upon her enemy.

For many seconds, they were just staring at each other and the fighting ceased. The light of the God-Emperor flared brilliantly.

The darkness seemed to falter, but then increased again.

It was only an illusion. A couple of seconds later, the heretical power ceased abruptly.

And the Arch-Heretic fell.

Everyone, even the Space Marines, got out of the way.

It was an excellent decision, he would comment later with the benefit of hindsight, because the monster which had tried its worst on the Fortress of Hera didn't plummet through one of the already created holes above their heads.

No, the Arch-Heretic created an entirely new massive opening by himself.

It should be impossible, because the reinforced materials, even if damaged, should have resisted, but...well, it happened.

The impacts against the ceiling clearly slowed down the descent from the sky.

But when the time came for the Arch-Heretic to impact the marble floor of the Shrine, Septimus was sure it would have killed an Astartes on the spot.

And yet, as an impressive cloud of dust was formed and the crippled silhouette of the Arch-Heretic was indistinct, one could only acknowledge the obvious.

The monster was still alive.

By all the marble collections of Macragge City, what was it going to take to kill this bastard?

Interrupting his thought, a guttural scream came into existence.

"WEEEAAAAVVVEEERR!"

**Primarch Lorgar Aurelian**

Lorgar didn't believe he had ever hated a single being more in his entire life...his genitor and father excluded from the competition.

"WEEEAAAAVVVEEERR!"

And then reality reminded him how badly wounded he was.

Lorgar spat blood and, as his brain reminded him, it could have been far worse. His head was now completely unprotected, and if he hadn't managed to let the most resistant parts of his body – the ones which had still decent armour protection at any rate – take the brunt of the damage for the rest, his skull would likely be splattered in several parts on the blue-gold marble, and no Primarch could survive that.

It hurt. It hurt terribly.

It was agony.

He had lost his left arm, and the wound was grievous in the extreme, the small stump of what had been his extremity bleeding, whatever power his enemy used to destroy his limb was also sufficient to overwhelm his natural regeneration abilities.

But this was only one of many injuries that were going to be his death.

Everything was pain.

Everything was failing him, and he didn't need an expert transhuman surgeon to inspect him before coming to that conclusion. One of his hearts was not beating anymore. One of his lungs had similarly succumbed. If he had any ribs left intact, Lorgar would be extremely surprised. The wounds taken while he had attempted to kill the Eldar and the incomplete False Angel of Shadows had been infected with something in the last few minutes.

His legs were broken, though they, at least, appeared to have kept their ability to regenerate.

But what good did that do when the body he had-

No, there was no time to ask questions which were of no more importance.

*Illuminarum* was still in his right hand.

It took a colossal effort of will to ignore the torment it put his body through, but Lorgar managed to use it as a lever to rise up against.

It was slow. It was suffering like he had never known.

It could have been the last thing he would do, if the mortals and the last Astartes present opened fire.

But they didn't.

Perhaps they waited for Weaver.

No, he didn't have the time to waste on some useless theoretical. He had to-

The golden fire which had been consuming half of the hall emitted a long melody, and then suddenly, the inferno opened like a sorcerer carving an empty riverbed and creating two seas where there had been only one before.

And from this arch in the golden flames, an armoured figure that Lorgar knew all too well slowly emerged.

The power armour itself, Lorgar had never seen before.

But even with the helmet hiding his face, there was only one soul on Macragge who had the physical ability and the will to equip himself with such a ridiculous blue-and-gold ornamented armour right now.

"Brother," the Primarch of the Word Bearers tried not to wince as Weaver chose this moment to land on his right, ready to deliver the finishing blow. Even if-

"Lorgar of Colchis," Roboute Guilliman replied, and his tone had an edge that rang like a bell of doom in his head, "I remember swearing an oath to you as Calth burned before my eyes."

The Gods laughed, and Lorgar's memory, eidetic for all the trials and changes it had endured, recalled the words he had not taken seriously when he heard them the first time.

\*\*\*\*

*The ritual is too complicated to give him a hololithic-type representation of what is happening in Calth's orbit, but he knows the attack is already a one-sided victory.*

*The Thirteenth Legion has been taken completely by surprise, and even now, they're still reeling in shock.*

*A Legion like the Imperial Fists would likely already be* *busy taking desperate defensive measures, but the Thirteenth Legion is not the Seventh, and Guilliman is not Dorn.*

*And what Lorgar is about to do is going to spread an even greater disorder in their chain of command. The* Macragge's Honour *will be crippled, the Battlefleet will be leaderless and fighting as disorganised individuals. Before he gives the signal to the servants of the Gods to begin, however, the Word Bearer hears the voice of his brother Guilliman address the simulacrum.*

"*Lorgar of Colchis. You may consider the following. One: I entirely withdraw my previous offer of solemn ceasefire. It is cancelled, and will not be made again, to you or to any of your motherless bastards."*

*Lorgar has to use a lot of self-control not to scoff. The Thirteenth Legion is already defeated, and still Roboute is busy with theatrics. For someone who professes to value practicality above everything else, this is a really unsound judgement.*

*Lorgar gives the signal and utters the final words of the last surprise that thousands of Ultramarines' Space Marines will ever be able to experience in their unfaithful lives.*

"*Two: you are no longer any brother of mine. I will find you, I will kill you, and I will hurl your corpse into hell's mouth."*

\*\*\*\*

**Primarch Lorgar Aurelian**

Once upon a time, on the bloody sands of Nuceria, the Seventeenth Primarch had acknowledged Roboute really hated him that day.

But years after that battle, Lorgar had ascended. He had been rewarded with the greatest blessing the Gods could reward him with.

No one save perhaps his father could kill him, and the Anathema of Chaos was in a near-death state, trying to keep everything functioning even as his Imperium decayed and rusted before the final collapse.

But times had changed.

He was no longer immortal.

He was severely injured.

And though his instincts did tell him Roboute was not fully healed from the poisoned wounds inflicted by the Pale Naga either, this mattered little.

Because in his state, even a small group of second-rate Astartes could finish him off for good.

"I swear-"

"Silence, *Traitor*." Weaver, always her, interrupted him. "You are fundamentally incapable of saying anything that is not a lie or an attempt to incite treachery on a grand scale."

"I was not talking to you!"

"You prefer that I speak, you who destroyed Calth? You who brought ruin to Ultramar so many years ago, and now with your sons tries to leave nothing more than ruins and nightmares in your wake?"

The blade that was pointed at him was unfamiliar. It was not the *Gladius Incandor*, which had been rumoured to have been lost when his brother lost his duel against the Naga aboard the *Pride of the Emperor*. And it was obviously no blade forged by their father or one of the Terran artificers, for it would burn in golden flames already.

Yet there was something sinister about it, something that screamed-

"I named this blade *Calth's Vengeance* when I commissioned it, Lorgar of Colchis," suddenly the reason behind his bad feelings was revealed in all its unholy glory. The symbolism of the name was powerful, and unless he was badly mistaken, the connection had been strengthened with something from the former jewel of Ultramar that Kor Phaeron and Erebus had devastated according to his will. "And today it is going to fulfil its purpose."

Lorgar uttered a word, a name from the Warp, the beginning of the curse which would allow him to escape-

He was unable to get past the first syllable without vomiting a significant quantity of blood.

"Roboute, please-"

But the Lord of Ultramar was already attacking him.

**Fortress of Hera**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

It wasn't a fair fight.

Roboute Guilliman, for all the efforts of Cawl, was not in good health at all. Taylor could feel the power of **Sacrifice**, her power, keeping him alive as the antidote to the poison worked through his veins and hyper-advanced serums tried to close his wounds as fast as the laws of physics and the constitution of a Primarch allowed.

But the Primarch of the Ultramarines was encased inside a brand-new unique power armour that Cawl had somehow managed to hide from everyone until today.

And aside from his millennia-old wounds, the newly reawakened son of the Emperor was in relatively good health. He had all his limbs, for example.

Something that couldn't be said about his opponent.

It was a very, very unfair fight.

But since the plan of Lorgar had involved murdering his brother when he couldn't defend himself, the Lady General was perfectly fine letting the Arch-Heretic get the humiliating beat-down he so richly deserved.

And within seconds, this was exactly what happened.

The left arm of Roboute Guilliman had been encased in an ensemble which allowed him to wield a Combi-Bolter of enormous size, but the weapon wasn't used to shoot down the Traitor Primarch with hundreds of Bolter shells.

No, the Thirteenth Primarch discarded it and went for the 'Power Fist' mode, all the while wielding his Gladius-like blade – except the average Gladius was a short sword, and this one was so tall even Sigenandus would have difficulty wielding it with two hands – with his other hand.

For all his reliance on treachery and sorcery, for all the fact he was Damned and his soul was breaking apart in a flow of horrible corruption and foul things, Lorgar managed to parry the blows of the Primarch who had once called him brother with his cursed mace twice.

But when the third attack came, the daemonically-corrupted weapon broke in half.

The Power Fist threw him to the ground again, so violently that the insect-mistress heard at least three or four bones breaking from the impact with the marble.

The next blow of the Power Fist was avoided, but all it meant was the Gladius *Calth's Revenge* struck and impaled him through his primary heart.

For what felt like many hours, the two Primarchs stayed frozen, the Traitor on his back, bleeding black blood, pinned against the damaged floor of Ultramar by the weapons of the other.

"I...I made...a mistake...Roboute. Forgive me..."

"No."

The blade was removed so quickly Taylor doubted most of the audience here saw it, and while with his left arm the Lord of Macragge plunged his fist directly into Lorgar's chest, *Calth's Revenge* found his neck.

For all the bitter enmity between the two Demigods, there was no intent to prolong the suffering.

Lorgar, Arch-Heretic, Traitor Primarch of the Seventeenth Legion, was decapitated for his crimes against the Imperium, the Thirteenth Legion, the Realm of Macragge, the Imperium, Terra, and the Emperor.

His black soul, or at least what foul thing had replaced it, tried to escape his corpse before passing to another plane of existence.

*No. Do not let the parasites have him*.

The order echoed across her very being, and Taylor was prompt to obey the implicit command she would likely have tried to accomplish anyways.

The Angel of Sacrifice shaped a spider of light with a thought, and used it to skewer the shreds of Traitor Primarch's essence before it could be claimed by the Ruinous Powers.

There was a shriek and then...nothing.

Lorgar was dead.

Though nothing happened in the hall where she was standing, a hurricane of screams echoed out from beyond the Veil.

And Taylor took only a second to realise those were the screams of the Word Bearers' Legionnaires.

**The Warp**

Contrary to what one would expect, the entity dozens of species knew as the Ruinous Power of Change very much dealt with hope on a daily basis, or whatever the equivalent of a day was in the atemporal dimension of the Immaterium.

Of course, the manipulations of Tzeentch didn't generally tend to fulfil one's mortal hopes. It was more about dangling them just out of reach for cruelty's sake, encouraging greater and greater acts of desperation until the servant or enemy forgot why those hopes had been worth fighting for in the first place.

Or sometimes the dream-utopia looked to be feasible...and the agents of Tzeentch would destroy it in front of the target's eyes, bringing not only Change, but violent emotions few entities but a Power thriving on Chaos could properly enjoy.

Lorgar's death fell somewhat into both the former and latter categories, and yet at the same time, it didn't.

While the Ruinous Power had enjoyed the Seventeenth Primarch's despair, Tzeentch was not responsible for the situation which had led to the storming of the Fortress of Hera.

This loss of domination on such an important battlefield was...not pleasing at all.

Lorgar's soul being lost, by comparison, was a far smaller issue.

Most of the plots of the Architect of Fate had never intended to replace Magnus with the failure. There were far worthier replacements available, and though the self-proclaimed Chaos God was known to reward some Champions who emerged alive after a spectacular disaster, well...

Lorgar's disastrous Black Crusade had failed so epically there were limits to all things, even for Chaos.

As it was, Tzeentch had contemplated the idea of exploring if there was something worse than a Chaos Spawn the Great Conspirator could transform Lorgar into should he manage to escape Weaver's blade.

At least the Angel of Sacrifice had spared the Master of Fortune this chore.

And honestly, the more the Architect of Fate reflected on it, the less Lorgar's death was a defeat. His Legion was already defeated; his 'Armada' a scrapyard of ruined wrecks and devastated hulls.

Trying to fight for his soul with the other Three, as amusing as it would undoubtedly be, was counterproductive, except for torturing him for all eternity and teaching their greatest servants that yes, there indeed existed higher magnitudes of punishment if you failed as badly as the Urizen had.

Anyway, the Cataclysm of Macragge had been fought...and lost. Changing that would require direct intervention, and the Architect of Fate was not stupid enough to believe the other Three would follow whatever plan could be devised on such short notice.

No. The battle was lost.

The Word Bearers, be they tortured in the depths of the Warp or fighting on the battlefields of Ultramar, were going to go mad as the death of their gene-sire attacked their psyche. Since they were already losing on all fronts, their enemies would not have much difficulty finishing them off.

The only question was what to salvage from this litany of defeats.

Tzeentch was not a merciful God for the beings of flesh who worshipped him.

Eight out of nine plans which were made at this very moment very much involved abandoning the Legionnaires of the Seventeenth to the ignominious death they so richly deserved.

One planet stood in the way of those plans.

Calth.

The ritual making sure this planet had been transformed into a wasteland and would keep it that way was tied to the Word Bearer Legion as a whole.

The Changer of the Ways had been greatly amused that the boring Ultramarines, for all their blindness, had guessed part of the truth, even if for the wrong reasons.

Exterminating the Legion which had betrayed them at Calth would indeed help them restore their private kingdom.

And that...that wouldn't do at all.

Weaver had already won too many victories; even if the Thirteenth Primarch were to drop dead in a few hours, the magnitude of what she had accomplished had long gone past an irritant issue and developed into a full-scale *threat*.

Tzeentch wasn't going to give her an additional one, not when the consequences would be so...*significant* in the long-term.

Self-proclaimed Chaos Gods didn't grit their teeth, but at this very moment, the plots relayed by the Architect of Fate to its agents could really have been recognised as such.

Then with a spell of ninety-nine curses, the Great Conspirator intervened. Vortexes of blue flames opened across the Macragge System, but not a single part of **Change** came out to help the Seventeenth Legion.

Instead, the tentacles of said vortexes grabbed nine hundred and ninety-nine Word Bearers spread out between the different battlefields; the majority were taken from the fight raging in Macragge City, but there were some from the retreating units of Pharsalus, and one or two were 'saved' from Laphis.

Regretfully, Tzeentch could not curse them with the Flesh-Change again; their numbers were already pitifully low, to do so would risk causing the Calth ritual to falter and die. That did not mean there wouldn't be other...plans to show these failures the proper magnitude of a Chaos God's displeasure. Their final destination would already be a good start.

This was not a victory, of course.

This was just saving something from the ashes of catastrophe.

And so Tzeentch, the Architect of Fate, observed the Macragge System, and went on to imagine millions of new plots.

There were a lot of changes coming, and the Great Conspirator was **Change**.

Everything would proceed according to the plan...eventually.

**Macragge System**

**Laphis**

**Ruins of Ravenna – west of the Polenta River**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Captain** **Aeonid Thiel**

These sorcerers, unlike their brethren, had known how to hide in an urban battlefield, and not been too proud to refuse to do it the minute it was clear the Traitor Seventeenth wasn't going to conquer Ravenna.

This was a dangerous combination.

This was also why Aeonid had decided to make their elimination a priority before all other Chaos Marines.

Finding them had not been easy, which hadn't surprised him.

Finding a good position from which to use the brand-new sniper rifle he carried on his back without the hundred or so of cultists patrolling the ruins surrounding the extremely well camouflaged ritual ground was even harder: when some of the Traitors took to using the sewers, they clearly recognised the problem proper skirmishers could present to their last figures of leadership.

Still, the Ultramarine Captain was in position and the four Word Bearers surrounding the eight-pointed star painted in the blood of the innocents had barely begun. He was in time to-

"**Gemkltvlrbtgkjbnr**!"

Reality...felt wrong.

Aeonid looked away and felt drops of blood coming out of his nose, and his bones were feeling really weak for some reason.

But when he looked at the epicentre of whatever madness had been unleashed, the veteran of Calth and countless other campaigns realised how lucky he had been to be so far away.

Of the four sorcerers which had been labouring on their abominable ritual, one was nowhere in sight.

The other daemon-worshippers were still there...sort of.

Whatever problem had caused the calamity, it had clearly not been a minor one, as the foul powers they had played with had merged them together.

And no, that was not a figure of speech.

The corrupted Mark IV armours of crimson and spikes had been separated by several metres each, but now there were tentacles of blood where there had once been arms. Those unnatural appendages had joined each sorcerer, so that now they formed a triangle of crimson and mutated flesh.

It wasn't the only 'issue' the ritual had caused them, really. Their heads had been transformed into a parody of the word 'Cyclops', with no mouth, an oversized red head with a single yellow eye burning in black flames.

It was incredibly disturbing to watch, and after a second, it appeared that it was unwanted by the foul things of the Warp themselves, as everything collapsed into a pool of blood and disturbing things.

But it was the last Legionnaires' reactions which were the most interesting.

Their bodyguard duties to the Sorcerers had just been made irrelevant.

Yet they were all prostrated before their masters' death happened and-

"LORGAR IS DEAD!"

The three words made him freeze.

That was-

"LORGAR IS DEAD!"

The rage, the undisguised loathing, the hatred...Aeonid had heard it long ago.

When Legionnaires had lost their gene-sire.

"Lorgar is dead. Lorgar is dead. Lorgar Aurelian is dead..."

"Without the Urizen, all is lost..."

"Without our Primarch, nothing matters. Better to die-"

"All is dust. The Thousand Sons were right..."

"WE WILL NOT HIDE ANYMORE! THE GALAXY WILL BURN!"

"Not on my watch," the Ultramarine Captain pressed the trigger and the Legionnaire who was screaming the loudest ceased to be a threat as his head was blown apart.

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**Ruins of the Pharsalus Line**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

The pursuit was so fast and the rout of the Word Bearers so complete that their advance was thunderous.

But as they had reached the defensive lines the Lords of Ultramar had once called the 'Pharsalus Line', their counteroffensive had begun to drastically slow down.

Clearly the enemy had realised that past this destroyed set of fortifications there was nothing left for hundreds of kilometres they could use to defend themselves with.

Dragon would almost pity them, if each member of this terrifying horde had not proven beyond the shadow of a doubt they were bloodthirsty monsters.

"Whoever is in command," General Rokossovsky grunted through the vox-frequency they were using, "unfortunately has some low cunning. They know their landing zone has been sterilised by our air force, so they're digging in here, hoping it will buy them a few more hours of life."

"Yes," Dragon agreed. "Not that the situation would have been much better for them if we hadn't hammered their drop pods and ground-to-orbit vehicles to oblivion. Their sorcery is fading, and I have two Mechanicus Cruisers ready to deliver orbital strikes and atmospheric suppression if they are so stupid as to believe their fleet is waiting in orbit."

"That would be very idiotic, even by their standards," the Vostroyan General affirmed. "How do you want to proceed, Lady Magos?"

"As much as I don't want to give them time to regroup," the Tinker analysed the data and winced, "all our forces need to take a break before launching the final assault on what is left of the Pharsalus Line."

"It's not that much of a defensive obstacle." Rokossovsky argued.

"Yes, but I don't like how low the ammunition levels are for all formations we began the pursuit with. And yes, that concerns everyone. Our strategy was sound, and made sure few heretics got away, but this means with the over-enthusiasm of the soldiers and the supply train tens of kilometres behind, we have...neglected a few things."

"Hmm...good point." Dragon could almost imagine Taylor's chief of staff grimace. "Very well...I will order a pause. But no more than two hours. The enemy is beaten, and I won't give them time to...what in the name of the winter storms are they doing?"

The Nyxian Minister of Industry almost gave the man a rebuke for his less-than-stellar choice of words...but frowned as the information-gathering capabilities of the Dragon Armour told her the situation on the battlefield had just changed brutally and unexpectedly.

By reflex, Dragon checked twelve times that there was no scrap-code trying to worm its way around her defences, but no, everything was working perfectly.

"The Traitors...are not digging in. They have stopped retreating. They are...charging towards our columns."

Dragon knew the enemy was in the service of Chaos, but even by that deplorable standard, it made no sense. The Pharsalus Line, as trampled by Traitor Titans and melted into oblivion as it had been, was the best chance for the heretics and their monsters to face the odds.

After the sound defeat they had been given on the Fields of Pharsalus and the long pursuit, the cultists and their Traitor Astartes masters had no more Titans or super-heavy armoured vehicles to support them, and in effectives, they were definitely outnumbered by more than ten-to-one.

Plus as much as the pursuit had been done in 'hot conditions' as they said, the Imperial guard's leading formations were at least five kilometres away...plenty of time to transform this charge into a pile of corpses.

But the Word Bearers didn't slow down.

And the more information Dragon gathered about this madness, the more it appeared that the Traitor Astartes were leading the charge, with the rest of their horde following after an initial moment of surprise.

"It looks like we won't need that much of a pause, in the end."

"No," Dragon agreed. "I'll call the Titans, you call the artillery. And the Salamanders finish the job?"

"A simple and efficient plan," Nikolai Rokossovsky approved. "Let's teach them a last lesson they won't forget."

**The Warp**

The apparent unity of the Three had not survived the events which had happened on Fenris.

Yet even the birth of Malal had not completely destroyed a certain level of something that would be called 'cooperation' if you stayed far away and didn't try to investigate the dealings of the entities known by their slaves as the Chaos Gods too closely.

In this regard, the revelation of the King in Yellow's existence had been a boon. Even Malal, Beast of Anarchy and prompt to oppose any initiative of the Three, was in agreement the mind behind the skeletons had to be hunted down and exterminated.

But this was only a fragile truce, strengthened by hatred of Weaver, the Anathema on his Golden Throne, and the belief there were a few more victories to be won.

The death of Lorgar changed that.

Tzeentch's intervention changed that.

By blatantly moving and grabbing Word Bearer Legionnaires, the Architect of Fate had made a blunt statement no one could misunderstand.

And this statement was that **Change** was cutting its losses.

Khorne and Nurgle knew some of the reasons, of course. Much like the Great Conspirator, they had been involved in the Calth ritual, and thus knew the advantages there were to keeping the planet in a devastated state and the sun spreading a baleful aura across the Veridian System.

There was also something unknown to the Imperium at large, but hardly secret to the current Masters of Immaterium: by symbolism, each Emperor-loyal Legion had a Traitor Legion to act as its nemesis.

For the Ultramarines, it was the Word Bearers.

If the blue-clad sons of Guilliman didn't have the sons of Lorgar to act as their sworn foes, sooner or later, they would find another.

Maybe it would be the Black Legion, especially with Guilliman's temporary reawakening. Abaddon, by his latest games, had considerably weakened the fratricidal relationship tying Blood Angels and those following Horus' Heir together.

But maybe it wouldn't.

Maybe the old rivalries would be cast in the dust and a new order would rise, one the Four would have little influence over.

This was not to be. Yet not knowing Tzeentch's plans, success may be impossible in that regard.

In the end, the Lord of Skulls and the Grandfather reached an agreement.

As many Word Bearer's lives had to be preserved as possible; if only to prevent Weaver from gaining one more total victory over them.

In the meantime, Malal was already on the move, tempting the most nihilistic Word Bearers to pledge their allegiance to Anarchy.

And as the light of the Astronomican approached in the distance, powerful artefacts left intact in the broken carcasses of the Armada Battleships went missing. Chaos Apothecariums were emptied. Ruined armouries and abandoned stockpiles were claimed.

Then and only then, the last intervention of the self-proclaimed Chaos Gods on Macragge was truly unleashed.

But they would not be as 'generous' as Tzeentch. Khorne would take eighty-eight Word Bearers for his purposes, while Nurgle went for seventy-seven. And the Beast of Anarchy, despite all its efforts, only convinced eleven Astartes of the crippled Seventeenth Legion to embrace its twisted Power.

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge District**

**Macragge City**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

*The Primarch is dead*.

Kol Badar didn't know the how, but he couldn't deny it, no matter how much he tried.

*The Primarch is dead*.

It was obvious the attack on the Fortress of Hera, the heart of the Ultramarine defences on this front, had ended in disaster.

*The Primarch is dead*.

"RAAAARRGGGH!" Vadukar, one of the most cold-blooded warriors under his command, exploded in mad fury, and ignoring his counter-command, charged the lines of the False Emperor's slaves like a World Eater Berserker.

There was roughly five hundred metres to cross.

With or without support, it was plain suicide.

A rain of artillery shells and at least ten thousand lasguns fired within four seconds, and though some missed, thousands didn't.

One more Word Bearer fell, though most of his body had been butchered and no one would have recognised the old warrior after this amount of punishment was delivered.

Kol Badar almost envied him. His physical torment was over.

*The Primarch is dead*.

"We have to retreat, Coryphaus!"

"Retreat to where?" Kol Badar inquired in a dead voice. "The breaches we made in the walls are assaulted by the enemy's reinforcements. We are completely encircled."

*The Primarch is dead*.

"BURN! THEY WILL ALL BURN!"

One more warrior of the 1st Great Host went mad acknowledging the truth.

His Flamer mutated through the power of the Gods and the Legionnaire went on the attack...which ended with him transformed into a living pyre before dying in countless explosions.

*The Primarch is dead*.

Since Ferrus Manus' death on the black sands of Isstvan V, every Legionnaire, no matter if they worshipped the True Gods or not, had known deep inside what would happen should they fail and their gene-sire die.

Some would fall to the ground in horror and sorrow, unable to continue the fight.

Some would simply let their fury burn every restraint and go on a rampage to avenge him.

Some would die emotionally. Physically they would be fine, but deep inside...there wouldn't be anything left of them.

*The Primarch is dead*.

Maybe that was what happened to him.

Kol knew he should be feeling something, anything. He should scream, reassure his warriors.

*The Primarch is dead*.

But he couldn't.

There was nothing left to give.

No wonder the Iron Hands and the Blood Angels had been so utterly enraged when their fathers died.

What had seemed a pathetic manifestation of their self-professed love was something the Word Bearers had refused to prepare themselves for until the last second.

*The Primarch is dead*.

No wonder the Sons of Horus had faltered and fled.

They had followed Horus Lupercal, and the First Warmaster died at Terra.

"CORYPHAUS! THE LINES ARE COLLASING ON EVERY SECTION!"

"No need to scream, I can hear you perfectly fine." Kol Badar admonished the other warrior. "The Architect's latest trick has cost us dearly."

Deprived of the illusions covering his eyes, the truth was not that difficult to see.

The transformation of Lorgar back from his Chaos Spawn punishment had been an ephemeral bonfire in a sea of darkness.

The Word Bearers had hammered themselves against the defences of the Ultramarines, and it hadn't been enough.

Not with the millions of guardsmen arriving to reinforce the bastard sons of Guilliman.

Not with their aircraft and artillery singing their requiem when the Legion's bolters were running low on ammunition.

Not when countless sorcerers had suddenly gone missing and their own ranks were depleted and suffering constantly from phenomenal battle-attrition.

"WITH ME! FOR LORGAR! FOR THE PRIMARCH!"

Kol Badar let them go. By what right would he counter-command them, anyway?

He had led them here, to this disaster.

He had been unable to avenge Jarulek.

Above their heads, the sky was turning a golden hue, and the power of the Gods was relentlessly ground down.

"FOR THE SEVENTEENTH! LET THE GALAXY BURN!"

Kol Badar didn't watch his warriors die. Instead he ran back to a more defensible position and slaughtered his way through a platoon of black-armoured guardsmen which had tried to flank them.

*The Primarch is dead*.

The Primarch was dead, but if this was the end, Kol Badar would die a warrior, and would make the Imperium pay the heaviest price possible before-

The world dissolved around him.

A grey and orange veil manifested while the broken columns and houses of Macragge faded away.

The noises of battle seemed incredibly distant, as if they were happening tens of kilometres away.

Something that was either dust or fog clouded his transhuman vision...but not enough to not see a lone silhouette advance towards him.

"Who are you?"

"I am like you, Kol Badar."

The figure was as tall as he was, and the closer it got, the more mysterious it was, for while the newcomer wore an Astartes Power Armour, his mind refused to recognise the glyphs and the style.

"I am not like you."

The other Space Marine shook his head.

"You are wrong. You feel dead. You are purposeless. You have lost your Primarch. All of this...I felt it long ago too."

"And yet here you stand. Alive."

Laughter answered...and the Astartes removed his helmet...revealing a skull, not a breathing transhuman warrior.

Kol Badar should have felt horror, revulsion, or anger.

But all of that was now denied to him.

"Not alive...but not doomed to the oblivion-extinction the False Emperor wanted to discard us to."

The Word Bearer Coryphaus asked the question he was sure the other Space Marine had waited for him to voice.

"Does your Master wish to destroy the False Emperor? Is it His Will that this galaxy of betrayers and hypocrites will die?"

"Yes and yes," the undead Astartes answered. "For He is the King in Yellow, and the Tyrant of Terra must die."

\*\*\*\*

**Mark of Oblivion: 68 hours after Mark Zero**

**Mark of Calth: 37,725,168 hours, 13 minutes, and 13 seconds after Mark Zero**

**Surviving Word Bearer Space Marines at Macragge: less than 800, and falling fast**

**Surviving Word Bearer Space Marines dispersed across the galaxy: 1,176**

**Living Primarch: 1**

**Dead Primarch: 1**

\*\*\*\*

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Approximately 50 kilometres away from the Laponis Valley**

'**Prince' Yriel of Iyanden**

The reconnaissance-purposed psy-crystals were marvellous for their ability to survey a battlefield, and Yriel trusted their capabilities with his life.

As a result, the Iyanden-born Asuryani instantly accepted the truth of the images.

The Mon-keigh brutes had won the battle.

Yriel controlled himself and gave a mental order to his steed.

His Jetbike accelerated, moving them away from the Mon-keigh settlements polluting this planet.

It was a shame, for the world could have been a Colony World for Asuryani colonists. There were a few too many mountains, but they could have grown forests inside the valleys, and the fauna and flora were quite acceptable.

The Prince of Iyanden dismissed the idea after musing about it for a hundred or so heartbeats.

Since the Primordial Annihilator and the Mon-keigh had not destroyed each other, imagining the planet without the primates on it was nothing but fantasy.

His steed and himself continued eastwards, before taking a snow-covered pass and pushing yet further east, before turning north again.

Wind caressed his armour, and it was pleasant enough to make him forget the humiliation every Asuryani had so recently received.

**I am the Empress of the Aeldari Empire**.

May all the old Gods of the Pantheon curse the Queen of Blades and the Harlequins for what they had done.

Yriel let his Jetbike manoeuvre with all the grace and elegance it could show to these far-distant uninhabited mountains.

Deep inside him, however, where even his steed could not be troubled by his thoughts, the Prince of Iyanden was howling with rage.

*Maelsha'eil Dannan* was the Empress of the Aeldari Empire. The Angel of Death, the Butcher of Commorragh, the Destroyer of Biel-Tan, She who wielded a Sword of Vaul, one of the most hateful Mon-keigh...was their Empress.

If the joke had not been branded into their very souls, Yriel would have burst into laughter at the ridiculousness of it all.

But the brand was there, he had been forced to accept it like every Asuryani, and...for all that he tried not to think about it, the Empress was on this world now.

*Maelsha'eil Dannan* was here.

And though the distance from her was...considerable...the song of her power had indeed taken on an Aeldari taste.

An Aeldari taste of flames and death.

It was a humiliation.

It was an insult.

It was something he had no choice but to accept.

After Commorragh and the deeds the Angel of Death was confirmed to have accomplished, Yriel did not believe he had a tenth of the talent needed to fight the monster in a standoff.

And it would not come to a duel.

The Helspiders guarding the Empress would make sure of that.

Still, his mind was enraged to its very foundations. Keeping her away from the Craftworlds, not provoking the monster, yes, he could understand that. Letting the Queen of Blades joke, yes, he could understand that.

But letting *Maelsha'eil Dannan* brand them and force them to bend the knee?

*That* was the elders and the Harlequins’ *greatest solution* to their problems?

No wonder no one had told him anything before this campaign.

If they had told him this was the plan, he would have told them no, and very loudly.

And if they had pursued this course without listening to him, there would have been opposition.

Few in Iyanden would be willing to spend their time cleaning the shoes of a Mon-keigh, be she golden or not.

Yriel sighed.

His faithful steed decelerated as he approached the agreed meeting location.

He was not the first, the ten other Jetbikes were evidence of it, but neither was he the last. Streaks of nearly-invisible white behind him and on his flanks confirmed it.

Patting his improved steed and letting the psy-crystals pulse with content, the young Asuryani dismounted.

"My Prince," Thrandael, wisest and oldest of all his friends bowed. "Thank you for joining us."

"I could hardly stay idle," Yriel replied with enough irony to melt the snow around them, "and it was either watching the Mon-keigh celebrate their victory or joining you. The choice was not that difficult."

Many other Asuryani arrived as they amicably exchanged their greetings. The majority of them were his friends and hailing from Iyanden. A minority was not; they had a couple of black armours from Ulthwé, a few representatives from Saim-Hann, and naturally several exiled Aspect Warriors from defunct Biel-Tan.

All in all, there were nearly two hundred of them.

It was an impressive show of force, between their Jetbikes, the armaments they possessed, and the influence the famous blades could command across the Craftworlds, but...Yriel would be lying if he didn't admit he had expected more Asuryani to come.

"The Iyanden Farseer commanding our part of the expedition made the choice of *Moderation*," Thrandael answered the unspoken question. "The Autarch went with *Harmony*. That was enough to sway many hearts, my Prince."

"In many ways, they don't matter," a Biel-Tan survivor hotly protested, "it is the Iyanden Councils that-"

"Much as I hate to admit it," Thrandael let them show his manifest disappointment, "*Maelsha'eil Dannan* dangled the perfect bait in front of them. If this had been merely the brand and the exchange of a few trinkets, they would have told her no. But a new Goddess, one strong enough to claim souls and deny the Primordial Annihilator? That they will seriously consider...and accept."

No one said a word for long and dolorous heartbeats. Many would have denied the existence of a Goddess about to do that, but everyone here had heard the song of **Carnality** and **Symbiosis** as *She* was born.

It was seductive.

It was attractive.

It was also, no matter how they disguised it, a leash.

"Unless *Maelsha'eil Dannan* is stupid enough to present tyrannical terms to our Iyanden emissaries, Iyanden will accept." Thrandael continued. "And with Ulthwé responsible for...for this in the first place, this state of affairs will spread to other Craftworlds."

Yriel nodded, as did nearly everyone of his friends present. In theory, every Craftworld was equal, but in reality, five had had the population after the Fall to exert powerful cultural, diplomatic, and military influence over the rest.

And with Biel-Tan destroyed, that left only four.

Iyanden, the very Craftworld of his birth, was the most populated Craftworld of the Asuryani – of all known Craftworlds, but so many cycles after the First Fall, it was rare to discover more Asuryani homes which had avoided the cataclysm.

Ulthwé had the most powerful Farseers and Warlocks, among other things, and their voice rose above all others when the fight against the Primordial Annihilator became a rising crescendo.

"They don't have Alaitoc and Saim-Hann."

"They don't," Yriel agreed, "but I think we must not downplay the challenge ahead of us: even their Asuryani may succumb to the temptation in large numbers."

"Surely not Saim-Hann," one of his friends muttered, "they are wild and free, they don't need..." many grimaces forcing him to interrupt this hesitant tirade.

Because yes, even the wild riders of Saim-Hann could tolerate it, depending on the terms presented.

"It is a disgrace," Yriel began, "and I believe that if you are here in this cycle to speak your doubts and what your heart screams to you today, you feel it the same way I do."

"Yes, my Prince. We aren't convinced by the promises of *Maelsha'eil Dannan* and the songs of the Goddess she created. We were forced to recognise her as Empress, but this was...*this was an act of slavery*!"

"Indeed," Yriel nodded in approval, as forceful whispers of support were heard from every Asuryani throat. "We are the chosen descendants of the Aeldari Empire. Greatness flows in our veins. We are the rightful masters of the void and everywhere we sail to. For Ulthran and all his lying friends of Carnality to have sold us to a Mon-keigh is the biggest disgrace of our species...ever. I certainly don't remember anyone selling us to a lesser race for the last million cycles. This is a disgrace. And we will refuse it."

"As much as I am disgusted by the delusional choices of the High Farseer," one of the two warriors from Ulthwé darkly replied, "we can't exactly move against *Maelsha'eil Dannan*. The brand is there, burning and forcing us to remember she is the Empress. Acting against her directly would be unpleasant, certainly fatal...that is, if her damned spiders don't decide to hunt us for sport first."

"We can't remove the brand...for now." Yriel acknowledged. In time, he firmly intended to find the lore and secrets which would allow him to change that and become the Hero of the Asuryani. "But as long we avoid the second trap, the leash of the Empress won't be able to chain us and force us to be her slaves."

"A very good analogy, my Prince," Thrandael smiled with eagerness, "you are absolutely right: the collar is there, but if we recognise the choice for the slavery it promises, we can make sure it stays nothing more than a collar. It will be a disgusting brand of subjugation to be sure..."

"Exactly," Yriel raised his right fist into the air. "And while we're away from this oppression and tyranny the Mon-keigh are so busy delighting in, we will sail the stars to discover the secrets which will allow us to nullify the collars and the leash that were just forged!"

"You want us to become Corsairs, my Prince? Iyanden is not going to like this, they may declare us to be on par with the Drukhari..."

"Let them call us outcasts or whatever they wish," Yriel shrugged, "in the end, we will be vindicated for our actions. Yes, this will be a long journey away from our homes. Yes, we will be Corsairs. But at the end of it, if *Maelsha'eil Dannan* was able to discover the secrets of God-Forging then surely we can too. We will rebuild the Pantheon as it should have been, and the Aeldari will be free to rule the stars again! Are you with me?"

"Yes!"

"We are with you my Prince!"

"YRIEL! YRIEL!"

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**Shrine of the Primarch**

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

He was alive.

This was...very much a relief.

He was alive.

He was alive...and Lorgar was not. Not anymore.

Roboute Guilliman looked everywhere but at the decapitated head of the Traitor, wondering what had been going through his mind to attempt such a gamble.

And it had been a dangerous and reckless attack, even for a Primarch supported by the same abominations Fulgrim and the others had fallen into damnation with.

The Lord of Ultramar had never doubted Lorgar would try to kill him for good if he had the chance. But there were less than thirty Word Bearer corpses with him.

Given the forces defending this hall, it should have warranted at least four times that number...so either the Seventeenth Legion was for some reason not available to lead a direct assault on Macragge...or the Legionnaires were already busy elsewhere.

But before that, there was something Roboute needed to know. Something that burned his tongue, as he observed the changes in the weapons and the organisation the Martian Skitarii sported. Something that was giving him more and more of a bad feeling as he saw Auxilia men crying and prostrating themselves.

"How long?"

Now that he knew he wasn't dreaming...the devices of Cawl hadn't been malfunctioning. There was indeed a winged woman in golden armour next to him. And she burned in the golden light of his father. Somehow rubies were shining on these impossible appendages, and-

No, it was not important. He would have to ask the questions later...one of which would be why three large golden spiders were surrounding her like bodyguards.

"Lord Guilliman," the woman's voice was respectful, but at least in what was a splendid contrast, she didn't show any sign of awe. "By the Imperial calendar, it is the year three hundred and ten of the thirty-fifth millennium."

More than four thousand years.

Roboute had had a feeling it was going to be bad, but...four thousand years.

No wonder so many, including his own sons were kneeling in awe. After so long...his own life had to be an old legend from the time of the Great Crusade.

But that could wait. The war, as always, took priority.

"You know who I am. May I know your name and rank...to thank the one who has healed me from my lethal injuries?"

"Lady General Taylor Hebert, Imperial Guard," the woman presented herself, removing her helmet with one hand and revealing a rather attractive visage with long black hair. The only thing out of the ordinary was her eyes...they were black, filled with stars, and it wasn't an exaggeration. "And I'm afraid I didn't heal you, Lord Guilliman."

"It certainly feels like you did," usually, he wouldn't disagree with someone so readily, but save the shadow of a hindrance, the pain was gone, and the wounds from the serpentine bastard had stopped hurting. "Unless you mean Cawl did all the work?"

"What I did do, and I am still doing, is preventing you from dying," the angel-winged General explained. "Your son, Chapter Master Cato Valens, chose of his own will to sacrifice himself to give you time. I transferred his life-energy to you...and that in turn allowed Cawl to put you in this new great armour boosting your regeneration and inject you with the antidote to the Naga's poison."

"I see..." Guilliman gave a remorseful glance to the immobile blue armour of his son that two Ultramarine Successors had taken to guarding. His face was at peace, though given the strain inflicted on his body...it had not been an easy death. "And when your power is gone?"

"You are going to be in pain." Lady General Taylor Hebert gave him a sympathetic expression, but the words were blunt and rang with truth. "Your body will only be able to operate with a fraction of your capabilities for years. I can see the damage the poison did to your body and your soul, Lord Primarch, and...you will need serious medical help for the next several years, assuming the pain is tolerable, which it might very well not be."

"I may find a solution before then," the Radical Archmagos he had hired so many millennia ago interjected. "After all, Lady Nyx, we clearly found a loophole where there was supposed to be none to give and-"

"Ah, Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl," this time it was not difficult to recognise the emotions of the woman who had been empowered by his father. There was some amusement...and a far greater amount of irritation. "First, you do not have years before it begins, but...approximately nine hours. **Sacrifice** is a harsh mistress, for it is unique and non-renewable. And more importantly, if you think about disobeying my orders again, I will drag you before the Fabricator-General of Mars myself so he can judge you for your fascinating interpretations of tech-law!"

"But clearly you anticipated me coming here!" Cawl was clearly as unrepentant as the first time Guilliman had caught him..."Why else would you send your sneaky Dreadnought and your spiders?"

A Dreadnought? Guilliman didn't see...in fact yes, there was one, almost hidden by the debris and the pillar.

"I sent them as a contingency if the heretics were to reach the Shrine." The Lady General sighed, clearly exasperated. "Anyway, you are very lucky to have proven yourself useful and allowed me to arrive in time. So I will not send a message to my Archmagi that you are in need of thorough punishment."

"I am grateful, really...your Celestial Highness."

Given that Cawl had used the title now and not before, Roboute knew it wasn't used by the Archmagos for his deep respect of Imperial protocol.

And they were wasting too much time as it was.

"I have nine hours, then." That required a focus on practical issues. "The war?"

"The war is almost over on Macragge," Lady Taylor Hebert informed him as thousands of footsteps climbing marble stairs echoed in the distance. "The Traitor Seventeenth committed most of its remaining strength to the battle in the streets of Macragge City, but it is now encircled and quickly being annihilated. The forces they deployed in the Pharsalus Military District caused a great amount of carnage, but all the Traitor Titans have been slain, and the death of their Primarch is accelerating the rout. Illyrium Military District is gone, but with the sorcery fading, the warships in orbit can destroy everything from a safe distance. A few elements of the Seventeenth have been able to escape, but between here and Laphis, the Word Bearers have for all intents and purposes ceased to exist."

Calth...Calth was finally avenged? The very thought astonished him for several seconds. Though that immediately posed a question.

"How can you possibly know this without a full strategium to relay your orders?"

"Who needs a strategium, when I have my loyal Adjutants to relay my orders and give me their reports?"

"We only did our best, Webmistress."

Roboute Guilliman, Avenging Son and Lord of Ultramar...stared open-mouthed.

"Your spiders...speak."

"They speak all the time, and their talents go beyond that," the Thirteenth Primarch had really no idea what to answer...he didn't even need to go beyond the doors of the Fortress to drown under the surprises?

"The military situation is resolved, then?"

"Not exactly," the Lady General admitted, her wings getting agitated and hinting the problems had not finished coming this way. "There's a dangerous xenos infestation on the Hive World of Ardium. I need to return-"

Her voice was not able to continue as hundreds of Space Marines rushed into the hall where his sons had let him rest in peace for thousands of years.

The sight was...it warmed his heart, to see that for all his millennia, the Adeptus Astartes had endured. The colours had sometimes changed, but more remained the same. His own Ultramarines. The Genesis Chapter. Brazen Consuls. Praetors of Orpheus. Iron Hounds.

And some which weren't of his line at all, but more than welcome all the same. Those who had decided to begin the pursuit of the Traitor for eternity, the Black Templars of Sigismund. And many other sons of Dorn from the Second Founding.

One by one, they knelt.

The woman who had helped – and continued to do so, at this hour – to let him return among the living raised her other long sword which looked to be similar to his own when it came to the style.

"ALL HAIL THE FIRST LORD OF ULTRAMAR!"

"ALL HAIL LORD ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN!"

"IMPERIAM VICTORIAM!"

"WE MARCH FOR MACRAGGE!"

**Fortress of Hera**

**Hall of Fidelity**

**69 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Captain** **Gaius Pompeius**

Gaius couldn't move, given how many devices the Apothecaries had attached to him.

But he could cry.

And cry he did, massive tears falling on his cheeks and armour.

"Father," he managed to say, for all he knew the pain would be unpleasant from the effort.

"My son."

Their father walked. Their father was alive and here to command them.

Everything...everything they had fought for had not been in vain.

"Chapter Master Cato Valens has given his life for me."

Gaius nodded, and this time his inability to speak had nothing to do with the frailties of his wounded flesh.

"Under the circumstances, you are now the highest-ranked officer of the Ultramarines Chapter."

"Yes." Gaius winced. "Theoretical: Captain Thiel has far more seniority than I will ever have...but I am indeed nominally in command with the Chapter Master's death."

But even if Thiel had been higher in rank, he was still on Laphis.

For the next several hours, the veteran of Calth would not be available.

"Will you relinquish your authority to me, First Captain?"

"I will...father. You are reinstated and acknowledged as the Lord of Macragge...effective immediately."

"Thank you...my son."

Roboute Guilliman stayed silent for several seconds. All the while Gaius stared at him. Their father...the Primarch...he was blinding. It was as if he was bathed in the light of the Emperor himself.

"The Apothecaries informed me you were alive because of...Bacta?"

"Yes. It is the healing substance Lady Weaver is providing for the Space Marines." The pain increased, and Gaius decided to not bother his Primarch with their...less than glorious role in certain negotiations where the near-miraculous substance had been concerned. "Without it, I would not be alive. The Traitor Primarch...nearly killed me."

Gaius hissed between his teeth as the suffering grew difficult to keep away, even with mental exercises.

"They say you killed him."

"The Lady General helped, but yes, I delivered the killing blow, my son."

"Good," Gaius Pompeius breathed out as the Apothecaries approached to put him to sleep. "Good..."

**Hall of Maxellus**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

If there was anything Taylor had learned in the last hour, it was that each Primarch was very different in his own right.

Of course, it was more confirmation than an actual discovery.

The writings of the Blood Angels she had read insisted Sanguinius was unique.

Rogal Dorn had been a being in which the wall and the human had coexisted.

Lorgar was a dangerous fanatic who should have been imprisoned before he could cause significant damage.

Hanzo Hattori had not lived long enough to be really 'studied' – though releasing the last part of him on Macragge had likely led to the favourable circumstances the Imperium had benefitted from – but with Isley's incomplete information, Taylor could safely say he was representative of a different culture and philosophy too.

Roboute Guilliman was different from all of those brothers, both in looks, culture, and methods.

Now that the Lord of Ultramar had removed his helmet – the only part Cawl was willing to remove given the circumstances – this was all the more evident.

Roboute Guilliman was human.

That was...very much a relief, to be honest, given how much the Ultramarines had been venerating his memory when she hosted the Bacta Conference. The Howling Griffons had been very respectful of his memory, and that was one of the mildest reactions...

But yes, the Primarch definitely had a human-like behaviour.

He wasn't angelic. The best word to describe him was likely handsome, though the paleness of his face did diminish that a bit. Otherwise, his blonde hair and his blue eyes, while benefitting from transhuman vitality, remained handsome.

As for the aura around him...the Primarch of the Thirteenth Legion was not exactly subtle. Or rather, the Emperor had not created him to be subtle.

Roboute Guilliman was **Order**.

The Primarch supposed to impose order on a battlefield where that wasn't meant to be possible.

Behind the lines, the order to keep the ammunition flowing to the frontline troops, no matter how many enemies stood in the way.

When it came to the internal affairs being imperilled or the rule of law collapsing, this was a being which would restore Order.

He was the ideal Emperor's adviser, the chief of staff, the commander-in-chief of a military force, the logistician, and the crowned head at once.

He was both Julius Caesar and his nephew Augustus in one.

And perhaps one of the greatest hopes to reform the Imperium...or one of its greatest threats.

The Angel of Sacrifice knew the political equilibrium on Terra was fragile, and the miraculous rebirth of one Primarch was going to bring a lot of earthquakes, no matter what she did. Three Primarchs?

Taylor couldn't even imagine a fraction of the consequences they were going to have to deal with.

Maybe if it had been Russ alone...but no, there was Leman Russ, Corvus Corax, *and Roboute Guilliman*.

Maybe Xerxes Vandire would do her a favour and die when he heard the news? It would certainly simplify a few things...

"I am going to return to Ardium," the insect-mistress told the reawakened Lord Macragge the moment the courtesies and the protocol were out of the way.

"Theoretical: you don't need a spaceship."

"I don't need a spaceship anymore," given how many people had seen her arrive in the Shrine, this new skill was perhaps the worst kept secret of the Fortress now. "And no, before you ask, I can't bring anyone with me."

What Taylor had gone through on the *Vengeful Spirit* had made her *complete*, and in many ways, more powerful than she'd ever been.

But in some ways, certain paths that had been opened to her were now closed. She could cross the void in certain places, walk where no human should be able to walk.

But she had to do it as the Angel of Sacrifice, and she had to do it *alone*.

No Space Marine would survive...even the Adjutant-Spiders were not powerful enough to endure the pressure of a small journey.

"This is a bad practical." Roboute Guilliman replied serenely. "Your fleet is still some five hours away from Ardium, and full deployment will require a few more hours, even if the Space Marines here aboard it deploy with Drop Pods right on top of the enemy."

"Yes, but it's not like we have a choice. My Honour Guard, your sons, and your brothers are there, fighting xenos horrors."

Judging by the lack of surprise, someone had already told Roboute Guilliman Russ and Corax had returned.

"I am going to order the three Strike Cruisers which have already translated in-system to make a tactical Warp jump so that they can support your fleet," the blonde Primarch announced. "But the theoretical problem does not lie in the amount of firepower available, but the time to-"

There was a flash at the edge of her vision...and suddenly to her left, a single Eldar made his entrance.

Of course, with her luck, it was not Aurelia Malys, an Ulthwé Farseer, or an envoy from the Queen of Blades.

It was a Harlequin. It was a clown.

"Don't shoot," she ordered as the sons of Guilliman were readying their Bolters. "He didn't come here to fight. Right?"

"Indeed not! Ha! Ha! Ha!" The acrobatic moves were both buffoonery, dance, and some kind of exaggerated reference which, even with Ynesth's knowledge, went far above her head. "All hail the Empress. What a fantastic tale you wrote, Mistress of Spiders! We will sing it in the heart of a thousand Craftworlds!"

"I would prefer you didn't." Taylor replied honestly...and very sincerely.

"Master Cegorach insists."

The winged parahuman huffed.

"You aren't going to obey my commands unless I give you my approval. Correct?"

"Yes, yes, yes! YES!" Were all the Harlequins on drugs? "We are here to help...to provide a once-in-a-lifetime-help. The Great Harlequin wills it."

Taylor was not naive enough to believe that, even as Empress of the Aeldari, Cegorach was that fond of her.

"What do you want?"

"The Great Harlequin wants an audience."

The commander of the entire Stalingrad Operation raised an eyebrow.

"I would likely have given him one after I dealt with the Tyranids."

"Perhaps or perhaps not," the poor Macraggian chair would never be the same after what the Harlequin did to it...whatever he...she...damn, Taylor wasn't even able to guess the sex of this Eldar clown. "Your reinforcements may not agree. Best to be on our best behaviour."

The last part was ignored, obviously. She wasn't going to fall into this enormous trap doubled with a provocation.

"You will have to be a bit more specific than that," the Lady General began, "the moment the Shadow of the Tyranids was no longer active, I gave the order to summon a lot of reinforcements."

"That you did! Yes, my Empress! But those we are the most concerned about will make their grand entrance in a few minutes of your counter! And they are the ones we have the more reason to be afraid of."

"Ah," Taylor could very well understand why any Eldar would be...extremely nervous. She smiled. "Those reinforcements."

\*\*\*\*

*And so the last battle of this campaign begins.*

*The Lords of Chaos have retreated behind the Veil, leaving their slaves to perish in their* *millions under their uncaring eyes.*

*The promised Age of Darkness will not come soon.*

*In the shadows, a new game is prepared. New pawns will be forged to replace those who failed on the battlefields of Cadia, Fenris, and Macragge.*

*But tomorrow will arrive in due time.*

*For now, the only enemy who matters is the Great Devourer.*

*Unfortunately for that maw cursed to always hunger, the young and old races of this galaxy have realised the danger it poses.*

*It is time for a last battle.*

*It is time for heroism and war.*

*There will be no mercy, no negotiated surrender.*

*For extinction is oblivion, and there is no peace among the stars.*

\*\*\*\*

**Macragge System**

**Region of space near Macragge's sun**

**Necron Battleship *Sceptre of Discoveries***

**Phaerakh-Cryptek** **Neferten**

The number of warships revealed to be destroyed in the Macragge System was not concerning to the mind of Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten, but it was not amusing either.

While the scale of the devastation was far below what a *real battle* of the War in Heaven would have looked like – the C'Tan in general typically used bombarding the planets with thousands of asteroids as an opening gambit – it had nonetheless involved hundreds of human capital ships.

And then there were these bio-psychic spores trying to escape the gravity well.

"My Phaerakh, I have bad news."

If she had been a being of flesh, this would have been the moment to make a noise of disgust.

"Speak."

"We have made a preliminary scan of the system, and we have confirmation of a minimum of twenty-one Eldar warships...warships by the standards we saw at Commorragh, I should say."

So the long-ears couldn't refrain from meddling in the affairs of other races when massive battles were fought.

Who would have thought it?

As the machines of the *Sceptre of Discoveries* displayed the information obtained in a three-dimensional star map, the view obtained was not one of imminent battle with the fleet she had brought to this theatre of operations.

"They are dispersed all across the system."

"Yes, my Phaerakh. And the signatures..." The Nemesor muttered a curse particularly insulting to the Nightbringer. "The signatures are consistent with some psychic micro-tunnels our ancient enemies sometimes used to imitate their instantaneous deployment arrays during the War in Heaven. Which is...surprising. After neither our human allies nor our warriors had seen them anywhere, all Nemesors who fought at Commorragh were sure the long-ears didn't possess that technology anymore."

"Clearly, this was an error." Neferten replied. "It will be something to not forget in the future. We aren't dealing with the so-called 'Aeldari Empire', Herald. We are dealing with a multitude of factions that might have recovered the last artefacts of their doomed civilisation when it was busy collapsing under their Chaos-tainted hedonism and decadence."

"Yes, my Phaerakh. The closest long-ears' warship is just outside the extreme range of the *Sceptre*'s long-range main weapons. And...the shape, the signatures and the technology...it belongs to the Harlequins."

"It is good for them they are outside our range," the supreme ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty remarked without a trace of irony in her voice. "I would have disintegrated them first and asked questions later if we had the ability to destroy them immediately. Let's ignore this for the moment. What information can you give me about the fighting on the planet the humans call 'Ardium'?"

"The humans appear to have found some very interesting things to serve as starships. One hull is clearly bigger than anything we have seen the Imperium use so far. And the other...seems to be a mountain they strapped some engines to."

Neferten wished her engrams could dismiss this amount of ridiculousness, but alas the data flowing confirmed her subordinate's words.

"How is it possible that such a thing is not breaking up under the effect of the gravity well? How can it fly without tearing itself apart?"

"As far as flying is concerned, it seems it won't fly for long. Our projections signal it has already lost a lot of altitude compared to the high orbit it arrived in."

"True. The biologic-psychic signatures?"

"Extremely dangerous, my Phaerakh. We don't have them anywhere in our engram-bases and the Dynasty-Intelligences don't remember them...which doesn't mean we haven't met them, alas, just that we don't remember them."

"Yes..." the more they reawakened advisors and old commanders of the War in Heaven, the more inconsistent the memories of the War in Heaven proved to be. Apparently Szarekh – or more likely, the minions he had used to alter the Nerushlatset memory-repositories – had not been too concerned about coherence and synchronisation. Some entire Phalanxes which had fought side by side with others remembered all their campaigns when others could barely recount a few skirmishes.

The more analyses came, the more it felt amateurish, rushed, and stupid.

But it still left enormous gaps in their engrams.

"The human main fleet is on its way to deal with this biologic-psychic infestation, is it not?"

"It is, my Phaerakh. The humans may arrive too late to erect a proper blockade of the planet, however. And this meant some of the spores may have to be hunted through the void, a...difficult proposition, even for our technology, especially if they go silent in short order."

"Then we will have to use chrono-dilatation on both our ships and the human ones." Neferten declared. "We will discuss the compensations later, for now, these signatures reek to me of the biological super-weapons the Old Ones were throwing around by the thousands at the end of the War."

"Yes, my Phaerakh. By your command."

"Glorious Phaerakh! The trickster-ship is trying to communicate with us!"

The long-ears really didn't know how to quit, did they? At least their predecessors had a brain between those two long-ears, enough to know when they were beaten, at any rate.

"Open a communication channel. And prepare to engage if any of their void units jump into our fleet's efficient range."

The moment the hyper-communicator activated, Neferten already regretted it. The interlocutor was indeed one of the crazy followers of the ancient Clown God.

Then it got worse.

"Greetings, oh Cold Sovereign of the Nebula. We have all become subjects under Empress Weaver, and as such, request a temporary ceasefire to discuss all the ramifications of the Nerushlatset-Nyx Treaty's Article Six."

Silence reigned on the *Sceptre of Discoveries*.

It took fifteen seconds for one of her Overlords to speak.

"We should have exterminated all the long-ears before the Great Sleep."

**Orbit above Ardium**

**Newly created 'Star Mountain Fortress' *The Fang***

**70 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Warmaster Ender Trevayne**

*The Fang* shook again.

Violently.

It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last.

The worse news was that very few orange lights lit up.

So whatever had been knocked out this time, it had taken at least a damage control node, because there was no way the explosive barrage that had just hit them had not touched something critical.

"We will hold," one of the few Space Wolves to have remained in the unconventional space base growled. "The *Aett* is a tough mountain. Only three more hours until the reinforcements are here."

Ender Trevayne grimaced internally.

For the sake of the troops' morale, he wasn't going to reply with the truth.

Yes, the mountain fortified by the Primarch of the Space Wolves had been equipped with little-understood and marvellous technologies from an Age which was now more myth than historical fact.

But a lot of these technologies had not been checked in the last millennia, for the sake of secrecy and many other – understandable – reasons.

The mountain was 'tough', yes, but natural landscape was not something created by a planet with the goal of throwing it into high orbit.

"We're losing altitude again," Rogue Trader Griffith murmured to his ear. "Whatever the xenos launchers hit this time, it has undone our efforts of the last hour."

So they didn't have three hours.

Ender wished he could say it surprised him, but it didn't.

"And even with our large companion standing by our side, we aren't even able to enforce a blockade of Ardium."

The fighting on the planet was ferocious, by all reports, and the Auxilia regiments were selling their lives dearly...but they couldn't hit the xenos' improvised launching bases, and in the last thirty minutes, the Tyranids had begun repurposing their spores as building materials for Destroyers.

It was, when you said it like that, something utterly ridiculous and completely impossible.

Even the greatest shipyards of Mars would struggle to make this kind of infernal hull-building possible.

But the Tyranids were indeed assembling several ships as they spoke.

And that was something giving him nightmares, because if these genocidal xenos could do that, what else could they do?

"There are other fleets in the system. Including a xenos one which translated near the sun. Necrons, they are apparently called."

"The metallic beings the Living Saint allied with at Commorragh," with his clearance level, Ender was aware of this reality, which had largely been kept secret from the citizens of the Imperium. "Whether or not I approve in this case, I'm afraid it won't change anything where we are concerned. Their acceleration is way too slow to begin with; we don't expect them to arrive within the next forty-eight hours, and everything will be over before-"

All the hololiths and working devices currently activated inside the command centre to show them the space battlefield suddenly fizzled out in countless flashes of green.

For three seconds, there was only blindness and incomprehension...and then the 'eyes' of the Star Fortress were restored.

"By all the blades of Fenris! They're here!"

Ender Trevayne gaped like everyone else, for this was impossible. They had seen the Battleships and massive squadrons of Battle Group Stalingrad slowly advance to reinforce them, and they were still too far away to give proper support, much less be visible to the Imperial auspexes *The Fang* boasted.

But they were here.

Before his very eyes, he saw the *Eternal Crusader* receiving the honour of drawing first blood, and the first half-completed Tyranid Destroyer in orbit was annihilated by a pinpoint bombardment.

The no less legendary *Flamewrought* followed, its enormous Plasma Cannons unleashing carnage on such a scale that the blinding flashes of devastation incarnate they visited upon their xenos foes had to be visible from every world of Macragge.

One by one the Imperial Battleships entered the fray, and on their left flank, the big Battleships of the Necrons whose usefulness he had been busy dismissing seconds before were there, restoring the orbital blockade of Ardium.

"Lord Admiral Müller," Ender gave a respectful nod when the lithocast lit up to reveal a grey-haired officer with the splendid blue uniform of the Imperial Navy. "Your timing is impeccable."

"I can't claim credit for it, unfortunately. All praises belong to her Celestial Highness'; I certainly don't have the renown to make sure xenos are fulfilling the spirit of the treaties they sign."

"I will not forget it," the Warmaster smiled before frowning. "I advise you to keep your Void Shields at maximum power no matter how unthreatening the xenos prove to be in orbit. This foe...I have never seen anything like it, even when fighting the hordes of the Archenemy."

**Ardium**

**Ruins of Hive Quartus**

**Last main** **relay for Hive Mind Behemoth**

The overwhelming majority of Generals or whatever equivalent existed among star-faring species would have experienced a great deal of fear when they realised orbital superiority had been entirely seized by their enemy.

The Tyranids, as their opponents would learn time and time again in the millennia to come, did not have the ability to experience fear. Or at least the Hive Mind, the quintillions and more synapse creatures waiting in the galactic void, could not experience anything akin to fear. Individual units could, in exceptional circumstances, return to a feral state when the control of the Great Devourer collapsed. And when experiencing such an animalistic behaviour, it was true that lesser warrior-forms could succumb to a sort of defensive prey mindset.

But those occasions were rare, required an alpha predator to step in in the first place, and the Hive Mind remained undaunted, out of reach of its enemies.

Losing all the assets that had been launched into orbit, in any case, did not make the Hive Mind of Hive Fleet Behemoth afraid.

No, if an emotion was to be ascribed to the hungering tumour that was directing the hundreds of millions of Tyranids feasting upon the dead humans of Hive Quartus, it would be frustration.

Ever since the Ancient Beast had woken up from its long hibernation at the bottom of the cold ocean, it had met setback after setback, be it from unexplained psychic phenomena or bothersome prey.

Part of it was undoubtedly the Hive Mind's fault. The Hive Queens were only the brain cells of this nightmarish 'brain', but they could recognise mistakes had been made. Attacking this planet when in the presence of prey able to retaliate had been a reckless short-sighted initiative.

The psychic potential of the ship had been more important than temporarily alleviating the hunger. What good did it do to devour prey in great numbers if the scouting elements could not be assimilated into the Greater Hive Fleet for further predation feasts?

The successive battles had not been a waste of time. The Hive Mind had learned much about the prey it would fight against once the Fleets reached this galaxy. But the biomass and the genetic sequences would be sorely missed.

The monstrous intelligence waiting in the galactic void dismissed these calculations as fast as they had been made.

What had been ordered couldn't be changed. And now with the enemy finishing off the spores in orbit, there was only one course of action left, since the assets available had no chance to hide for long against the capabilities of these tenacious prey.

They had to engage the armies of the prey at close-quarters with every asset left. The devouring here and on every hub conquered was irrelevant when fire would rain down from the sky and obliterate this temporary biomass gathering point.

The last army had to be committed at once.

And the new Prime Commander created had to lead them in person.

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**Mark of Oblivion: 70 hours after Mark Zero**

**Number of Tyranid synapse organisms remaining in space: 0**

**Number of Tyranid organisms remaining on Ardium: approximately 1,300,000,000**

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**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**Industrial Levels**

**70 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Seraph Gamaliel**

They were fortunate to have lost no Dawnbreaker Astartes in the fall of the Industrial Wall. Though in the post-battle record, assuming they were ever in a position to write one, many thanks would be given to the Blue Bacta, as always. Rahab, Midas, Ximenes, Boulc'h, and Forman would surely not be among them now if they hadn't been healed by their Lady's healing substance.

Gamaliel fired again.

Six rounds.

Six targets.

All found their mark.

All the Tyranids' heads exploded.

And it didn't matter at all, for these had been the last Bolter shells he had, and there were far more than six Tyranids.

"For the Emperor, Sanguinius, and our Lady!" Puriel shouted, crushing the skulls of the Tyranid warriors with his improved Power Axe.

"FOR THE EMPEROR!" Sigenandus screamed, seemingly having not abandoned his contest with Kratos and the others to claim the greatest number of kills in the battle.

They fought.

They killed hundreds of Tyranids per minute with nothing but their blades and fury, the ranged weapons being completely empty of the desperately needed appropriate ammunition, and since they were abandoning the Industrial Sector step by step, this issue wasn't going to be resolved.

They fought and yet they were forced to retreat.

There were not enough of them to hold more than a short line, and sacrificing their lives when it wouldn't make a difference was not something members of the Adeptus Astartes could afford. There weren't enough of them and-

Metallic scarabs smashed a Gaunt which had tried to play dead under the corpses until it could attack him in a very underhanded manner.

"Thank you, Artemis."

"Thank...but I didn't do it!" What was the Adjutant-spider saying? Of course she did it now that- "They are not...PRAISE THE WEBMISTRESS! On your left!"

Gamaliel did not even have the time to react as a circular portal bathed in light opened in the middle of the battlefield, and thousands of razorbeetles and plenty of other 'lesser' insects came forth in a vast swarm.

The Tyranid attack, which had been numbering in the hundreds of thousands and crawling ever closer to the last wall separating them from the civilians, abruptly stopped.

Four Carnifexes which had stayed in reserve immediately charged, but the beetles went on to kill two.

Then before Kratos could defend himself against the monster on the left, a colony of Ambulls dug up under the enormous organism and tore its leg apart.

As for the last one, it was suddenly bombarded with bone-coloured stings of flung by enormous bees.

The Carnifexes raged and screamed...but they died.

The Hormagaunts and Termagaunts were scattered as if they were leaves in a storm.

More portals opened, but what came forwards were not insects anymore; instead it was the eminently recognisable Tanks of the Imperial Guard, accompanied by Chimeras, Basilisks, and other war equipment made by Mankind to pulverise its foes.

There was heavy infantry of Nyx, mechanised formations of Wuhan, and one or two regiments from Fay among others...and as such, despite the clear xenos architecture of the mobile portals, Gamaliel knew who had organised this deployment well before she came through.

When she did...Gamaliel had to fight the *pull*.

There had always been...calling it a connection seemed too weak a word, the gene-sire authority of Sanguinius too weak...there had always been a deep link with her since the Battle of the Death Star, but now it had been magnified into something else.

Her armour had slightly changed. There were more rubies burning on her armour and her wings, and some carvings were clearly improved, as if a sculptor had been able to carve them into the fabric of reality.

"My Lady, welcome home!"

"The Webmistress is back! Webmistress! We held the Swarm in your absence! We are sorry, we couldn't do more-"

"You have done well, all of you. I'm very lucky to have you in my service."

The words, the Herald of Sanguinius thought, had been intended to be simple and truthful, but now they held more power than they would have had before.

Lady Weaver had truly changed...and yet some things had not changed.

"The vote of confidence is appreciated," Gavreel Forcas tried to joke, and even though the Sergeant might not feel the connection of the Blood, he still wasn't able to hide his emotions, even if everyone –save the spiders – had a helmet on. "Though I suppose the full tale of our respective battles will have to wait?"

"You could say that," the Shield of Angels stepped forwards, bringing the Light to Ardium...as well as many insects, which were now falling from the skies, not coming by the portals. "We have exterminated the Traitors at Macragge City. Now it's time for the Tyranids to be taught a lesson they won't forget."

"We?" Diamantis repeated as all the Guards of the Blood tried to be as close to their Lady as possible. "Knowing you, my Lady, that isn't to imitate certain Governors' arrogance...and you don't use it lightly otherwise."

"Oh no, I don't."

**Captain Falco Tullius**

"Oh no, I don't."

Falco shook his head in disbelief.

That made the second time in less than a week that Lady Weaver had saved the entire population of Ardium.

"Better call the two Primarchs and the other Astartes here," the Ultramarine told his second. "Our plans of retreat are just getting scrapped, and I think we need to be briefed on our new strategy."

Because yes, in a mere minute, every belief they had had been utterly demolished with a Thunderhammer.

The Tyranids were infinite in numbers? Well, the swarm of insects which was counterattacking was doing a very good job of proving them wrong.

The psychic Carnifexes needed enormous amount of firepower to be brought down? There were spiders and flying insects that proved they could not be more wrong about that, making them lose their equilibrium before their decapitation, or decimating them from the skies.

And this was not done on a few streets, on one Wall section, or several hundreds of metres.

It was a splendid and well-coordinated *Hive-sized counteroffensive*.

It was...humbling.

Falco had fought with Lady Weaver hours ago, so he knew better than to think she had gained her current rank by nepotism or 'just' because of her insect-controlling powers, but this new demonstration of strength wrapped inside a layer of operational art was something to be taught to every Space Marine.

"You were saying something about Traitors inside Macragge City, I believe, Lady General?"

"Yes. But you don't have to worry about them anymore, Captain. Their strategic skills were incomparably weaker than the Tyranids you faced. The only ones who didn't get exterminated are the ones which were teleported away by the Archenemy. The Battle of Macragge is over, and the Imperium is victorious."

That was excellent news, though the fact some had escaped was a source of disappointment. Truly, the Word Bearers were like cockroaches...no offense to the part of the Swarm helping them which actually were cockroaches.

"Did their bastard of a Primarch manage to flee?"

"I think," and for a second, Falco didn't understand why there was suddenly so much amusement in the Swarm Mistress' voice, nor why she turned towards the glowing portal, "I will let someone else answer in my stead."

The Guard regiments had stopped coming seconds ago, and the reason why was evident as a large shadow became visible, becoming clearer and clearer with every second.

Falco at first believed it was a Venerable Ancient, but he was swiftly proven wrong, it was the wrong shape, and-

No.

No, this couldn't be.

He was...

He was...he couldn't be healed...

"Father?"

"My son."

The words which were shouted by a Terminator of the Dawnbreaker Guard didn't really register...the turmoil of emotion was too great.

"ALL HAIL THE LORD OF ULTRAMAR! ALL HAIL ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN!"

At least the Auxilia and the other Space Marines knew how to answer those calls.

"WE MARCH FOR MACRAGGE!"

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Watching the Ultramarines cry and joyously celebrate the return of their Primarch was certainly something you didn't see every day.

The sons of Ultramar were many things, but undisciplined and prompt to regular emotional outbursts where everyone could see was not something they were generally accused of. Yet the 9th Company of the Ultramarines Chapter was doing exactly that.

Granted, they had a lot of reasons to behave that way. If the reinforcements hadn't arrived in time, they would all likely have died, along with the civilians they had sworn to protect here and in the other Hives.

The return of a Primarch was one more astonishing revelation in a sea which counted already plenty.

That said...

Gavreel could not help but wonder if the Dark Angels and every Chapter born from their gene-line would be that happy should the Lion return.

Part of him wanted to say yes, of course, every Legion should be ecstatic if their gene-sire came back from wherever he was...but a little part of him doubted.

Anyway, this was just an idle thought. This was Guilliman who was back, not his brother.

And he had a report to give to his Lady.

"The Bacta stocks have saved us from suffering any permanent loss, my Lady. Though as your Swarm undoubtedly told you, the healing process has made sure that we suffered from the same problems the Ultramarines met after their void battle against the Traitors of the Seventeenth. We had plenty of Bacta, and too few replacement armours."

"And so some of you went on to seize the old museum exhibits and almost forgotten depots of the Hive," Taylor Hebert noted in a very amused tone. "Well, I approve the show of initiative, it's better to have some armours repaired than none. We will of course arrange something with the Ultramarines in the aftermath...and likely return the old armours, if they've not transformed into something unfit for a museum."

"We will try our best," Gavreel assured her before wincing at the efforts the poor Techmarines would no doubt have to make to refurbish Mark II and Mark III power armours once it was all over. "Practically, I don't want to repeat the obvious, my Lady, but I humbly suggest it is going to be essential to increase the production of power armours in the Nyx Sector."

"I know." Several Adjutant-spiders began to relay telepathic orders as they moved away from the Lady General, and the heavy Landers which touched ground disgorged tens of thousands more insects so that the regiments coming right behind them were not ambushed by Tyranids lying in wait. "But that is something I must return to Nyx to deal with. We produce sets of Mark VII armour in considerable numbers, but though the Mark VII has proved its worth for several millennia and can be useful when one is only fighting non-corrupted rebels and third-rate opponents...those are not the enemies the Adeptus Astartes' talents are so badly needed for by the Imperium."

"Mass-production of the Mark IX?"

"Gavreel, your face alone tells how little you believe in the Mark IX." The angelic-winged General snorted. "We could mass-produce it I suppose, but the more battles we fight the more I realise why some Tech-Priests were concerned. We needed the Ion Shields integrated with Astartes Power Armours, and I would give the same order with the benefit of hindsight...but the Mark IX as it stands is an incomplete project. I am not arrogant enough to believe it is something suitable to equipping the Chapters fighting from Pacificus to the Eastern Fringe with. We need a new model of Astartes Power Armour...preferably yesterday, but in practise, the order to implement it will begin right after this battle."

The tone employed could have been matched with a grimace, he knew.

"This sounds somehow fitting..."

"Gavreel, no need to walk on eggshells. You can ask why."

"Why?"

"You do realise the power armours you go to war with are not exactly cheap?"

Oh. Oh, yes, that explained the...lack of enthusiasm.

"Well," he tried to be cheerful, "let's see the positive side of things. There are Primarchs here, they will certainly be eager to support this project."

"One can always hope, one can always hope...next question. Where is the Queen of Blades?"

Almost as if someone was waiting for those words to be voiced, right outside the ruined outer walls which were crawling with Tyranids, a large silver flash appeared to sever reality in two.

"Never mind. Let's go, Dawnbreaker Guard. We have a battle to win."

"WE BRING THE DAWN! FOR SANGUINIUS AND THE EMPEROR!"

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Werner Groener**

Many guardsmen had long wondered if it was going to make a big difference that Artemis, the now well-known 'Adjutant-General' of the Swarm, had been replaced by another golden spider.

In Werner's opinion, no, it didn't.

"The Webmistress is back! Rejoice everyone! Except you xenos, you don't have a reason to rejoice!"

"Indeed," the Cadian officer coughed, "I am waiting for this ammunition distribution's data-slate, Adjutant-Colonel Ishtar."

"You will have it in one minute, General! Praise the Webmistress!"

"Don't be too hard on her," Rogue Trader Wolfgang Back smirked as the arachnid moved as discreetly as possible – which wasn't subtle at all – to the other end of the bridge. "The officers have a hard time maintaining discipline among the crew too now that the secret is out."

"I don't care," Werner replied bluntly. "The battle is not yet won. Yes, it is a major improvement that Her Celestial Highness has returned and found us some xenos support so that we could arrive at Ardium faster, but it has made a mess of our logistical planning, and now we have to solve it. Though the Adjutant-Spiders can at least cheer and work at the same time, I am less confident our men can do the same."

"I wish I could say you're wrong, but-" plenty of auspex alarms shrieked and the hololith flashed as an uncountable number of enemy dots materialised. And when Werner said uncountable, he meant it.

"The Tyranids are committing everything they have in terms of aerial monsters," the blonde Rogue Trader grunted. "We will have to commit all the squadrons of the Aeronautica Imperialis at our disposal to counter that. The Astartes are launching?"

"They're on their way as we speak," dozens of Drop Pods were expelled from the *Flamewrought* and the *Eternal Crusader*, but the principal flow of Space Marines deploying was coming from the Chapters hailing from the gene-line of Sanguinius the Great Angel.

"Holy Golden Throne, there must be-"

"All in all, six thousand of them," Werner finished. "And thanks to the work of the Star Forge Galleons and the Bacta healing, most of them are in perfect health despite the battles of the Ymga Monolith, Mandragora, and the other brutal battles these Battle Groups had fought."

Normally, such a colossal spear of Space Marines would have launched first. It was a sign of how efficient the Swarm of Lady General Taylor Weaver was, they would only be committed in the second wave.

"Admiral Müller agrees with our suggestion. All Navy starfighters and Aeronautica Imperialis squadrons are launching as fast as they can, minus the ones we need to protect our line of battle."

"Orbital strikes?"

"Beginning in twenty seconds. The priority target is the carcass of the Behemoth bio-ship and the ruins of Hive Quartus and-"

The vid transmitted from a Mechanicus scout ship interrupted this situation overview.

In fact, everyone able to watch the hololith stopped what he was doing, including the administrative-working arachnid who was coming back to give him her report.

"By The God-Emperor...this is coming out of Hive Quartus?"

It was not an army. It was an encroaching ocean of monsters. And for the things in their core to register that powerfully on the auspexes, they had to be Titans or the xenos equivalent...

"Inform Her Celestial Highness immediately that the Tyranids are sending an entire new army to Hive Asculum!" Werner commanded, all thoughts of the previous timetable being discarded. "Adjutant-Colonel Ishtar! How long until we can commit the first regiments of the Indigan Praefects?"

"Twenty-three minutes, General! But I can send the Templar Sororitas and the Fay 20th ten minutes before them!"

Werner hesitated for a single second before nodding.

"Do it."

"At once, General! Praise the Webmistress!"

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**The ruins of the Outer Wall**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

They met Leman Russ and Corvus Corax before encountering the Queen of Blades.

As his reputation suggested, the Primarch of the Space Wolves was a model of tact and diplomacy.

Nah, she was joking.

It began with Russ giving his brother a 'friendly shove' which might have laid low a Space Marine for several hours.

"ROBOUTE! FINISHED SLEEPING?"

And it all escalated from there, with the two transhuman Demigods cleaving apart Tyranid 'Gaunts' as they exchanged jokes...or at least the Sixth Primarch pouring a torrent of excited comments and the Lord of Ultramar giving laconic replies. All the while Corvus Corax slaughtered some of the Tyranid command predators, proving that the Primarch of the Raven Guard might have gifted some of his essence to Elena Kerrigan, but he sure as hell hadn't lost his fighting proficiency.

As for her?

Well, the insect-mistress would love to claim she was blasting apart thousands of Tyranids every second, but no.

Her Dawnbreaker Guard had suddenly transformed itself into an assembly of mother hens, and outright denied her 'suggestion' that they move closer to the frontlines.

It had all been very polite, but led by Gamaliel, they had told her that she had taken enough risks...Taylor considered herself lucky that she hadn't begun to tell them of Khaine and the rest of the opposition faced on the *Vengeful Spirit*.

That didn't mean she wasn't killing a lot of Tyranids, but every part of it was done by her Swarm, and with the quantities of Adjutant-Spiders, the level of coordination she had available was so high it felt like she was the Conductor of an opera: the Adjutant-Spiders and the Queen-ants had been trained heavily, and though they played against an opponent which was a terrifying and twisted corruption of the Swarm, they executed their performance to perfection, from the Gladiator Spiders and the Baal Scorpions to the Ambulls.

"Those giant bears..."

"My Lady?" Captain Rhodes answered.

"Don't they look a bit like the Polar Megabears the Magma Spiders sent us vids about?"

"Now that you mention it..." Techmarine Renaldo affirmed seriously, "there's a strong resemblance with them. Of course, I didn't visit Polar personally, so I can't compare accurately how many traits they share."

"They are ursine animals and they are the size of a battle-tank," Kratos grunted. "Look very much alike to me."

"I'm sure a proper study will be made once we're safely back home," Stormseer Uriyangkhadai assured. "Assuming you don't intend to invite the Space Wolves to the Nyx Sector, my Lady?"

"Please don't joke about things like that," Vidal of the Knights of Dorn protested aloud. "I want to spend my architecture hours without hearing wolfish howls in the distance."

"Let me reassure you," Taylor fought the urge to laugh at the noises of consternation made by many members of the Dawnbreaker Guard. "While it is true that I have the possibility to invite a few more Chapters to the Nyx Sector, it is not my intention that said invitations will be made to the Space Wolves. The primary reason which surpasses all others is that gifts and invitations are intended to be a great honour, much like your vows for the Dawnbreaker Guard are a recognition of your skill, your honour, and the ties which exist between your Chapter and my life."

The same applied for the Dark Angels, in her mind. Taylor didn't know the exact circumstances which had led to the First Captain of the Night Lords escaping, but there was no excuse for not executing him for centuries. And when the Traitor had killed the Blood Angels' Chapter Master, this had made the reality that, save Gavreel, there would be no son of the Lion among the Dawnbreaker Guard for the foreseeable future more or less inevitable.

"I feel you thought about the idea at least for a few minutes, my Lady." Gamaliel gently teased her.

"I did, you're right. But to be honest, I dismissed the idea rather quickly, and not just because one of my Adjutants is busy organising a staring-contest with one of the giant bears. Artemis!"

"My granddaughter will be punished! Return to your duties, Neith! The ursine furball is not worth it!"

"Yes, Webmistress! Forgive me!"

"As I was saying," Taylor sighed, first the big tiger of Elena Kerrigan, now the bears? Her Adjutant-Spiders certainly knew how to create animal-versus-animal rivalries. "There are many reasons. One of them is that the planet which looks the most appropriate for a Space Wolves' implantation in the Nyx Sector is, all of you guessed it, Polar. And it would be a massive waste and an insult to the Magma Spiders. I officially made Polar part of the region they are responsible for, what kind of ruler would I be if I cancelled their prerogatives while they've fulfilled their duties superbly over the last decade?"

"That would certainly be setting a very bad precedent." Gavreel agreed.

"Not to mention it would be overkill." The Lady Nyx added as the skies turned to fire as the Aeronautica Imperialis began firing tens of thousands of missiles to shoot down the Legion of Gargoyles which had been detected a few minutes ago. "We already have two Chapters in this sub-Sector, the Heracles Wardens and the Magma Spiders. Yes, they are understrength right now and have other responsibilities outside those boundaries...but they won't always be understrength, and more than two Chapters would be extremely wasteful for the Imperium and the Quadrant as a whole. There are entire Sectors which don't have a single Chapter defending them..."

"I completely support your reasons," Diamantis announced, "and you haven't yet mentioned how-"

The Imperial Fist stopped his advance, and it wasn't because trampling the corpses of the Tyranids offended his sensibilities.

It was because the being which had just jumped in front of him was capable of making you freeze, no matter how skilled you were as a Space Marine.

"So you're back, my Empress." The Queen of Blades purred. "Missed me?"

**Chapter** **Master Agiel Izaz**

After his Thunderhawk, the *Spear of Nyx,* had been almost downed twice by the multitude of Gargoyles the gunners shot as quickly as possible, seeing Lady Weaver safe was a reward in itself.

And there was the power tying her to them...a few silent questions were enough to confirm that yes, it applied to all the Space Marines of the Blood, not just the Brothers of the Red or a single Chapter of the sons of Sanguinius.

This was...this was going to take some time to get used to.

And there were going to be plenty of...things to resolve. Agiel did not believe the Lady of the Nyx Sector had fully replaced their Father in their hearts and souls, but clearly there was something more now, something that had been magnified or revealed after sleeping for years.

The Chapter Master didn't intervene, though.

Not only it would be impolite...but the being the Dawnbreaker Guard had to watch like a hawk was the Queen of Blades. And whether you called her Lelith Hesperax or Aenaria Eldanesh, Agiel Izaz knew one talked about an immortal xenos capable of snuffing out your life like priests snuffed out dozens of candles with one breath.

Better to let Lady Weaver deal with the diplomatic side of things.

It was far better for everyone involved.

"Yes, I am *complete*."

"More than that, I think," the long-ear monster that Agiel had absolutely not missed since her performance in the Arena of Blades corrected. "Far more than that."

"I will show you, but once this battle is well and truly over. For now, my Swarm and my armies have a war to win."

"Agreed," surprisingly, the Eldar sword-mistress approved. And the Brother of the Red knew better than to think that was good news. "There are a few good challenges coming this way. It would be a shame to miss the chance to fight one."

"I suppose you're referring to the Bio-Titans of the Tyranids, aren't you?" Lady Weaver didn't even show the slightest amount of surprise.

"No," the Queen of Blades immediately shook her head, "I'm referring to the one which masquerades as one of them. You're feeling it, aren't you? It's coming for us."

"A psychic colossus," the golden-armoured Lady General whispered, though they all heard her. "An intelligence gifted in the arts of butchery and psychic devastation. The brutality of the Carnifexes elevated to new heights. And the psychic power of several Zoanthropes combined together."

"Then what are we waiting for to kill it?" Leman Russ asked, making plenty of Space Marines jump in surprise as they had not heard the Lord of the Space Wolves arrive.

Agiel had, but even then...there was something incredibly humbling about observing a Primarch from so close.

"Oh, look, the Barbarian King hasn't learned his lesson," the crimson-haired Eldar was an arrogant xenos, but the disdain she showed to a son of the Emperor had to be a new level of 'putting you in your place with a single facial expression'.

"You would do better to stay-"

"Lord Russ," the Lady of the Swarm said with a false smile and in much hurry, "could I suggest not antagonising the Queen of Blades? I will not be the one to tell your father you were disintegrated by the undisputed Queen of the Eldar Empire's Arenas."

"It might be worth it if he gave me a duel of legend," the monster mused. "Don't you think?"

Agiel was not the only one to groan. May the Emperor protect them from the xenos' abysmal sense of humour...

**Forgefather Vulkan N'Varr**

"It seems the sons of Corax, Russ, and Guilliman will have plenty of reasons to rejoice after this battle."

"We will have such reasons as well, when you think about it, brother," T'klis Rubix mused.

"Truly?"

"Of course! Since several Primarchs are coming back, including one coming back from the dead, then surely that means Vulkan lives!"

"You're right," the Forgefather agreed after a couple of seconds, humming as his mental strength was bolstered. "Vulkan lives. We may not have found an Artefact of Vulkan in this campaign, but I am certain we will learn much from his brothers, and this will give us new leads to find the Artefacts, and via them, our father. In the meantime, we will be able to improve our craft."

"We might even be able to do better, brother." Vulkan N'Varr was not a Space Marine who couldn't guess at hints thrown his way, but in this case, he had no idea of where the Firedrake wanted to lead him.

"I'm sorry I don't see where you're going with this."

"Our Lady wants Nyx to be the birthplace of the new standard Astartes Power Armour which will equip the Chapters for the rest of the 35th millennium. We, the sons of Vulkan, could play a great role in this."

"We participated in the development of the Mark IX, brother."

"Please," T'klis scoffed. "You know as well as I do we merely took an advisory role and tested it when we had the time with our brothers of the Dawnbreaker Guard. That's not the kind of involvement I would describe as critical, brother."

The Forgefather had to admit that the representative of the Magma Spiders had a point.

"Yes...though even we, sons of Vulkan, have to sleep sometimes. And we were often involved in repairing venerable war machines and giving our opinion on the Volkite weapons."

Weapons which had been proven to be formidably efficient. Still, at this moment, they were strapped to their backs, because incinerating the Tyranid corpses blocking their path was a job for their Flamers.

"True. And maybe our Chapter Master will say this is beyond our means. But in the case he doesn't say I'm wrong...the Mark VI is often associated with the sons of Corax, brother. And the Mark VII saw first use among the Imperial Fists and the Ultramarines. I think it would be something dearly pleasing to our father, wherever he is, to know the new Astartes Power Armour bears the name of Prometheus or another Nocturnan symbolic name."

"Personally, brother, I think this is a reasonable ambition. Of course, I am not the only one who-"

"Stop! STOP! Please stop, Angels of Death!"

Many things had surprised Vulkan N'Varr since they had arrived on Ardium, and one had just been added to the list.

Seeing a young man in the uniform of the Ultramar Auxilia wasn't that extraordinary, but when the entire hab-block they were torching had been crawling with Tyranids until Lady Weaver's Swarm decimated them...it was suspicious.

"Identify yourself!"

"Private Jeremius Vindictus, 3724th Infantry, Ultramar Auxilia!"

"He could be telling the truth, brother." T'klis Rubix conceded. "That was one of the regiments which didn't make it during the second retreat."

"Oh, I'm sure he's telling the truth about that, brother," the Forgefather replied. "The xenos have many talents, but unlike the treacherous vermin of Chaos, it doesn't appear that they can shape-shift into human form."

"Lord Angel of Death-"

"Be quiet, Private!" Vulkan continued his conversation with the Firedrake by vox. "Unfortunately, I am very suspicious that anyone, even the most resourceful guardsmen, can evade a million Tyranids in a hab-zone. Especially when those creatures have proven they will eat everything in their path."

It didn't help the man's case that about thirty-plus Auxilia soldiers emerged from the hole which must have been the entrance to part of the Asculum sewers.

"We lack Aethergold to see if they're corrupted." The Magma Spider warrior noted sceptically. "And I would prefer not killing any Ultramar man only to later acknowledge we made a mistake and the soldier was ultimately innocent."

"But you have a vial of Red Bacta left from the operation where we helped those civilians a few hours ago. And this man is wounded."

"That's...you think the Bacta will interact if there's something unpleasant at work?"

"I think," the Salamander said calmly, "that their story, should we choose to listen to it, would be entirely made of grox-shit."

The Private and his comrades were blabbering about their heroic last stand and some kind of adventure that, if true, would make them the equals of some Guard legends.

The Firedrake temporarily gave him his Flamer, and grabbed the Auxilia Private extremely gently...which did not mean much when one was speaking of Firedrake Armour. Still, no bones were broken...and the Bacta was administered as it was recommended.

The effect was immediate...and abominable.

All the veins of the Ultramar-born man, be they in his head or in his arms, began to shine in a fluorescent violet. "They didn't escape." His brother's disgust was evident. "The xenos injected them with...something."

"Indeed." The Dark Angels and the other members had spread some information about some kind of xenos virus-tech breaking the loyalty of the mortals serving among their flagship, but seeing this defilement with your own eyes was something completely different than reading the report. "I believe some Mechanicus Biologis teams are on their way?"

"They are."

Some days, Vulkan N'Varr really hated this galaxy.

"They will need a few individuals alive."

The Salamander didn't need to look at his Magma Spider brother to know the idea was incredibly unpleasant.

Unfortunately, they had to know more about this threat.

"For Vulkan. Into the fires of battle..."

"Unto the anvil of war," the Forgefather finished grimly.

**High Orbit above Ardium**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Overlord Imotekh the Stormlord**

If there had been one good thing about the Great Sleep, it was that they had been asleep.

Waiting for the aeons to pass while remaining conscious would have been a torture far crueller than anything his enemies might have imagined.

At some point, thinking of what you could have done better during a campaign lost all its interest. When you couldn't implement the changes to your phalanxes' formation in simple exercises, there was not much point thinking about war.

There wasn't much point thinking about the intrigues of the Sautekh Court.

Not when it didn't exist anymore.

Imotekh returned to pacing through the room that had become his prison.

To be sure, it was a nice prison...not that it changed the purpose. At least it reflected he was still an important and valuable prisoner of war.

Something that, in all honesty, the Overlord of the Sautekh Dynasty had a lot of doubts about these days.

Imotekh didn't doubt merely because he had been defeated.

That could happen to every Necron noble during the War in Heaven, and if he hadn't learned to accept the reality that there were greater powers at work than his mind during this long-past conflict, the Stormlord would not have survived long.

No, the defeat wasn't consternating by itself.

It was the totality of the defeat.

The Sautekh General couldn't deny a lot of factors had been outside of his control when he woke up, but it was still unnerving.

It didn't help that many of the issues which had led to the defeat at Mandragora and elsewhere were due to the pathetic performance of the Szarekhan and Sautekh Dynasties.

By all rights, their human enemies shouldn't have been able to set a single foot on the Crownworld of the Sautekh before being immediately disintegrated.

The Great Sleep had considerably weakened the Necron race...though how much was a question he couldn't answer with the extremely limited information sources at his disposal.

And so Imotekh was bored.

There was nothing to do but wait and...oh, no.

The thief was back.

In fact there was something worse than boredom.

Though this time, the infernal Nihilakh scoundrel of Solemnace didn't mind-control the military escort protecting his prison room.

"I bring," the plague had a name, and it was Trazyn, "an invitation."

"If it is an invitation to become part of your ridiculous exhibits, I refuse." Imotekh had heard several lesser Nemesors and Overlords of other Dynasties had thought they could topple the crazy Archaeovist once they reached Solemnace before taking control of all the military resources the thief had robbed from countless worlds since the biotransference made him immortal.

It never worked.

"As it happens," the thief agitated his ridiculous garments in a pose that was lacking in greatness, "this was not that sort of invitation. But if you are willing to reassess your position on the subject-"

"No." Better to suffer the permanent removal of all his memories than being stuck in a collection for the thief to laugh at for the next millions years.

There were things worse than boredom, and one of them was being an immobile prisoner stuck in a decor where he would be taunted and mocked until this galaxy died.

"Ah well. Let me know if you change your mind. Anyway. The invitation comes from Phaerakh Neferten of the Nerushlatset Dynasty, and my good friend Weaver has given her approval."

"You have no friends, *thief*," if there was an eternal truth this galaxy should consider true, this might be well it. "And what does your former betrothed want that I could possibly give her? I have lost all my troops. The only thing I have that my human jailors don't have in overwhelming numbers is my mind."

"And that is what the Phaerakh is interested in." The Master of Solemnace replied with his usual smug behaviour. "There is a species on the planet below the humans are busy fighting against. It is one that appears in none of the Nerushlatset Dynasty's archives or the Solemnace Collections...but these creatures, these *Tyranids*, appear to have devoured Aeldari flesh and integrated their psychic potential into their genome at a speed which surpasses every other exploit from a race created by the Old Ones. They fight, they adapt, and with each battle-phase, new units are created to take advantage of their enemy's weaknesses."

A representation materialised from a projector in Trazyn's hands, and seeing the appearance of the creature, Imotekh acknowledged that an enemy race capable of adapting into *that* was a credible threat.

"The Silent King's unwillingness to let us clean up this galaxy of the products of the Old Ones' madness was a monumental mistake." The Overlord declared bluntly. "Since I doubt the humans want me in command of their armies, I suppose I am to play the role of military observer?"

Granted, nobody had used this old tradition after biotransference, there had been no point to it anymore. But it had once been very common during the Wars of Secession.

"You are...provided you give your word."

Imotekh turned towards the soldiers waiting at the entrance.

"You have my word, humans. I won't try to escape. And I will give you my opinion on the ravening beasts you face."

And if the thief tried to use this as an opportunity to re-edit his last exploit, Imotekh would not be sorry to organise a little accident for him.

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Plains of Asculum**

**71 hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Brigadier-General Tanya Sevrev**

This was like the good old times already.

Xenos corpses were pushed by the gigantic machines of the Mechanicus towards hastily made piles where they burned by the tens of thousands.

The skies were on fire as the Navy threw every missile and laser weapon it had to down the Gargoyles and other flying Tyranid horrors.

And in the middle of this, the Fay 20th was fighting.

Their equipment had changed. The Swarm had changed since Commorragh.

Even Her Celestial Highness had changed; Lady General Taylor Hebert was greater and more skilled than ever.

But war hadn't changed.

The goals didn't change.

Protect humanity from the things which wished to destroy it. Protect the Imperium and everything they loved from the new threats.

"Golden Throne, dead Tyranids stink like death itself!"

Tanya chuckled at the imprecation of her new chief of staff. Captain Maya Bilikides really had a gift for describing a situation in one sentence.

"Yes, not very courteous of them, is it?" The Brigadier-General replied before returning to more serious matters. "This is going to be one hell of a fight."

"We thought something like that was in order," the Colonel who had replaced her affirmed on the vox. "Their vanguard is darkening the horizon, and yet we aren't bothering digging trenches. We don't exactly need a strategium and three army-dedicated hololiths to know we aren't going to stay on the defensive."

Every piece of artillery which had arrived on Ardium was firing now. It didn't matter if the gun in question had come from the strange portals transferring regiments from Macragge or directly from the macro-transports of the fleet in orbit; everything was firing at the mass of xenos coming to kill them.

"And Hive Asculum isn't exactly a good defensive position," a female Lieutenant who sounded way too young for her rank spoke. God-Emperor, had she ever been that young? "The Tyranids look like they were able to chew up half of it before Her Celestial Highness killed them all."

"The Lady General didn't kill them all, unfortunately. Just this big army the cogboys are burning."

"When you're willing to fight an army by yourself, Theo, just let us know."

"Can I borrow a few spiders?"

"No, that would be cheating!"

"Aww, too bad..."

At least they were confident.

They had reason to be, to be fair. From the devastation of Mandragora to the dark pits of the Ymga Monolith, the Fay 20th and all the Fay regiments nearby had fought, and emerged victorious.

They had survived the Necrons, and spat in the face of some of the oldest horrors. The near-totality of the officers above Captain rank were veterans of Commorragh.

Everyone had an excellent Carapace Armour, which in general had saved their lives more than once.

"They will enter the Chimeras' optimal gun range in thirty minutes if we stay here."

And they wouldn't, of course.

Like all officers, Tanya had heard the briefing on the Carnifexes. These tank-eviscerating abominations mustn't be allowed to get to close-quarters in significant numbers, or the casualties would make Mandragora look like an amusing joke.

"Not that I doubt the wisdom of the higher-ups, Brigadier-General, but why are bare-chested Squats coming to stand before our lines?"

"I'm afraid that wasn't mentioned in the orders I was given," Tanya Sevrev admitted. "That said, don't worry overmuch for them, if they want to die-"

"DOOM!"

The first Squat's scream seemingly silenced over one hundred regiments.

No, it was not a scream.

It was something which was far too powerful to be called 'scream'.

Strangely, the Fay-born officer didn't think it was something generated by a psyker's trick.

It was...it was merely the rage of a being who didn't care at all if he lived through this, as long as he could vent his rage upon the enemy.

"DOOM!"

"DOOM!"

"WE ARE DOOMED, BROTHERS OF THE SLAYING!"

"NO LONGER ERRANT! OUR DOOM IS HERE!"

The Tyranids advanced upon the plains of Asculum.

More and more artillery was coming. Rocket launchers, some of the old Manticore variety, were launching their enormous payloads before withdrawing to more secure distances.

Machines roared. Millions of men, entire Brigades from Indiga, were taking their positions, their commands relayed by thousands of ants, beetles, and of course the loud encouragements of the Adjutant-Spiders.

"DOOM!"

Gigantic things became visible on the horizon. They were like dark mountains on the move.

Tyranid Bio-Titans.

"DOOM!"

And the armies of Battle-Group Stalingrad and the Ultramar Auxilia forces that had managed to arrive on the battlefield in time screamed their defiance.

"DOOM TO THE TYRANIDS!"

"DOOM TO THE XENOS!"

"WE MARCH FOR ARDIUM! DOOM AND DEATH!"

"FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR! FOR LADY WEAVER AND THE PRIMARCHS!"

The Tyranids' numbers grew beyond the ability of anyone not-augmented or possessing insect-controlling powers to count.

"DOOM!"

A few Necrons teleported in on the extreme left flank in a flash of green.

There were portals on the right flank which opened to disgorge a column of Eldar, 'escorted' by a small army of arachnids.

"DOOM!"

"Well," Tanya smiled, "it seems everyone has arrived in time for the final battle."

"Praise the Webmistress and attack!"

"FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

"DOOM! AVENGERS! ASSEMBLE!"

**Herald** **Aurelia Malys**

It was a relief to be back on the world of Ardium.

For all the power and protection merging with Lhilitu's essence had given her, the Ocean behind the Veil was a very dangerous place, and Atharti's protection could only go so far.

Thus yes, Aurelia was very happy now that she was back where the Sword of Paths had waited for both of them.

The same, alas, couldn't be said about the red giants surrounding her Empress.

They didn't growl when she stepped forward, but the Space Marines were not far from doing so, and only an idiot would fail to notice their hostility.

"You're late." Taylor Hebert didn't look at her, but Aurelia Malys wasn't offended. Right now, *Maelsha'eil Dannan* wasn't really looking at anyone with her eyes. The helmet was just providing a nice protection against casual observers realising it. And no, the Herald of Atharti couldn't really explain how she knew that.

The God-Forging – or rather Goddess-Forging – must have had...unforeseen side-effects. Unless it was the fact they were both Muses now, both in title and in power?

"I apologise. Transporting the sword of the Bloody-Handed to a secure location was...more taxing than I expected it to be. And convincing Ulthwé to send an expeditionary force so close after the last battle needed plenty of convincing too."

"My Lady, you can't trust-"

"She's here and she's speaking the truth." The Empress spoke in a fairly neutral and emotionless tone, and the one of her protectors who had begun his rant – if Weaver really needed protectors by this point – became silent. "They will play their role."

That didn't mean the other red giants were convinced.

"They brought far too few numbers to weigh in on the outcome of the battle, my Lady."

"You misunderstand me, Jegudiel. The role of the Eldar is not to win this battle. Their role is to *witness*. The Tyranids are the irrefutable proof that there are things in the galaxy you can only face with military might, and with the annihilation of Commorragh, it doesn't matter how good the Seers of the different Craftworlds are, since there will never be enough of them."

The hostility of many of the bodyguards-wardens decreased, most notably the ones which didn't have yellow or red armours. Though Aurelia wasn't going to claim they were about to declare mutual friendship. It was just that they were not going to point their enormous guns or blades at her if the Empress didn't command it.

"Are you certain?" The fact that the black-armoured giant closest to *Maelsha'eil Dannan* asked it and she'd been able to hear was a good sign it was meant to be heard.

"Ignoring the Eldar after the destruction of Biel-Tan didn't work," the Mistress of All Spiders replied with an emotion that had to have some traces of amusement woven into it. "So I'm going to try a new plan. If that doesn't work, there will always be time to shift the strategy to something involving far more violence. And there's some measure of good news: everyone will soon be able to distinguish the corrupted Eldar from their non-corrupted kin."

That much was true. And all the followers of Addaioth were going to loathe *Maelsha'eil Dannan* until the stars grew cold for the curse she had placed upon them.

But Aurelia was sure the Empress had factored this into her **Administration** Aspect.

The calculations had been made. The balance had been weighed between letting Addaioth get away with the defiance and the treachery manifested before, during, and after the birth of Atharti, and punishing the fell Power of Vainglory.

And the pretender-God hiding itself in the heart of Shaa-Dom had acted so decisively against Weaver that the verdict couldn't have been anything but a declaration of guilt.

It wasn't worth thinking about what could have been, in the end. What was done was done, and Aurelia was reasonably certain that what had been enacted could not be reversed.

This was why the Herald of Atharti used her new powers to study the battlefield.

For all the artillery of the humans, for all the lack of grace, the army assembled was filled with *potential*.

Some of it would undoubtedly burn bright and not survive this battle.

The red-crested warriors with their enormous axes standing in front of the first lines were...doomed, exactly as their screams implied. They didn't think about the next battles. Their thoughts were all about the carnage to come.

But there were others. A giant who was not one of the Space Marines, clad in black armour and wielding an enormous sword.

Women in red armour flying standards of a silver flower. The short-lived troops flying standards of beetles and various insects were all important in their own way. So were the thousands of red armours of the giants preparing their greatest war machines for the assaults against the ravenous enemy.

Three Demigods were waiting as far in the rear as *Maelsha'eil Dannan* was. The Lord of Wolves. The Lord of Ravens. And the Lord of Order.

They were the heroes of the humans, summoned by chance, duty, and Weaver to fight this battle.

And then the Great Devourer truly turned their attention towards them.

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Having the Tyranid Hive Mind pressing against her parahuman powers was extremely unpleasant.

The worst part was that Taylor was ninety-nine percent certain the baleful power of Behemoth was not trying to usurp control of her Swarm.

This was 'only' the manifested hunger of the Tyranids that the impossibly dangerous xenos didn't repress. Whether the cold intelligence she had dubbed Behemoth couldn't suppress the effect or thought the power brought more advantages, the Lady General couldn't say.

And ultimately, the former wasn't mutually exclusive with the latter.

"Let the battle begin..."

The cataclysmic confrontation began properly in the skies, as Taylor had known it would.

More than fifteen thousand Bombers and their escorts were committed in this first wave; the atmospheric-capable elements of the Battle-Groups and everything that was still flyable of the Ultramar Air Force which had defended Ardium in the last hours.

And of course her insects able to fly at these high altitudes went with them.

The Tyranids sent all their Gargoyles to meet them.

"You don't do subtle today, my Lady."

"No, I don't Gamaliel. Subtle won't work anyway. The Tyranid are no mere beasts. That's why I went with a plan that leaves little to chance."

"And this plan is?"

"The Imperial Navy is sterilising Hive Quartus' ruins and pushing the Tyranid army towards us with their orbital strikes. They are the hammer." Though Taylor was alas sadly sure that Behemoth had understood what was coming for it and thrown everything available at them before the Navy executed the first orbital bombardment. "The Imperial Guard and all the forces we've been able to muster here are the anvil."

She winced as dozens of Marauder Bombers died a very fiery death and began their final descent onto Ardium. This campaign had proved the old workhorse of the Aeronautica Bombing Squadrons was obsolete, and replacing it would have to be a high-level priority after this.

"Is that why you didn't cause too much of a ruckus when we insisted you didn’t go anywhere near the frontlines?"

"In part," the Angel of Sacrifice nodded. "But the bigger reason is that there's nothing in the Tyranid tide we're soon going to clash at close-quarters with that can win them the battle if I am able to annihilate it. The Bio-Titans that are over twenty kilometres away are the real command nodes of the Tyranid Army, Gamaliel. And the Zoanlord behind them is the only General whose death can't be replaced."

The Destroyer of Commorragh had wondered how the enemy was going to react now that it knew that defeat was in sight. After all, the defence of Commorragh had utterly collapsed when its denizens were attacked from several directions at once.

Readings of the Imperial Guard's archives had also informed her of the scenarios possible when a human army in the 35th millennium thought defeat was inevitable.

But the Tyranids weren't human, and they were proving it beyond doubt now. The cold intelligence had certainly acknowledged its defeat, but it was still fighting as emotionlessly and relentlessly as in the last several hours.

It was like a player of a strategy game who would continue to move the pieces no matter how impossible ultimate victory was.

Only the disappearance of the player’s forces involved would force the player to concede...until the next game.

That was what they were facing today.

"Fortunately, the Indigan regiments I sent to Macragge had yet to be engaged. And the clowns gave us the means to transport one million of them to Ardium."

The other Imperial forces of the different Battle-Groups in high orbit were more numerous than one million, of course, but transporting all those regiments from the ships to the battlefield was taking more time the Tyranids were not going to give them.

"I'm surprised you didn't order the transfer of millions more," Gavreel noted conversationally, "the Word Bearers are all dead and gone, after all."

"The Traitor Astartes are gone," the winged parahuman answered keeping her eyes on the tens of thousands of vehicles manoeuvring to avoid presenting a vulnerable target to the Carnifexes, "but I know better than to hope that they have not left a lot of unpleasant surprises behind, especially in the Illyrium District. Furthermore, before allowing my forces to travel to a different planet, I want them to have been on the receiving end of Lisa's light orbs for days. There might be a few cases able to slip through the cracks, but that way, we will avoid massive chaotic corruption."

"My apologies, my Lady. I hadn't thought about that."

"To be fair, I was willing to take some risks," whether they fought on Macragge or Ardium, the guardsmen involved were going to be under a strict quarantine at the end of this campaign anyway, the time for everyone to be sure they wouldn't spread any corruption across the stars. "But the Inquisition wasn't."

"Lord Inquisitor Tor-"

"The Lord Inquisitor isn't the only member of the Ordos I had to negotiate with in a hurry."

Each Inquisitor was an independent power in his own right, and woe to any General who forgot this in the glorious madness one called 'battle'.

"Signal General Dundee." She commanded as the gap between the two armies fell under one kilometre. "He can unleash everything. All our Space Marines save the Dawnbreaker Guard will support his advance."

And thank whatever goodness existed in this galaxy the Tyranids hadn't been able to field more than five thousand psychic Carnifexes, one-fifth of which had been already destroyed at long-range.

"And the Primarchs?

"I told them they could deploy their own forces as they wish; I will keep my word." Honestly, Corvus Corax and Roboute Guilliman had readily agreed that since it was her army and her training, it was far better for her to be in command; the least she could do to thank them was to let them to monitor their own Space Marines and other forces as they wished. As for Leman Russ...well, there was always the old good saying about not giving orders when you knew they wouldn't be obeyed.

The lasguns opened fire by the millions. Bolters and other famous tools of war sang a terrible litany of destruction. An ocean of firepower was directed impeccably with all the professionalism one could expect of the Indigan Praefects, renowned monster-slayers of the Imperial Guard.

But the enemy didn't break.

The Tyranids retaliated with torrents of acid, millions of bio-projectiles causing unspeakable agony to their targets.

And when the surviving Carnifexes began to slam into the Imperial Armour, the battlefield unravelled into a chaotic bloodbath.

Yet in this battle which was going to remembered for ages, there was still something that could surprise her.

"The Squat Slayers are still alive?"

**Venerable Ancient Pierre**

Pierre had not thought the assignment would be easy.

Lady Weaver did not give him easy assignments. That's what lesser and less talented operatives were for.

Moreover, it involved Borek and Leet. Pierre didn't know what those two walking disasters had been up to for the last decade, but he had heard a summary of their arrival from Kratos. They had arrived from out of nowhere with a forty kilometres-long warship, and if that hull was not a relic from the Dark Age of Technology, he was ready to be fed the original Codex Astartes as part of the nutrient soup keeping alive day after day. A hull which, his contact among the Adjutant-Spiders had confirmed, was likely hiding an Abominable Intelligence.

The Emperor only knew what kind of disasters waited revelation, but Pierre was too experienced to not believe that the void leviathan they had used as transport was anything more than the tip of the iceberg of bad news that would result from Borek and Leet's tale.

The order of his Lady made perfect sense.

The Slayer and the crazy Tinker had to be kept alive at all costs.

This might be a tad more difficult than he had originally assumed, however.

"DOOM! COME AND DIE UPON MY AXE MONSTERS!"

Pierre fired all his weapons that his heavily modified pattern of Dreadnought contained to destroy the Tyranids trying to attack him frontally. For the rest, he had to rely on the Swarm. As much as it pained him to be only as subtle as a Black Templar, there were too many enemies coming at him. He had to trust the spiders and the scorpions to protect his flanks and back.

And no, it was not him who was screaming.

"DOOM! HA! HA! HA!"

The anonymous Slayer was not Borek. His musculature was less impressive, and the ugly red mohawk all Slayers turned their hair into was bigger and wilder...proving that yes, it was possible to be a fashion disaster on a battlefield.

None of it mattered when the crazy Squat devastated his surroundings by making enormous circular swipes with his axe.

It had to be a plasma-powered relic, one of a kind the Heracles Warden had never seen before.

This was...interesting. Power Blades – even Power Axes – existed across the entire Imperium, with recent models developed at Nyx on the pattern of the STC *Masamune*.

But a close-quarters weapon including miniaturised plasma technology to make the sure the axe could slice like an Eldar blade?

That was definitely new.

"DOOM! I'M COMING BESSIE!"

Fortunately, the short and insane being jumped towards a pack of a dozen Tyranid Warriors, and Pierre was able to push forwards and protect the back of Borek and Leet.

To be honest, Borek didn't need much support.

The Squat had proved it at Commorragh, and he proved it again now: when he was on the warpath, there wasn't much that could seriously threaten him. Lady Weaver could likely handle him. A Primarch could too. The rest? Unless you caught Borek exhausted and in a near-dead state, it was likely that your last sight would be an axe entering your field of vision.

There was a reason why, for all he had promised to seek a glorious and final doom in expiation of some wrong, Borek had not yet managed to find it on the different battlefields this galaxy had no shortage of.

The Slayers were dedicated doom-seekers. And they proved it once again today, on the devastated terrain before Hive Asculum. Their numbers were few, but none had fallen yet. And this despite the fact all of them were bare-chested, that none of them wore anything which might be considered an armour, and the little problem many Tyranids exhaled toxins capable of paralysing Astartes and outright killing normal humans.

Needless to say, at the risk of repeating a mind-shattering revelation, Leet wasn't an Astartes.

Still, the Tinker was alive. The Slayer was alive too.

And as the battle became their whole universe, it was Pierre's job to make sure the improbable duo stayed that way.

It was done as subtly as possible...which meant it was an exercise of brutality and pure murder. Hundreds of xenos perished by the toys the Tech-Priests had allowed him to wield. He was likely going to need a very thorough decontamination procedure and many layers of paint to stop stinking as rivers of Tyranid blood sprayed upon his armour.

But he was succeeding, and after being involved in the resurrection of a Primarch, this was-

"THE TYRANID BIO-TITANS ARE ADVANCING! BROTHER SLAYERS! OUR DOOM COMES TO US!"

"Oh no..."

For once, Pierre agreed completely with the unreliable Tinker – unless you wanted reliability in explosions, those Leet could be trusted to provide with stunning regularity.

The Venerable Ancient slaughtered four Tyranid Gaunts more audacious than the rest of their horde and looked northwards.

Unfortunately, the Squats had been right.

The greatest xenos horrors had stopped their long-range bombardment and were advancing again. And they were cloaked with psychic halos of red-black which couldn't be considered a good omen.

There was a moment when you realised that some opponents were beyond you.

This moment was now.

Pierre didn't turn, the flow of Tyranids didn't allow it, but he addressed the spider protecting his back.

"ADJUTANT. PLEASE INFORM LADY WEAVER THAT I AM REQUESTING ASSISTANCE. MY WEAPONS WILL BE INSUFFICIENT TO PROTECT THE INFERNAL DUO FROM TYRANID TITANS."

A second later, silver lightning began to rain down on his right.

"AND PLEASE ALSO INFORM HER THAT THE QUEEN OF BLADES IS NOW GOING TO TRY TO CHALLENGE THE SLAYERS. I THINK THEY ARE IN A CONTEST TO SEE WHO WILL KILL A BIO-TITAN FIRST."

"Message relayed. Praise the Webmistress!"

**72 hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**The Queen of Blades**

Before Commorragh, Aenaria had not had to remember her oldest memories for thousands of cycles.

Now that Commorragh was no more, everything these days seemed to revolve around them.

Lelith Hesperax, arena-mistress extraordinary of the Dark City, had no need for that old baggage. They were mementos of failure. They were filled with death and pain. Mourning and sorrow came with every cycle, and one had to find ways to keep oneself sane.

She wasn't completely successful, but then who was?

The Yngir had been too powerful, and even their greatest slaves were mostly insane.

Aenaria remembered, for all her attempts to forget.

This new period of upheaval wasn't that bad...yet.

The key word was the last one.

"You just had to make a joke, didn't you?"

She *moved*.

She unleashed a strike which would have pleased Vaul.

Five hundred and fifty-five Tyranids died.

The Queen of Blades knew it wasn't a coincidence.

Few things were, in this galaxy tainted by the faded remnants of destroyed Empires.

"You named an Empress, and you killed the former Emperor and his treacherous mother. What were you thinking?"

She knew the answer to that before she asked herself the question.

Aenaria had been *bored*.

Bored by the petty rivalries of the Noble Houses of Commorragh. Bored by the absolutely lamentable failures of every 'rival' who proclaimed that next night, surely they would be the one to surpass her. Bored by the plots of the ex-slaves, who in the shadows whispered they would be the ones to inherit the Empire, failing to realise they grasped at the ruins of a twisted and decadent port in the Webway.

And now there was an Empress again, and things weren't boring anymore.

"I am the wind which roams over the steppes. I am the water which flows over the cliffs. I am the fire of volcanoes returning the heart to creation. I am the metal hardened by every trial. I am all of them. I am the shadow and the blade. **Die**."

The creature the humans had called a Bio-Titan was powerful, both psychically and physically. But power was useless if you didn't know how to use it. The psychic shrouds they cloaked themselves with were only to be commended if your opponents adopted the same kind of 'battering rams'-tactic you did.

Against someone like her, it was nothing more than a death sentence.

Her first strike severed one of the four enormous legs of the colossal monster. The second, third, and fourth strikes cut apart the remaining legs. The fifth decapitated the Bio-Titan.

Something snapped in the psychic connections of the Tyranids.

Many turned feral for several heartbeats, before being controlled again, but there was a hole the other towering colossi were desperately trying to fill.

"This..." there was something wrong. These psychic Titans were supposed to be the Zoanlords, or at least one was supposed to be the nexus giving the orders to the rest of this enormous army of fangs, blades, venomous maws, and talons. "It can't be trying to-"

A lifetime of hard-fought battles and unequalled reflexes told her she was in danger.

Aenaria *jumped*.

She didn't try to conceal her strength, and as a result it was more self-propelled flight than leap by Eldar standards.

It was barely in time, as a colossal blast of psychic power erupted into existence.

It was akin to a furnace of red-black psychic energy.

It was a beam of utter annihilation, whose power was so intense the corpses of the Bio-Titan and its bodyguards she had just killed were destroyed as if they had never existed.

"Cunning foe," the Queen of Blades complimented her enemy as it revealed itself for the first time. "It was a trap the whole time, wasn't it?"

Sadly, the ruthless and cold intelligence wasn't capable of answering.

It was too bad. An attack which could have very well killed her deserved some recognition.

The barbarian Demigod had called it 'Zoanlord', but he like everyone else had failed to recognise the trap before it was sprung.

This was not a Bio-Titan. The things which had forged the flesh of this creature had combined a psychic creature's enormous potential and the body of a gargantuan tunnel-burrowing unit. It was not a brutal hammer which would bombard the enemy armies at long-range and let them despair.

It was a cunning commander, hiding until it felt it had the best chances it would ever have to win.

"This...is going to cause a problem."Aenaria admitted as she flew above the revealed threat, evading psychic blasts, spore clouds and shots from acid-filled guns trying to bring down her defence. An exercise in futility, as she was too fast for them. "I hope the humans will not get the wrong idea and-"

Yeah, it had been another mistake to say it out loud. The veteran of the War in Heaven looked below, and sure enough, one of the small warriors with a gigantic axe had rushed towards the Zoanlord.

With a formidable – and very loud – battle-cry, the axe-wielding ugly maniac jumped to deliver a fatal blow to the spikes-covered head of the enemy leader.

**DEVOUR**

"Oh, Morai-Heg be-"

Aenaria used her psychic powers to throw herself to the side.

The Sea of Souls *shrieked*.

And for all her efforts to avoid it, when the shockwave came, the Queen of Blades had to reinforce her shields to not be injured.

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

**DEVOUR**

"What just happened?"

Taylor needed only a few seconds to have an answer.

"Behemoth's answer for the Queen of Blades."

Part of Taylor's mind was a bit impressed, really.

After losing psychic Carnifexes and countless other Hive Tyrants to Aenaria Eldanesh, the Hive Mind had indeed acknowledged that it was futile to challenge her to a sword fight.

So its new solution was an overwhelming display of psychic firepower.

**DEVOUR**

Multiple beams of pure destruction were hurled at the last Muse of the defunct Empire.

The Queen of Blades avoided them with ease.

The follow-up attacks were the equivalent of monstrous psychic air blasts, and the legendary sword-mistress of Commorragh had to protect herself by summoning psychic shields.

**DEVOUR**

Part of her was really impressed, but the other part of her was worried.

If that was what the Tyranids could come up with given a few hours of campaign and with only a few ships available, what the hell would they have faced had the Imperium been unable to stop them in time?

It would be like fighting a virus.

It was not a Swarm like hers. A Swarm implied it was made of insects or arthropods which would somehow coexist with their environment.

The Tyranids' only limits were the pace at which they could devour a planet and the ones their enemies would enforce against them.

**DEVOUR**

As the Angel of Sacrifice, Taylor could see a lot. And she could see that this super-Zoanthrope was so powerful it was damaging the fabric of reality.

"The Primarchs are advancing, my Lady."

"Tell them to stay away, please." Taylor grimaced. "It would be different if they were dedicated psykers."

"They aren't, but it doesn't mean they are powerful enough to-"

"This 'Zoanlord' is psychically draining all life around it."

That included all other Tyranid units, by the way.

Behemoth had boosted this monster to a level of psychic power which was unlike anything that had come before, but this in turn meant that nothing was immune to it, not even the other Tyranid Zoanthropes. They had simply exploded as the ripples of the psychic attacks spread across the battlefield.

As for the vanguard of Indigan Praefects which had been trying to lead a decapitating attack upon the Zoanlord?

It had died without achieving anything.

Over one thousand men and one Duardin Slayer eliminated in less than three seconds.

After this battle, they would be granted heroes' funerals...all of them would be with sealed caskets, alas.

"I am going to have to intervene."

"My Lady, I think that is a very bad idea."

"The Queen of Blades isn't going to be able to slay this monster quickly enough on her own." Something more than verified a few seconds later as reality was severed in a hundred strikes...and the Zoanlord was left completely undamaged by the hurricane of blades which had been trying to end it.

The battlefield around them was torn apart. Ardium's plains of Asculum were toxic and hardly perfect for harvest cultivation. But in mere seconds, they gained *canyons*.

Big ones.

"I still think it is a very bad idea. How do you even intend to reach the enemy? The skies are a bloody war zone and-"

"Oh, I am not going to move from this spot. This is a battlefield of the mind."

Taylor closed her eyes.

"Librarians, protect me."

The female parahuman called forth the Aspect she had been given by Ynesth.

It was part of **Administration**, **Hope**, and **Sacrifice** now.

Three Aspects in One.

And yet in many ways, it was reciprocal. The One existed to serve the Three.

This would not be a Fourth Aspect.

It would be One to empower and support the Three when her powers were brought to their limits and they weren’t enough.

Like today.

**Administration** could master legions of insects, but what use it could be when even her most powerful insects were drained to death long before getting to attack range of the Zoanlord?

**Hope** could rekindle the courage of vacillating hearts, and dissipate the darkness in the minds of those who believed all was lost. But it could not change the possibilities of winning when there were none.

**Sacrifice**...she had already sacrificed so much to arrive here. But would it do anything to this monster? Even if she was to sacrifice each and every human psyker present on the battlefield, even if she added the psychic power of the Eldar delegations minus Aurelia Malys and the Queen of Blades...it might not be enough.

And if it was not enough, **Sacrifice** was not worth it.

No, the only weakness of this psychic killing machine would not be revealed by them.

But maybe **Origin** would.

**The Queen of Blades**

Aenaria hated opponents like these.

No grace. No elegance. No imagination.

And most disgusting all, no talent whatsoever in wielding a blade.

By the unlimited decadence of dead Slaanesh, the Queen of Blades wasn't sure this enemy had the capability of wielding a sword or anything the Tyranids used as a substitute, despite having two elongated 'arms' with which to do so.

No, the claws and maw had only been there to burrow ahead of the psychic onslaught.

Now the Zoanlord was levitating and draining everything of life.

She struck.

*I sever. Die.*

**DEVOUR**

Be it in the War in Heaven or the conflicts which had followed it, she had only seen this kind of opponent a few times.

They were shrouding their bodies in so much psychic power that the cloak drawn from the other dimension was a peerless shield by itself.

It had its flaws, of course. Chief of them the fact that if you tapped into the Sea of Souls too much, your body wouldn't be able to tolerate it at some point and then you would mutate beyond recognition, or one of the entities would use your flesh like a puppet of meat.

Or you were going to annihilate the planet you were on and everything nearby.

That was what happened to a few...Old Ones...

Ah, Khaine damn it.

*I sever.*

**DEVOUR**

**Origin**

The devastation stopped.

The enormous fissures into the planet ceased to grow in size.

Suddenly, it was as if the sun was caressing her skin again, despite all the fires and dark smoke covering the skies.

"It seems I was right to proclaim you Empress, then. And-"

An enormous shadow came over the battlefield.

At first, the Queen of Blades thought it was a new monster, but within a few heartbeats, she realised that was not the case.

It was a flying mountain.

To be accurate, *the* flying mountain she had seen orbiting this bloody world called Ardium.

And it was falling. Fast.

"Well, I got my wish. This galaxy isn't boring anymore."

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

The calculus was simple.

The conclusion was irrefutable.

An enormous mass of rock like a mountain, falling at several kilometres per minute, crashing with a reduced but non-null speed on an inhabited world?

That was the kind of apocalyptic event no one in the vicinity was able to survive.

Roboute didn't know fear.

In that instant, he almost wished he could experience it, if only to distract him from the calculations which left no place for doubt in his mind.

They were caught between the disaster of the *Fang* and the enormous devastation provoked by the Tyranid commander and a hyper-powerful Eldar fighting each other.

There was no stratagem. There was no way to retreat. The malevolent psyker powers of the Tyranids had jammed the teleporter beacons and everything nearby.

And second by second, he felt himself becoming weaker.

He was not drained like too many humans and monsters had been, he was too far away from it. It challenged everything he knew...but the Primarch of the Ultramarines felt that as Ardium died, so was his strength waning.

And then the final onslaught began.

*Sever!*

**DEVOUR**

**Origin. Query? Symbiosis.**

The entire battlefield exploded in maelstroms of black-red, silver, and gold.

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Taylor saw them.

Oh yes, **Origin** had allowed her to see *them*.

To be clear, the Living Saint had always known since this battle began that Behemoth and all the creatures it had sired were not the only Tyranids in the galaxy.

Since there was one hiding on Catachan, and one sleeping in the oceans of the Fenris, that was one too many for it to be a coincidence.

But now the parahuman could see *them*.

**Origin** had let reality fade around her, and Taylor was seeing the Zoanlord for what it was.

It was a scar injuring reality itself.

It distorted reality and drew too many disturbances from the Warp for it not to provoke a massive catastrophe even in the short-term.

But it wasn't the main purpose of the Tyranid command unit.

The main purpose was to let the psychic strands ordering the Tyranid army receive their orders.

For behind the reality-shattering breach in the fabric of reality, the *true* Behemoth was waiting.

Now that **Administration** and she had merged satisfyingly, Taylor could count huge numbers at ridiculous speeds.

Yet even with this ability, the numbers of this impossible armada were beyond her.

There were so many ships like Behemoth...granted about four-fifths she saw were largely smaller...but billions could still outweigh a Warp-capable Imperial Destroyer. Maybe trillions. Maybe *quadrillions*. There was no end to them...

For all her power as the Angel of Sacrifice, Taylor could only peer through the Zoanlord 'gate-scar', and even then...

The insect-mistress knew when the Tyranids realised she was truly seeing them.

**DEVOUR! DEVOUR!**

The baleful power of Behemoth increased to unprecedented levels.

Forget the idea of taking control of that. Taylor was many things, but she wasn't delusional enough to believe she could stand against that.

There was only one option. The Tyranids were far too strong for her, but there was a flaw in their strategy.

The Zoanlord.

The female parahuman tightened all her power into a golden web.

Flashes of calamity were summoned before her eyes. A mountain crashing into Ardium. All life expunged from the world she was trying to save.

She couldn't-

Taylor wasn't powerful enough.

She was going to need help.

**Origin. Query? Symbiosis.**

And then Taylor detonated the web.

The shriek of mental fury she heard before her mind returned to the Materium was incredibly satisfying.

**Beyond the last star of the Eastern Fringe - the Galactic Void**

The Tyranid Hive Mind rarely felt bothered by the futile gesticulations a prey could make before it was consumed.

This battle had been the exception.

Before the link between their asset and the closest Hive Fleet was broken, the Great Devourer's last view of the galaxy it intended to prey upon was the sight of the Zoanlord being trapped inside a web of light, resulting in the implosion of the vessel the guidance was provided from.

And the Tyranid Hive Mind, for the first time in an eternity, felt a genuine emotion: hatred.

It was not because the Hive Mind cared very much about the loss of the Zoanlord. Assuredly, the loss of its biomass was regrettable, the inability to assimilate the curious flesh giving so many useful and strange abilities a setback for future devouring campaigns.

With the death of their most useful synapse creatures, the army assembled on this planet would be easily broken and defeated. Bleeding the prey, forcing it to expend quantities of finite biomass while at the same time the Norn Queens analysed the prey’s tactics would have been useful. The inability to achieve these goals was also inconvenient.

But the Tyranids' Hive Mind sudden ability to feel something deep, something enraging, went beyond that.

For a brief moment, the prey of gold and red had existed where no one but the Hive Mind should thrive.

The Tyranids, for all their complete dedication to devouring, could very well recognise a challenge from their prey. This was a prey which had denied them assets, biomass, and above all the delicious pleasure of devouring what they wanted, when they wanted.

The Hive Mind was not the kind of entity which swore oaths, but the infinite numbers of the different Hive Fleets would not forget that on this day, unanimous agreement was reached.

This prey was going to die.

The Great Devourer would make sure of it, no matter how much indigestible devouring had to happen before it was achieved.

**High Orbit above Ardium**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**72 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Back**

The Necrons had tried their best, but even the strange and mysterious technology these metallic xenos used had been too little, too late.

Wolfgang and all the bridge crew of the *Enterprise*, along with tens of thousands of souls had tried to warn Her Celestial Highness on the surface.

But it was useless.

The psychic interferences made things so that exchanges were garbled and erratic at best, incomprehensible at worst.

The explosion, when it came, was not unexpected.

But it wasn't the kind of fiery cataclysm the Tech-Priests had predicted.

If anything, it was more akin to a sort of...crystallisation of Ardium.

It was as if suddenly, the planet was in the process of freezing.

And it wasn't a phenomenon which was limited to the main theatre of military operations either.

It was as if many distant locations and zones far distant from the positions of Asculum and Quartus were heavily affected.

"What in the name of the God-Emperor is happening?"

**The Warp**

**Symbiosis Domain**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

This time, Taylor didn't lose consciousness while travelling to it.

She wasn't sure if it was much better honestly. Outside of the Domain, the Immaterium was really a dimension of horrors beyond counting.

"**I wasn't expecting you to be back so soon, my Empress**," Atharti gently teased her.

"Neither did I." Taylor huffed. "The Tyranids are...a far bigger problem than I thought them to be."

Given that she had already thought them something deserving the description of 'galaxy-level threat', that was quite the feat.

"**As you say**."

The Goddess had embraced **Harmony** to welcome her. Her skin was green, and her tunic and the rest of her attire was entirely made of leaves. They were flying over a never-ending forest, though this one did not look tropical at all. It was more the kind of wooded area native to a temperate climate. It was a forest which looked old and seemed to be filled with hidden secrets, the kind one easily imagined hundreds of adventurers losing themselves in every year.

"Did your intervention come in time?"

"**Yes. Though I was forced to...improvise since there was too little time left**."

"Improvise?"

"**The soul of the world that was called Ardium was already wounded by millennia of careless exploitation, and this battle almost completed its death, Taylor. A few more minutes of damage caused by the Tyranids, and you would have inherited a dead world**."

"But you managed to save it." The Angel of Sacrifice didn't like the silence after she spoke. "Didn't you?"

"In a certain manner."

"In a certain manner," Taylor replied dubiously.

"**There was a crystal aboard the mountain about to crash and kill millions. The Wolf King used it to save and preserve the life of the World-Spirit his life was tied to. I used my Symbiosis to merge this crystal with the spiritual core of the dying planet**."

The knowledge the Primarch of the Space Wolves had done something like that didn't surprise Taylor. Well, it surprised her Leman Russ had the means to do it, but not that he would go for it if it was within his capabilities. The father and the sons shared certain tendencies to ignore all the rules when they didn't suit them.

"I...I think I understand." This was...unprecedented. "The World-Spirit of Fenris is going to dominate the merging, isn't it?"

"**It will**." Atharti gave her an apologetic expression. "**A Goddess I may be, but I can't create from nothing something that doesn't exist**."

"And I don’t blame you for this." The insect-mistress assured truthfully.

All the while she tried not to sigh.

The ruler of Nyx wasn't a specialist in planetary-scaled psychic merging – assuming someone like that existed in the first place.

But it seemed that in the future Ardium was going to be overwritten by Fenris' essence.

That was...not exactly good. Okay, Taylor had never visited Fenris before it was seen on the long-range auspexes of the *Enterprise*, but the planet the Space Wolves had for their home since they were reunited with their Primarch was a legendary Death World.

There was no way they could use continue to use it as a Hive World, there would be billions of deaths in the first years from the wrath of the elements alone.

"**Now, while I don't want to sound too mercenary, my Empress, I expect to be generously compensated for my assistance**."

Taylor nodded. Calling on Atharti at the end had been a major risk, and the Lady General had not been naive enough to think it would be for free.

As far as potential casualties went, Aurelia Malys, all the detachments of clowns and Eldar psykers, and Taylor herself would have survived the destruction of Ardium. Her army wouldn't have, but since they weren't worshippers of Symbiosis-Carnality in the first place...

"I am willing to negotiate, Goddess."

The green-skinned beauty laughed and the bargaining began.

**Re-purposed Mountain Fortress *The Fang***

**73 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Primarch Magnus the Red**

Magnus had been the first to wake up after the not-so-controlled 'landing'.

Most of the time, to be a Primarch, even one who had been deprived of his psychic powers, was really useful in that regard.

But what mattered was that he was the first to recover.

And his chains, for all that they were made of phase-iron, had broken.

Magnus could have stayed on his seat, waiting for everyone to return to consciousness.

But if there was something neither Tzeentch nor Malal had been able to break in him, it was what he was in every part of his being.

Sanguinius might have been **Sacrifice** before his death, but Daemon Prince or not, Magnus was **Curiosity**.

And right now, the Fifteenth Primarch was filled with far more of it than usual.

The rare vid-projection devices revealed *The* *Fang* had landed on Ardium, without splattering itself in the process and killing them all.

There were vivid purple and green sparks of power rapidly dissipating and absorbing what remained of the Tyranid-inflicted damage.

There was a slowly growing layer of frost, and snow was beginning to fall.

All this pointed to divine intervention, and Magnus knew better than to think Tzeentch had done a favour to Weaver.

This led Magnus to ask himself certain questions.

And the answers were here, inside the *Fang*, to be found.

Magnus began his descent into the entrails of the *Fang*, as thousands of souls began to voice their surprise they had survived. No doubt his absence would be noticed in the next few minutes, if it wasn't already.

It didn't bother him.

Oh for sure they were going to hunt him soon. The Sixth always had superior trackers, and without his gifts, there was no hope of evading them. That was why he had not bothered trying to attempt a convincing evasion, by the way.

There would be a price to pay, in the days to come. So be it. Better to go back to Terra with his curiosity satisfied than to die ignorant.

And obviously, it would be all too funny to rub Russ' transgressions in his face.

The descent was long and complicated.

Finding what he searched for and how to access it was a succession of enigmas and mental exercises.

But at last, the Crimson King arrived before a gate which must have been placed here at a time their father walked and ruled the Imperium.

It was a gate decorated with a theme the Lord of defunct Prospero was intimately familiar with.

"Yggdrasil...the World Tree of the ancient Nordic myths of Old Earth." Had he had more time, Magnus would have stayed there for hours, studying the skill with which the long-dead Fenrisian artists had carved the precious silvery metal to shape it into this form.

But alas, his time was already was running out.

Magnus touched the gate and *pushed*.

Proof that *someone* had come here not long ago, the two heavy sections of stone opened without a sound.

It opened and it revealed...a tree of crystal.

For all his psychic blindness, Magnus could recognise the unique creation for what it was.

"This is a World-Spirit Receptacle...the Seed to create another World-Spirit when the previous one is lost."

No wonder all efforts to turn Fenris into a Daemon World had been stalemated. As long as the *Fang* stood, the planet was not truly vanquished.

It was pure genius.

It was not a mere violation of the rules their father had desired to enforce; violation would imply you acknowledged you had broken one or two rules.

What this tree of psychically-reactive crystal represented from the intricate roots to the exquisite leaves...it was just the absolute willingness to utterly ignore every last one of their father's edicts and lessons.

Magnus burst into laughter.

"Congratulations, Leman!" The Fifteenth Primarch chuckled. "Congratulations. You have surpassed my wildest dreams."

The Crimson King didn't dare touch the crystalline substance, for without the World-Spirit to give it solidity, the structure had to be extremely fragile. Whatever deity Weaver had forged and used for the spiritual transfer, the power keeping the tree extremely resistant had disappeared seconds after the process was over.

"Congratulations. You are really the King of Hypocrites."

Magnus laughed.

He was still laughing fifteen minutes later when the sons of Russ arrived to drag him back in chains.

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Former Plains of Asculum**

**74 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Primarch** **Corvus Corax**

It was over.

Corvus Corax had prepared himself for a long and difficult battle, but...difficult, the battle had certainly been.

Long, not so much.

Once the huge psychic leader had imploded when the phenomenal powers it wielded went out of control, the Tyranids' greatest war monsters had been on the receiving end of an enormous retribution from the Warp.

The Bio-Titans had seen their skulls and their chests explode under the psychic pressure. Well, those who had not been crushed when the *Fang* 'landed'. And those who had not been already mutilated by the vengeful red-haired Eldar.

This strategy of psychic drain might seem an excellent idea at first glance, but when it went out of control, the results were devastating for the side which had used it. All the psychic monsters of the Tyranid army, beginning with the Carnifexes and the Zoanthropes, had imploded shortly after the Bio-Titans and the horrifying acid-throwers of the things Tyranids used as heavy artillery.

In mere minutes, the Tyranids must have lost half of their surviving army – the *Fang* had, fortunately for the Imperial forces, crushed and incinerated millions of the Tyranids, not the human soldiers, when it finished its descent onto the northernmost part of the battlefield.

The xenos could have continued the fight, except of course they had no more leaders or anything to tell them what to do, and in this absence, they reverted to the behaviour everyone had already seen them adopt when the sixty kilometres-long battleship fell onto Ardium: they became feral beasts.

But unlike the last time, the Swarm of Weaver and the Imperial Guard were present in sufficient strength to exploit the breakdown.

Corvus had seen enormous waves led by Baalite Scorpions move in every direction. Thousands upon thousands of tanks and armoured transports had pushed their engines and charged in pursuit. Entire companies of Blood Angel Successors had accelerated their pace to decimate the Hormagaunts and Termagaunts before they could move out of reach of their Power Swords and Bolters.

The battle was not over, but it certainly had already been won.

And though the losses had been great, they had survived this invasion which seemed to have come straight out of a book retelling the horrors of the Age of Strife.

Corvus opened his palms and watched the skies.

"It is snowing."

"You only just noticed?" Roboute tried to joke, but the weakness of his voice didn't incite Corvus to laugh.

"Well, we were a bit busy slaying the last Tyranid Champions...and making sure you didn't die."

His brother was currently seated on an enormous empty canister used to store artillery shells, and the most tactful thing that could be said was that he wasn't looking healthy at all.

After erecting numerous devices which purified the air and installed several force fields, Archmagos Cawl and several Genetors had removed his helmet, and Roboute's face was incredibly pale and tired.

"How do you feel?"

"Weak," this time the voice was more 'normal' than the last time. "Tired."

Three transparent pipes went to connect with the grand armour of blue and gold, and after a second, the familiar noise of pumps was heard. Medicinal liquids were seen flowing in large quantities, and the irregular breathing of the Thirteenth Primarch grew better.

"I thought I would have...more time."

"You partially ignored the warnings of the Chosen of the Omnissiah," the senior red-robed representative of the Mechanicus pointed out in what could be a smug tone. "Fortunately, you were smart enough to authorise me to support you in case something of this nature happened when you couldn't count on miraculous pain-relievers."

"There isn't much pain," Roboute protested...truthfully it seemed, this time.

"There isn't?" Cawl's mechadendrites went into accelerated moves, and the flow of medicinal substances changed really quickly while the Archmagos took notes.

"That's because the intervention of **Symbiosis** partially removed your suffering," a female voice came to their ears.

Corax turned and made a curt nod as he saw who was standing behind them, protected by over a hundred Space Marines.

"Lady General Taylor Hebert. A pleasure to finally meet you in person."

"The pleasure is mutual, Lord Corax." The golden-armoured woman removed her angel-shaped helmet, and handed it to the black-armoured Astartes to her right. It revealed a face which was rather beautiful, though not inhumanly beautiful like Sanguinius or Fulgrim had been. The eyes, however...the eyes were shining with the light of a thousand stars.

Corvus Corax could stare back, but he was intelligent enough to know few would be able to meet this gaze for more than a few seconds.

That said, he didn't miss the exhaustion of the young Lady General. No one had left this battle in perfect health, but the soul his father had chosen seemed to be more tired than anyone else in this medical zone.

The commander of the Swarm and the vast regiments burning the dead Tyranid horde around them advanced, until her fingers touched the armour of Roboute.

The golden fingers burned in golden light for several seconds, a ruby on the back of her hand seemed to shed tears of blood...and then everything faded as if it had been a dream.

"As I thought. The power of **Sacrifice** is nearly entirely gone." The amusement was limited, but it was there when black eyebrows were raised. "When I told you to remain calm and in a strategist role, I didn't expect you to carve a path across an army of Tyranids, Lord Guilliman."

"I wanted to end this battle as quickly as possible."

"He really drank the pride juice of the Avenging Son brand," Corvus Corax corrected.

"Brother!"

"What?" The Primarch of the Raven Guard asked innocently. "Tell me it's not true."

Roboute grumbled, but failed to give a coherent answer. Once again, the truth of the Ravens triumphed!

"Anyway," the black-haired woman who had in all likelihood saved this entire campaign by herself continued, "Archmagos Cawl did a great job purging the Naga's poison from your veins, and the wounds to your throat and the rest of your body are healing satisfactorily. I do not feel any taint."

"Then why do I feel...so powerless?"

"Primarchs are far more than mere flesh and bone. So am I, I suppose...we can be generally described as a combination of three vital components: the soul, the body, and the mind. All of them are closely intertwined, of course. Your body is beginning its healing. Your mind doesn't seem to have suffered from any serious consequences...but your soul was damaged."

"And how does one heal one's soul?" The Nineteenth Primarch questioned respectfully.

"Shouldn't I be the one to ask you that, given what you did with Elena Kerrigan?" The star-filled eyes definitely shone with a humorous twinkle. "She's still alive, by the way. And she will need rest. She and an Eldar tried to kill Lorgar on their own before I arrived."

"I'm aware that what I did was...unprecedented."

"Unprecedented, he says," Taylor Hebert shook her head in clear exasperation. "Healing your soul is going to take time. Time and rest. You will have to stay far away from the battlefields for a while, and really spend your free hours doing nothing but non-strenuous activities. Read books. Listen to the tales the different Chapters of your gene-line have for you. Anything but waging war in person. You have to let your souls recover, Lords...otherwise the next time, the Enemy will try to use that weakness against you."

"Understood."

But the Lady General wasn't exactly taking their word for granted...as her next words proved.

"Archmagos Cawl."

"Chosen of the Omnissiah?"

"You are officially their Healing Overseer. And I grant you dictatorial powers to enforce everything that goes with the prerogatives of making sure they don't do anything stupid."

"Yes, Chosen of the Omnissiah!"

"I hope that doesn't apply to me, by the fires of Muspelheim!"

The growl was intimately familiar.

Russ had returned from the hunt, wolves and bears following him.

As if it had been planned beforehand, a time sun lit the enormous mountain now transforming the plains of Ardium into a...a mountain-dominated area.

One sin one was never going to accuse the Lady General of: she wasn't one to prostrate herself or roll over just because they were Primarchs.

"Your soul appears to be intact, Lord Russ. What is more concerning in your case is the amount of violations relating to the Edict of Nikaea, among other things."

"It has all worked out in the end, no?"

The glare that was directed at Russ reminded Corvus the face Malcador made when the Lord of Fenris uttered something particularly stupid or false.

"We aren't dead because I had the power to call for a unique divine intervention here, and for said Goddess to intervene so quickly, your father certainly increased her range of action. Otherwise I think my fleet would be in the process of sterilising Ardium from orbit."

Leman looked like he was about to protest...but the amused expressions coming from Roboute and himself likely discouraged their brother from trying his luck with strange and misleading explanations.

"But you're not in my chain of command, and for the time being, all's well that ends well," Lady Taylor Hebert sighed and went into appeasement mode. "We're all tired, and we will deal with the politics and repercussions of what happened another day. There is only one thing I'm curious about."

"Yes?"

"You saved Fenris' World-Spirit Lord Russ. You saved your Mountain-Fortress-Monastery." The mistress of arachnids stated as little snowflakes landed on her black hair. "Where exactly did you send the devastated planet that was your homeworld?"

Leman grimaced.

"Honestly..."

Roboute emitted a deep sigh.

"What have you done, *brother*?"

"To be fair, it was partially *my* idea," Corvus Corax confessed.

"It was your idea to do *what*?"

"Well, I told a certain rat-daemon that if it betrayed me, there would be...*consequences*." The Primarch of the Raven Guard smiled. "And it did betray me. So...I, acting in my persona of Avenger of Shadows, sent it a last gift to 'reward' its perfidy."

**The Eye of Terror**

**Skavenblight**

**73 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster**

Scrachit knew-knew incompetence when he smelled it, yes-yes! And this black-furred stupid-thing was guilty of it, yes-yes!

"Your fur," the most powerful Council member in all Skavenblight proclaimed, "stink-reeks of incompetence."

"Most Glorious and Invincible Arch-Warlord, I beg-beg your mercy!" At least the vermin-thing had the good-good sense to prostrate itself before Scrachit's peerless magnificence.

"Mercy?" The Supreme and Sublime Commander of All Verminus Warrens repeated the strange word. That had to be something the man-things had invented. Proper Skaven would not-not bother with such a useless thing, no-no! "Wrong-wrong word! There can't-won't be any mercy when I-I punish the slave-thing who stole-stole my dinner!"

"But," the black-fur wretch pleaded, increasing the Arch-Warlord's anger, "I didn't take-steal your dinner, Most Titanic and Genial Warlord!"

"You allowed it to be stolen-robbed," Scrachit Barbbuster squeaked loudly. "That is near-same thing!"

It was an outrage, yes-yes! A delicious piece-part of bacon-meat! Only for his-his glorious self! Freshly brought-taken from the Moulder vat!

This was more than an outrage, yes-yes! It was an insult to his-his glorious self, and wasn't he the most-most favoured of Malal? The one who would make all the Council of Eleven bow-bow to him?

"And continue to prostrate-crawl, vermin-thing!" The Arch-Warlord spat as the insolent looked up with terrified eyes. "Stormvermin! Beat-beat it again!"

But his guards didn't listen-obey. They looked up like the punished one did-did.

The musk of fear was spreading.

Scrachit turned, but prudently and cautiously. It wouldn't do at all to be stab-stabbed by an insolent-

No.

No.

This was-was...impossible!

Scrachit forgot every insult to his-his glorious titles.

Above Skavenblight, pride and jewel of Skavendom, there was a huge planet-thing.

It looked-appeared like-like an eye of fire and ice!

It was big-big!

It was coming straight for them-them!

"A PLANET IS COMING TOWARDS ME-ME!" Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster squeaked in fear-horror. "SCURRY-SCURRY! FIND ARCH-SPARK CONQUEROR! TELL HIM THAT IF HE-HE DOESN'T SOLVE PROBLEM, I WILL TELL MIGHTY MALAL IT WAS ENTIRELY HIS-HIS FAULT WE LOST-LOST SKAVENBLIGHT!"

**The Warp**

**Beyond the Veil of Macragge**

Cato Valens opened his eyes.

It was dark.

It was dark, but there was light.

The light was coming...from under his feet? Yes...but not just from it. It was coming from his body too.

And as the seconds seemed to pass like an eternity, the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines realised he wasn't able to hear his two hearts beating.

Suddenly, the memories flashed through his mind.

The Shrine. The Traitor Primarch. The Sacrifice.

"Practical: I'm dead."

Cato Valens looked behind him, and blurrily, as if a considerable distance away, the Fortress of Hera stood.

Something pressed him to rush in that direction.

Something equally strong pushed him to remain where he was.

And as the Ultramarine studied his surroundings, he acknowledged the latter point of view was by far the more prudent.

The shiny lights supporting his feet were akin to a standard Imperial paved road, one like tens of thousands that existed across the Realm of Ultramar.

But this road wasn't very large.

And on each side next to it, the abyss waited.

Cato Valens was a Chapter Master of the Adeptus Astartes and he had to be sure.

He stared at the darkness.

A pit of horrors was there in all its glory.

The old Space Marine looked away, and refocused his attention on the small golden road.

Here and there, there looked to be some rubies imbedded in it.

But the impression it presented was that...this road was incomplete.

And then footsteps echoed.

Cato saw them coming many...kilometres or any distance unit seemed inadequate...he saw them coming a great deal of distance away.

There were eleven of them.

As they approached, their identities were no longer in doubt.

One was a Custodes. Five were Space Marines, three of them proudly bearing the omega of the Ultramarines. And the remaining five were clearly soldiers of the Imperial Guard, though all were coming from different Regiments.

Their progression stopped when they were so close he could touch them.

"We are the Legion of **Sacrifice**, Cato Valens. Do you remember what you swore to the Angel?"

"Yes," Cato answered. "A **Sacrifice** for a **Sacrifice**. Guilliman was to live. Guilliman lives."

The son of Macragge didn't know how he knew this, but as the words were uttered, Cato knew instinctively they were the truth.

"Indeed."

One of the guardsmen came forwards. He was the banner-holder. And for all that the details of his face meant nothing to Cato, the words on the flag were accompanied by two beetles, one red, one gold, fighting side by side under the Aquila.

FOR FAY AND THE EMPEROR, Cato read.

"You have **Sacrificed** everything, Cato Valens. Your life and your soul being just the most obvious parts. But now another war is to begin."

"I hear the call."

It was not a figure of speech. While there were great lights in the distance, one propagating a melody which made him think of fruits and sugar...the real light, he felt, was far away, a beacon hidden by the darkness.

"You marched for Macragge in your time, but that time is now over."

A chest was opened and a golden helmet and a new Bolter were revealed.

"You, Cato Valens, need to march for Terra."

\*\*\*\*

**Mark of Oblivion: 75 hours after Mark Zero**

**Ardium theatre**

**Number of Primarchs alive: 4**

**Number of Tyranids still alive: approximately 200,000,000 (and decreasing fast)**

\*\*\*\*

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**The Ruins of Hive Asculum**

**75 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

This war had been won.

It was won, and yet it wasn't enough.

Victory by force of arms wasn't enough.

Not when she could see the gigantic mountain which had not so much altered the landscape as completely remodelled it.

Not when she could see all too clearly a multitude of problems coming her way.

Taylor was mentally exhausted. Physically, what she had become let her regenerate quite quickly, but her mind desperately needed some rest.

And once this last affair was settled, the insect-mistress swore she would find a bed and sleep twelve hours.

But there was one final powder keg about to blow which couldn't wait.

Diamantis and N'Varr walked by her side. She could have taken others, but to avoid provocations, more than half of the Dawnbreaker Guard was unsuitable, and many of the remaining ones were not noted for their diplomatic skills.

No, it was better to have a representative for the Salamanders and the Imperial Fists and no one else. The Angel of Sacrifice had to hope it would be enough.

The coordinates they had agreed upon were perfectly accurate, ensuring it was easy to find them. Everything was ruins in this part of the Hive, that much had never been in doubt, but Taylor noted with interest their 'hosts' had decided to use a building which had likely been used as the equivalent of the Adeptus Arbites in Ultramar.

That may be promising...or not. Time would tell.

The three Space Marines stood when they arrived in their field of vision. The two Astartes Captains, one in ivory Terminator armour and the other in a very traditional green, saluted and marched back a few steps.

"Supreme Grand Master Lucifer," the commander of the now completed Operation Stalingrad spoke.

"Lady General Taylor Hebert," the Chapter Master of the Dark Angels replied with a polite nod.

She could have let silence return, but this was posturing, and her intention was not to humiliate the Space Marines in front of her.

"I'm sure you know why I am here, but in case there was any doubt, I will confirm the only goal of this meeting is to deal with the titanic disaster the breakout of the Prince of Crows, also known as First Captain Jago 'Sevatar' Sevatarion of the Night Lords Legion, presents to the Imperium as a whole."

"I thought that was indeed the case." The Supreme Grand Master replied levelly. "And though I know it is too little and too late...I present my apologies."

"They are welcome nonetheless," the Shield of Angels knew the green-armoured Astartes was sincere, if anything. "But I am not the one who suffered the most from Sevatar's rampage after his liberation."

"The Blood Angels did."

Yes, and there was nothing to add. For a second, she thought Lucifer was going to say something else, but the leader of the First Founding Chapter – and certainly more than that – seemed...uncharacteristically hesitant.

"Why?" Taylor asked, trying to keep any emotion sounding like a stern accusation out of her voice. "Out of the nine Loyal First Founding Chapters, the Dark Angels have always been renowned as very pragmatic warriors when matters of great strategy are concerned. Why keep that Traitor alive all this time?"

"I could give many reasons," Lucifer began slowly, "and some of them are likely true. But in the end, I think the only answer we can give is that we were overly prideful. We thought that one day, we would be able to break that monster of Nostramo. We thought that no matter how hard he resisted the Interrogators, one day his breaking point would be reached."

Taylor resisted the urge to say 'well, that wasn't the case'.

"You speak of interrogation, cousin," Diamantis spoke in her stead, while N'Varr was immobile, evidently displeased by the actions of the Dark Angels. "But the Heresy and countless other conflicts since have proven that not only are Space Marines extremely difficult to subdue, they have an extraordinary resistance to interrogation by torture. And the Night Lords, for all their sins, were experts in this domain long before anyone saw the Heresy coming. What kind of information could you possibly hope to gain? The Night Lords Legion dispersed into an uncountable number of pirate warbands well before the Night Haunter died. All their pre-Heresy supply caches must have been looted and pillaged by now."

"All but one, cousin...at least that was what my predecessors thought, and I re-read the evidence before agreeing to this meeting."

"All but one?" Taylor asked neutrally. "That sounds oddly specific."

"It is," Lucifer agreed. "But I suppose we should begin...at the beginning. During the Thramas Crusade, the combined operations during which the First Legion proceeded to destroy over half of the accursed Eighth, the bastard sons of the Night Haunter had numerous allies to help them ravage Thramas and that entire region of space. One of them was the Predator Forge of Ulan Huda, a moon that some hereteks of the Dark Mechanicum were using as their lair. Somehow, by using forbidden technologies, they were able to warp it across the Thramas Sector and the nearby regions, plundering and causing a significant number of military disasters."

"You think Sevatar had information about where it fled when the Night Lords dispersed or marched to Terra?"

"Oh no," Lucifer shook his head. "The Unforgiven hunted Ulan Huda after the Scouring, and finally, near the end of M33, we found it orbiting a planet at the very limit of the Astronomican. It was abandoned. The surviving hereteks had used some of the remaining materials available to build themselves new warships and flee. The moon couldn't leave the system it had been found in due to the damage the Lion inflicted on it during the Heresy, you see."

That...somehow made sense. Though that opened many more interesting questions...

"When one of my predecessors found Ulan Huda, however, the incomplete databases confirmed what we already heavily suspected: the supplies available to the Night Lords Legion during the Thramas Crusade were well below our most optimistic estimates."

"That always happen in war," Forgefather Vulkan N'Varr interrupted for the first time. "I would be very surprised if the pre-war estimates of the Black Crusade that has just been fought weren't hilariously wrong too."

"Yes," Lucifer appeared to concede, "but Ulan Huda was mass-producing first-grade Astartes equipment well before the treachery of Isstvan. So did many lesser Industrial and Forge Worlds allied with the Night Haunter. All things considered, even after new analyses made during the thirty-second millennium, there is too much equipment missing."

"Missing," Taylor frowned, "as in 'we never captured it, missing', or 'we never saw it in use by any side, missing'?"

"The latter."

"And what kind of war equipment are we talking about?"

In her guts, the insect-mistress was ready for a worst-case scenario. The Dark Angels had the *Invincible Reason* and the *Rock* to play the role of hammer and anvil. They weren't going to be worried about half a dozen Bolters and a Predator Tank.

"The missing equipment should include twenty thousand Astartes Power Armours, and enough firepower in tanks, aircraft, and other support elements to be in conformity with the thirty-first millennium military treaties prescribed by Terra."

Hell and damnation.

And if the Prince of Crows was really the only Space Marine to know where this war treasure was hidden...

"I see..." this was bad, but well...there was nothing she could do about that problem. Sota-Nul and her accomplice had certainly long since left the Macragge System. Taylor didn't see why they would stay here and risk getting killed, at any rate! "Well, nothing I can do about it for now. And I will thank you for your honesty. Now let's get to the main problem: while the death of Chapter Malakbel could be a matter left to talks between the Blood Angels' senior representative and yourself, the Prince of Crows can't. There have been too many witnesses. The High Lords are going to be informed, sooner or later."

Probably sooner rather than later, given the magnitude of the problem.

"Sooner, I think," Lucifer remarked calmly. "May I presume, Lady General, that you intend to inform Terra yourself should...certain conditions be met?"

"You presume correctly," Taylor nodded. "My armies have saved Macragge. Operation Stalingrad is a splendid success." Though one which had cost a horrible price in lives, but unfortunately, she had known it would not be cheap the moment the planning for the campaign began. "And victory excuses many sins. I am willing to...present your mistakes to the High Lords and say judgement has already been delivered, only waiting for their seal of approval."

Vandire wouldn't like that at all, of course. The Grand Provost of the Adeptus Arbites may have a heart attack. But the others were likely going to cheer, since it meant that they could focus on other problematic Chapters...like one of insubordinate wolves, perhaps?

"And what would this judgment include, Lady General?" The Supreme Grand master asked with careful but genuine interest. "I prefer to avoid settling the matter before the High Lords, obviously, but I don't know you well enough to know what you call 'justice'."

"I would divide it into three parts," the gold-and-ruby-winged Angel of Sacrifice felt that at last, she was in familiar territory. "The first is preventing the mistake from happening again. The second is paying the debt. The third is ensuring the current mistake doesn't generate too many problems."

"An...interesting stance." The Dark Angel stated. "And the details?"

"Preventing the mistake from coming true again will require you to kill every Traitor and heretical prisoner you have in the halls of the *Rock* and whatever prisons you have control of. I won't ask any questions about how they arrived there. I won't come aboard your headquarters to inspect each cell one by one. But I want them to be removed from this galaxy. Forever. As proof of your good intentions, you will release the corpses into Inquisitorial custody, and the Holy Ordos will confirm before incinerating them. Should any notable prisoner have escaped with Sevatar, you will inform the Inquisition so that they will be put on the Most Wanted List alongside the Prince of Crows."

"Acceptable," the Supreme Grand Master replied after several seconds of silence. "The next condition?"

"The Blood Angels lost their Chapter Master," the ruler of Nyx forced herself to keep the sorrow out of her voice. "Whatever terms they impose upon your Chapter tomorrow, it will involve a blood debt. When a Regent of Baal will demand your help, be it in ten years or in ten millennia, the Astartes who will hold the Supreme Grand Master title will come in person to provide said help, with the appropriate support to make sure victory is possible."

"The...the exact phrasing of the oaths will need to be negotiated. But I agree to this condition."

"And last but not least, a kill-team will be assembled before this year is over so that the escape of the Night Lords' First Captain's remains extremely short-lived. You will provide Space Marines and intelligence to it, under Inquisition monitoring. This task force, and only this task force, will participate in the hunt for the Prince of Crows."

The Dark Angel remained silent for far longer, this time.

He stood immobile like the perfect statue of a knight, as snowflakes fell nearby upon the ruins.

"Agreed," Supreme Grand Master Lucifer conceded at last.

**Not far from the damaged Hive Asculum**

**Leviathan Super-Heavy Mobile Headquarters *Defender of Ultramar***

**76 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Primarch** **Roboute Guilliman**

Theoretical: Primarchs could be absolutely powerless to act. Arriving at Terra too late to change the outcome of the final battle was one such moment he had experienced, but hardly the only one.

Practical: not only Roboute did feel powerless now, he was *physically* powerless.

Belisarius Cawl and the other Magi working under his orders had strapped him to so many machines that it was quite lucky the Ultramar Leviathan had survived this war: there were few vehicles capable of holding the machines attached to his armour, his armoured body, plus two other Primarchs while keeping minimal operational capabilities.

His ability to move was incredibly limited now.

And that was pretty much the good news. The bad news...had truly earned their name.

"So Hanzo is dead."

One of his brothers was dead. True, Roboute had pretty much lost hope after their genitor ordered the removal of his statue and everything related to the Second Legion, but the Emperor was not infallible. He had been wrong before.

"I only spoke with a few members of the Dawnbreaker Guard," Corvus commented, "not Weaver herself. But from what I heard, death was pretty much the only mercy he could be given when she found him."

Roboute could very well believe it. There were moments when it was preferable to die, and what had happened to the Primarch of the Tsunami Sabres definitely sounded like one of those cases.

"I suppose I will have to return him to his homeworld," the Primarch of the Raven Guard continued. "Of course no one will remember the Second Legion, but-"

"Brother," Leman Russ interrupted in an unusually grim voice, "the Traitors burned the Second Legion's homeworld during the civil war. There's nothing but a dead planet to return him to."

"Why the hell would they do that?" their raven-haired brother asked. "After the Legion's last military assets were removed, it was just an average world. One with a remarkable feudal military culture, high mountains and enormous oceans, I won't deny, but hardly the kind of critical hub one would need to deny to an enemy."

"I don't know," the Primarch of the Space Wolves shrugged. "All I know is that when I saw the report, I went in person to verify that the information was right. And it was. I don't know why they did it, but the world was a smoking ruin when I arrived. The Seventeenth were the ones responsible for this atrocity."

The more hours passed, the more Roboute was incredibly glad the sons of Lorgar had been slaughtered by the tens of thousands before he killed their father. Their elimination had been more than deserved.

"We should have strangled that Legion of oath-breakers at Monarchia, not just forced them to bend the knee." The Lord of Ultramar sighed, wondering how many dark schemes had already been waiting there behind seemingly loyal masks. "Hanzo's body is in the Lady General's possession, I take it?"

"It is."

"In that case," Roboute said, the decision evident in his mind, "I will formally make a request for Hanzo's mortal remains to be relinquished into my custody. There is a Shrine which has recently become unoccupied. As Hanzo died loyal to the Imperium, there is no reason to hide his body or how he was lost anymore."

"That's...that's not a bad idea, actually." Corvus Corax approved. "He deserves to be remembered. I'm sure Magnus will approve too. He and Hanzo were rather close."

"They were speaking to each other far more than any of us here, yes," Leman growled, and the two other Primarchs chuckled. It was good that four millennia gone or not, some things stayed the same. "But our one-eyed brother's approval does not factor into what must be done."

Roboute and Corax exchanged a glance of frustration. The galaxy was really too small for those two egos...

"What?" The Lord of Wolves barked when they looked at him.

"Oh, nothing," Roboute cleared his throat, something that created some light amount of pain in his organs. "I've heard a Custodes vigorously insisted Magnus and you must depart for Terra as soon as possible."

"We will be in the first ship to leave the moment the quarantine is unofficially lifted, Roboute." Leman grimaced. "Apparently, the Captain-General and his officers are not exactly impressed that I needed over four thousand years to bring Magnus back to Terra."

"I would not expect congratulations if I were you once you enter the Inner Sanctum."

"I won't. But I have to do it. And this is a convenient gathering point to summon all of the Great Companies who aren't here with us already."

It was more than that, it went without saying. Roboute had not been able to read even a tiny fraction of what had happened in the last four thousand years, but he had heard the Space Marines' exchange their colourful opinions during the battle. And many Chapters, the Dark Angels above all others, had not been sent to Fenris to congratulate the former Sixth Legion. The current High Lords of Terra were certainly going to have a word or two to say to the Primarch of the Wolves too, when it came down to it.

"In the meantime, I will tolerate the presence of your mountain upon one of my sovereign planets." The Primarch of the Ultramarines told his brother in a fake 'I am so generous' voice.

It would also give him a chance to assess what had been done with all those psychic phenomena he didn't fully understand. The snow and the brutal change of climate, while tolerable for now, were not something to take lightly in even the short-term future. Ardium's population may have to be progressively evacuated once the quarantine was over.

"Thank you for your unlimited generosity, brother!" Leman affirmed before giving the painful truth as if he was about to visit someone who was going to tear him his teeth one by one. "I will admit I don't know if I will be able to make the *Fang* fly again. The damage was...considerable. Damn Lorgar. He's really lucky you killed him, Roboute. I would not have given him such a quick and easy death."

"Please," their raven-haired brother shook his head. "You were always an executioner, brother. You don't play with your food...and you aren't stupid enough to toy with an opponent as dangerous as a cornered Primarch."

"You're right. I am not." Leman grunted. "Well, the evil son of Colchis is dead. Good riddance, I say."

"Yes," Corvus agreed slowly, "that said, while I don't want to give bad news, there's one other treacherous sibling who may not be as dead as we thought."

"If we're talking about Alpharius' twin-"

"I'm talking about the Eleventh."

Roboute blinked. But that was-

"Impossible," Leman immediately denied, "he is dead, brother. I duelled him. I defeated him. And I killed him."

Roboute grimaced. The Lord of the Five Hundred Worlds had always suspected as much, but had never really found the courage to ask the question.

"He can't be alive." The growl was both filled with fury and...something like apprehension? "I destroyed his two hearts with my spear. I annihilated his Legion. I destroyed the homeworld of the Eleventh, and I salted the earth so that nothing would ever grow again on that wyrd-forsaken soil."

That was...incredibly ruthless, even by the standards of the Sixth.

"Wasn't that a bit of overkill?" the Primarch of the Raven Guard questioned, apparently sharing the same opinion that he had.

Russ laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound.

"You didn’t see what I saw, brother. Lorgar at least believed himself a priest of the Gods, a servant of things bigger than his fanatical head could handle. The Eleventh...*the Eleventh wanted to become a God*."

Before Horus betrayed them, Roboute would have wondered if Leman hadn't suddenly become mad...but after seeing the atrocities of the Traitor Legions, the implausible had become disturbingly possible.

"So what could possibly make you believe he is still alive?" Russ asked, a bit calmer after his diatribe.

"Weaver fought undead Astartes animated by some Necromantic psychic power somewhere. And they proclaimed they were obeying the will of an entity called the King in Yellow."

The Lord of Fenris grimaced.

"That was one of his titles...one of the few things which survived the psychic scouring our father did after I returned to Terra. I will...I will make a request to the Custodes. The corpse should still be in their possession. But he can't be alive. I killed him..."

Roboute Guilliman sighed internally. Of course after four thousand years of absence, he was going to have to deal with four millennia of problems...

"I hope you don't have a lot more of those problems to deliver to us, *brother*."

"Don't worry, Roboute," the reassurance from Corax was...not much of a reassurance, actually. "Aside from NOT being signatories of the Bacta Conference, your sons were relatively skilled when it came to the avoidance of playing stupid games."

"Say what?"

And of course Leman immediately howled in laughter...

"I don't see what exactly you find funny, Leman. My sons told me the Ultramarine envoys behaved like imbeciles, but yours weren't even there!"

The expression on his brother's face was priceless, though it was a really, really weak compensation for the disaster of huge strategic consequences he felt Macragge had committed in his absence...

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Warmaster Ezekyle Abaddon**

Ezekyle didn't look up from the vast daemonic map he was studying when the door of black slime and twisted metal opened.

He hadn't heard any sound of fighting outside, and all of his Ezekarion brothers were quite busy right now. That left only a single person the Black Legionnaires would have let pass without violently opposing the intrusion into his inner sanctum.

The footsteps were slow and assured.

It slightly amused him that in all the time spent since the first campaign, this habit had not changed.

"Weaver killed Lorgar."

The Warmaster of the Black Legion would be a liar if he claimed that he was surprised.

"Guilliman lives. The Avenging Son is weak and vulnerable, but alive."

He continued to try to decipher the complex symbols of the map. Ah, if only the creator of this incredibly useful artefact had been willing to join his Legion...but alas, the xenos had proved...extremely uncooperative.

So uncooperative in fact he had tried to bring down an entire base to take Ezekyle and the Astartes accompanying him with him in death.

"I had a vision. I saw Weaver walking in the Imperial Palace. I saw her Swarm darken the skies of Terra. *I saw the* *Eternity Gate open for her*."

What a waste. There were few talented artisans in the Eye of Terror who had the imagination and the lore to make stable artefacts, especially maps.

"Do you really realise, *Warmaster*, what it means?"

This time Ezekyle Abaddon, greatest warlord of the nine Exiled Legions, had no choice but to react.

"*Prophetess*, watch your tongue."

Immediately, the thing that pretended to be a blind old woman kneeled in a mocking affirmation of loyalty.

"I apologise, Warmaster. Still, the importance of the vision-"

"You have not told me anything I didn't already know." Ezekyle revealed truthfully.

Watching the expression of shock from the Damned Seer was one of his rare guilty pleasures. The fact he was unable to arrange it frequently made it all the more delectable when it did happen.

"But...I apologise, but why...Warmaster?"

In times like these, it wasn't difficult to remember that for all the pretensions of loyalty of the Prophetess, she was just a different weapon the Chaos Gods used to test him.

Drach'nyen was a really unsubtle threat and bribery attempt wrapped in one object. It was an entity of utter malevolence, something Sorcerers of old had sometimes called a *Daemon King*. In his hands, as long as he was able to master it, even killing a Primarch was far from an impossible task. Of course, what most of the denizens of the Eye failed to understand was that, at the first defeat, the End of Empires would turn on him and devour his soul.

The crone-looking being was not that kind of unsubtle threat. It was a chalice filled with the sweetest poisons, and you never knew if you had the antidote beforehand to make the beverage worth the risks it entailed.

"Lorgar was a fanatic and he abandoned his Legion to Erebus and Kor Phaeron."

And with those two in charge of the Seventeenth, they would never win the Long War. Ezekyle would trust the intentions of the giant rats of Anarchy far more than the Vile One's and the Black Cardinal's. At least the rats were honest about what they were.

"Lorgar was a fanatic and weak. Lorgar was a fool. He had one of the greatest Legions within his grasp, and yet he destroyed it for a battle that shouldn't be fought. He got what he deserved."

The best part was that Ezekyle was absolutely sincere.

"And the Avenging Son? If he sails towards Terra-"

"He won't." And he hadn't needed Seers to know that. "Guilliman does sometimes commit short-sighted mistakes, but he did not build Ultramar by playing stupid games. If he doesn't know already, he will soon discover how much the Imperium has changed. Going to Terra when he is weak and his Ultramarines have been given a well-deserved lesson in humility would be the end of his reform ambitions, and he knows it. Moreover, he can't rely on the threat of an enemy at the gates that will force the squabbling Lords to restore his ancient privileges and authority to him."

And that assumed his two brothers would have let him become the Lord Commander of the Imperium again. Corax, on his own, may have let him try. The Ravenlord was not fond of tyrants, but he respected the Lord of Ultramar.

Russ, however? Not a chance.

"But Weaver..."

"Enough." The man most of the Imperium called the Despoiler ordered. "Plans are in motion, Moriana. You do not need to concern yourself with the Angel of Sacrifice unless I command you to focus on her."

"It will be as you say...Warmaster."

The Damned Seer was lying, and blatantly at that. That was...a shame. He would have to tell Iskandar to watch her. Just in case. The Prophetess was a useful source of intelligence most of the time, but there were things Ezekyle Abaddon wasn't ready to tolerate. Not now, not when the Long War had entered a new and challenging phase.

And if Moriana was ready to disobey and go against his orders, well...she would neither be the first nor the last Seer he had to kill in his life.

"I didn't summon you to speak about what happened in Ultramar. Tell me. You have been given the opportunity to study his work now that his deception has fallen apart. Do you think the King in Yellow found a way to create his own unique construct of Noctilith in the pursuit of his mad ambitions?"

Moriana stayed silent for many heartbeats.

Her voice was more a croaking sound than something truly human when she answered.

"Yes. The bones weren't transformed Noctilith, but it is clear there was *something* to sustain them. The probability was high it was a ritual. And the only possible stabilising agent would be Noctilith attuned to the essence of the ritual's creator."

Any other day, it would have been fascinating to see one of his guesses end up true.

This was, unfortunately, not one of those days.

"Interesting, really...interesting. It will give that arrogant king a decisive advantage. The Warpsmiths monitoring the Octarite stocks we have report it is getting more and more brittle. Meanwhile this enemy won't suffer from the same weakness. If only I knew how he acquired this secret..."

For the first time in...as far as he could remember, something looking like fear crossed the Prophetess' face.

It didn't last long, but it was there.

"Warmaster...there is a possibility which is incredibly...worrying. I think there may have been a way for this undead usurper to obtain this Secret that should never have been his."

"And this way is?"

"He must have walked through the labyrinth of the Tower of Silence. The King in Yellow must, like yourself, have survived Uralan."

Ezekyle Abaddon had lost the ability to feel fear long ago.

But the news provoked in him a shiver that was not caused by excitement or battle-lust.

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Former Plains of Asculum**

**89 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

They met in the middle of the devastation, and her Swarm and the Dawnbreaker Guards were the witnesses.

As much as she wanted to sign a treaty with some of them, there was no way it could be properly done here and now. Too much remained unknown, and there was news from many parties which could change everything.

It didn't help she could only speak as the Lady of Nyx and a Lady General of the Imperial Guard. The formal communiqué of the victory had been sent to Terra hours ago, but it would take many days before they received an official answer from the High Lords. There would likely be nothing coming with the Seal of the Senatorum Imperialis before a formal session met under the emergency procedures. And then the High Twelve would have to agree to a course of action unanimously, or at a super-majority close to it.

As a result, when she spoke before the representatives of the three other species arrayed before her, it was simply as Taylor Hebert, Lady General of the Imperial Guard.

And it was not to congratulate them once more about their military prowess. It was to warn them of the apocalyptic threat she had seen with her own eyes.

"The Tyranids are coming."

Imotekh the Stormlord was the first to react. The Sautekh General, unlike the others, seemed to have acknowledged the possibility of the Tyranids being more than they seemed.

"How many?"

"Conservatively, trillions of bio-ships like the Escorts Behemoth tried to increase its numbers with. There may be more. I could only observe them for a few seconds."

"This battle has attracted their attention?" an Eldar with green skin she didn't recognise spoke in a panicked voice.

"No," Commander Shadowsun told the long-eared xenos before Taylor could. "Many of the warriors of the Empire went to fight against the threat of what we called Gorgon in our very different era. And we hard many rumours that the Gue...that the humans were fighting them too on other fronts. The Tyranids were going to come no matter what the Lady General and the other armies assembled at Macragge did."

"I agree," Eldrad Ulthran came forwards, his blue skin indicating he had embraced **Moderation** of all the choices offered to him. "We have been given an advance warning of the peril we will all have to face."

"True," Phaerakh Neferten supported the Eldar Farseer's statement, which had to be a political novelty by itself. "I suppose we will organise many conferences and meetings to debate about it. But speaking as the Phaerakh of the Nerushlatset Dynasty, I will provide the following realistic assessment. This galaxy is not ready to fight against such a threat. The Tyranids, being psychically active or not, will defeat everything we can raise to oppose them with. They may not devastate Necron worlds, for we are indigestible even for their maws, but they will devour the inhabited planets and everything that may sate their infinite hunger. And none of the current Empires or factions have the strength to stop them."

"The Necron Dynasties, united under a single leader, could stop the Tyranids." Overlord Imotekh argued back.

"And do you think anyone can reunite the Dynasties without the command protocols of the Silent King, Stormlord?" The Nerushlatset ruler asked rhetorically.

"No," the defeated noble admitted. "Even the threat of those bloody monsters of the Maynarkh wouldn't be able to do that."

Eldrad Ulthran stepped forwards.

"As much as our Asuryani pride will get in the way, we have to admit this is not a threat the Craftworld have the numbers and the skills to deal with...my Empress. What is the wisdom you wish us to relay to the souls of Isha's children?"

"I don't know if I can speak of wisdom," the insect-mistress tried hard not to laugh. "I will just speak of what I think is repeating the obvious: if we spend most of our time fighting each other, weakening our armies and our not-infinite forces, the Tyranids will devour us. I believe no one will make it easy for them. I believe we will all fight until the last weapon is broken and the last warrior falls. But ultimately, if we try to fight these monsters alone, we will die alone."

The Imperium Indigan Praefects were superb monster-hunters. They would have been overwhelmed in short order if not for her Swarm and the support of thousands of Space Marines. And unfortunately, Taylor was not so naive to think one could muster so much of the Eastern Fringe's military resources at a single battlefront without paying for it dearly elsewhere.

"The Tyranids are an enemy we can't negotiate with. They see us as dinner, and Behemoth has proven they will fight to the death before they relent. This is the Enemy Without. At the same time, each species assembled here has other enemies in common. The dark monsters of the Warp. We give them many names: abominations, parasites, daemons, and more. They are the Enemy Beyond."

"All the while," Ethereal Aun'shi began, "all species are plagued by their own internal contradictions and disunity. This would make it...the Enemy Within."

"Exactly," Taylor nodded. "Within and Beyond are the greatest threats right now, though Without, in many ways, already existed with threats like the greenskins."

And based on what Neferten had told her before this meeting, it seemed the Old Ones had really screwed everyone before being exterminated during the War in Heaven.

"We have to solve these problems. We need a plan...or knowing the Tyranids are on their way will have proven futile in the end."

The rest of the debate was essentially arranging the future conferences, meetings, and accepting the possibilities of Ambassadors and other Emissaries at Nyx. Fortunately, Imperial Law judged it acceptable, as long as you had the support of the Inquisition...and Taylor did have it, though there would be favours to be repaid in exchange.

The Tau were the first to depart. With no rejuvenation or life-prolonging treatments available, their time was precious, and the Tech-Priests were going to place them in time stasis for the next year or so, at least until the Magi found a solution to their short life-span. Otherwise, by the time she returned to Nyx, Shadowsun and Aun'shi would be at death's door and more or less incapable of playing a role in any plan the Lady Nyx wanted them to.

The Necrons teleported away in bright green flashes, with the sole exception of Imotekh, who was led away by a ceremonial Honour Guard.

The Eldar opened their curious intra-system portals that the Harlequins seemed to be able to manifest at will.

Taylor ordered a lot of her Swarm and the Dawnbreaker Guard away, and rapidly, as a light snow fell over what had been a gigantic battlefield, there was only the Queen of Blades and herself.

"All hail the Empress." The crimson-haired Endbringer proclaimed before snickering. "You realise that you can’t avoid the problem forever."

"The problem?"

"They will want a Court, my Empress," Aenaria Eldanesh purred, "you gave them a Goddess, and she has made her will clear. And it would be incredibly insulting for the True Empress of the Aeldari to have human protectors but no representatives of our race."

Oh, that was going to go over well with the Space Marines, Taylor just knew it.

"You may have to accept a station filled with the envoys and messengers of each Craftworld too. Plus entertainment centres. We are a race that easily gets bored."

"Actually," Taylor cleared her throat, "I was thinking about transforming your Arena into a part-time sport centre. My Tech-Priests built it to be easily transformable, so I thought we could use it for other purposes when you're not there. Concerts, sport competitions...that sort of thing."

And totally not because the inauguration of said Arena had left a very bad taste in her mouth...

To her relief, the Queen of Blades barely raised her eyebrows and dismissed it as unworthy of her attention.

"Do as you wish. As long as the Arena is ready for my use, my lodge is up to my exacting standards, and your spiders are appropriately punished for suggesting the *heresy* of not giving me warm showers, we won't have any problems."

Note to self: reward Artemis and a few of her sisters with sugary delicacies for the next several weeks, while appearing to 'punish them' from an outside perspective.

"And there was this insolent brute in black with his ridiculous big sword. I have a special punishment in mind for him and his lover."

That promised nothing good...

"Marry them in front of millions of humans. That will teach them a lesson."

Okay...okay, she could do that. That was within her authority, and that wasn't that bad an idea anyway.

"Now for the more important matter. How were you able to wield such a difficult power as **Origin** in so little time?"

Taylor raised her eyebrows, and then smiled viciously.

She drew the power that was now an integral part of her, and in a fraction of a second, her skin turned gold. As she had discovered a few hours ago, her hair did not turn red like Ynesth's; instead it took on an even deeper shade of black, very similar to the raven colour the Primarch Corax had.

And her features stayed the same, beyond a few cosmetic alterations, longer, sharper, but the differences with Ynesth were marked.

Taylor was still her own person, even if her ears were long and her body inhuman.

The reaction of the Queen of Blades was worth it, though.

Aenaria Eldanesh stared open-mouthed like she had grown a second head for what seemed to be an eternity.

Small green flashes interrupted this unique moment, alas.

"Yahaha!" Trazyn the Infinite laughed. "These stellar photos will be the crown jewel of my Macragge Collection! Thank you for the opportunity, my friend!"

Even surprised as she was, the Queen of Blades reacted in a violent manner incredibly quickly. One second Trazyn was standing almost a kilometre away...the next second, enough firepower to make a C'Tan shard flinch was hurled at him.

The Necron thief did what every rational being would do in such a situation: he teleported away.

"I didn't know he was there."

"One day I will deal with him permanently." The Mistress of the Commorragh Arenas swore. "But let's return to what is important."

The immortal Aeldari closed the distance with her, and the grace with which she did so nearly overwhelmed her.

"You absorbed what was left of Ynesth within you." This wasn't a question, and she made only a small nod to confirm it. "Did you dig deep into her memories?"

"Err...no. There was the battle and everything, I lacked the time, and I couldn't...I took only what I needed to master **Origin**."

"If you had," Aenaria Eldanesh purred, "you would have known that before she succumbed to the lies of Slaanesh, Ynesth was one of my lovers."

Oh.

Oh.

Taylor could react incredibly quickly, and yet she didn't even see the Ancient Aeldari begin to move.

In a fraction of a second, the lips of the Queen of Blades were against hers. And then the explosion of sensations became truly overwhelming. It was like the stars were born again, it was like-

Aenaria Eldanesh removed her tongue and her lips.

"I see I will need to visit my arena more frequently to *train* you," the Third Endbringer purred. "My Empress."

Taylor tried to shake off the sensations, her mind had suddenly been transformed into jelly or something similar. It had been too much and-

Someone applauded.

The insect-mistress expected to see Trazyn, and was ready to curse the thief, who didn't know when it was better to run half a galaxy away...but it wasn't him.

It was a single Harlequin, dancing on the snow in vibrant multicoloured clothes.

"**What a lovely spectacle! Can you do it again? It has been ages since** **I last saw the mighty Queen of Blades kissing someone so ardently and**-"

The answer of the Arena Mistress was an attack of blades about thrice as powerful as the one she had launched towards Trazyn.

But this time, there was no teleportation.

Taylor's eyes widened as one by one, the silvery blades were intercepted with an incredible facility. The clown was catching the psychic blades between his fingers.

What the hell?

And just as she returned to her normal human appearance, Taylor watched as the Harlequin Eldar became taller.

The multicoloured clothes became a whirlwind of shades that were impossible to properly describe.

The world seemed to convulse in laughter around them.

"You are Cegorach."

The God of the Harlequins had come to Ardium in person.

"**In tricks and treats**," the jester laughed. "**Now my dear Weaver, I think it is time we have an interesting conversation before our dear Queen of Blades decides to further explore your relationship**."

"Return to your Black Library, clown!" The next strike vanished in a maelstrom of shadows, and the next second the Queen of Blades was gone.

"**Now**," eyes which were older and crazier than those of anyone she had ever met stared at her. "**I have plenty of messages to give you. And many warnings to deliver, oh my Empress**."

Wonderful. The God of Bad Jokes had jumped on the bandwagon. What had possessed her to accept this title?

**Ardium**

**Re-purposed Fortress-Monastery *The Fang***

**94 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

Taylor didn't really like the *Fang,* and it had nothing to do with the colossal headaches, both past and future, it represented.

Sure, the decoration was original, and could not be accused of plagiarising what was recognised as 'Imperial culture'.

But you had to love monster-hunting and the glorious 'sagas' of the Viking culture, Space Wolves-style. It was...primal, she guessed. It was presented as glorious.

It was, almost certainly, the root of all the problems the sons of Russ were experiencing these days when they tried to 'deal with' the Imperial worlds they were supposed to save.

But that was fine.

The first astropathic communications from Terra had arrived a couple of hours ago and made it clear that the High Lords wanted to deal with the Fenrisian Chapter themselves – along with thanking her for defusing a potentially nightmarish situation with the Dark Angels.

This wasn't the Lady of Nyx's problem anymore.

And thankfully, her visit in the halls of the *Fang* was essentially one of courtesy.

Thus the long walk to their destination was...akin to some touristic activity in a void-faring Viking museum? Yes, that described the situation rather well.

Only Gamaliel and Gavreel accompanied her. Artemis should have come along too, but since Wolf Lord Direbear had come with the enormous Great White Bear he for some insane reason called 'Boo', it had been decided to avoid...frictions and her Adjutant-General had remained outside, dealing with the thousands of problems that came with a system-wide quarantine.

The moment they reached their destination was obvious.

It wasn't every door aboard the *Fang* which had four Custodes and half a dozen Sisters of Silence guarding it.

"I will wait here with Boo." The Space Wolf announced loudly.

"Thank you for playing the role of Guide," Taylor thanked him. "It was my pleasure to have you by my side, Boo."

The massive ursine made a pitiful sound which sounded incredibly comical when made by a gigantic creature, and the Angel of Sacrifice stepped forwards, followed by her two Dawnbreaker Guards.

Only then did the Custodes seem to react to her presence, though obviously, it was not the case at all.

"You alone can enter." There were Space Marines who could speak in utterly emotionless tones. They could learn a lesson or two from this Watcher. This Custodes didn't seem to behave like a human at all. "The Astartes will wait here."

"Understood." The Lady Nyx didn't try to negotiate; first because there were most likely sentinels of the Adeptus Custodes inside, and second, because it wasn't a negotiation. With any member of the Ten Thousand, her authority vanished like it didn't exist.

To be completely honest, Taylor didn't even know how those Custodes had arrived so quickly after the final victory was won over the Tyranids. The Space Marines of Guilliman's gene-line were still arriving in groups of two or three ships, answering Macragge's call-to-arms. Her best explanation for now was that there had been a Custodes task-force operating in the Eastern Fringe for unrelated reasons.

Despite the gravity of the moment, Taylor couldn't help but giggle when she went past the doorstep. It seemed that the Lord of Wolves had not been too angry with his brother, because the 'cell' chosen to keep his brother imprisoned appeared to be a library.

The Traitor Primarch was seated on a couch adapted to his stature. Even from afar, there seemed to be something wrong with him...and when Taylor really looked, this feeling was completely justified.

What did so many Primarchs wind up mutilated either by their own hands or by someone else? At least this one appeared to have been a victim and not done the mutilation himself...

One glance was sufficient to know she would never be able to do anything for the giant hole which had been the 'psychic lungs' of the Fifteenth Primarch. Still, it was fascinating to see the Aspect of **Curiosity** had not been affected at all.

"Lady Weaver," Magnus the Red showed a modicum of surprise as she went to stand before him under the vigilant gaze of four Custodes and as just many Sisters of Silence. "An unexpected but welcome pleasure. I would rise to salute you, but..."

Yeah, the chains binding his arms were 'lax' enough to allow him to eat and read books – the table next to the couch and the couch itself provided good clues in that regard – but Leman Russ' brother couldn't walk or move away from his current position.

"It's all right. I wanted to speak to you before you departed for Terra." Which would happen as soon as the quarantine procedures were completed, the Tech-Priests verified there were no spores trying to stick to the Custodes ship's grav-plates, and other time-consuming but necessary measures.

"A message for my father?"

"A gift," Taylor revealed the book she had kept in her old-fashioned bag until now. "It should make the journey to Terra less boring than it promises to be."

The Custodes, of course, didn't twitch – they had been warned of this move. Though one or two of them seemed to radiate disapproval. As for the Sisters of Silence, it was far simpler: they were all against it. And it wasn't because of the cold they emanated, and which diminished the very part of her being now merged with her wings and **Sacrifice**. No, the disapproval had everything to do with their horrible personalities.

"*The* *Fate of the Second Primarch*," Magnus' sorrow was clearly visible for an instant, "Ah. You...knew about Hanzo and me?"

"I know you were very close, yes. So I commanded one of my Adjutants to compile all the information we had on his last battle and what happened when I found him. The book will go to the Custodes' libraries, once you reach Terra. But I thought you deserved to know the truth, before..."

She didn't finish the sentence, and Magnus the Red didn't show any willingness to do it either. His lone eye which had earned him the nickname of Cyclops seemed one step away from crying. His red finger caressed the book's cover.

"Thank you...this means a lot to me."

"Just for the sake of curiosity, if it's not too indiscreet, what were your common points of interest? Your brothers didn't say."

"Poetry books, of course," the Primarch of the Thousand Sons replied as if it were a given. "Hanzo had a gift for finding them in the unlikeliest of places, and his homeworld had a strong and rich tradition which encouraged new talents to come up with their own creations every year."

The red-skinned Primarch allowed a thin grin to be visible on his face.

"I admit I kept quite a few of them, for all I was ordered to return them to his home as Father commanded he was to be forgotten."

If the Custodes had seemed to radiate disapproval before, it was nothing compared to the sea of hostility directed at him now.

"I miss him dearly. I am quite glad you could end his torment. I think Perturabo would too, if he was still himself."

"The Lord of Iron and the Master of the *Tsunami* were friends?"

"Oh yes," Magnus the Red replied as his brilliant eye revived old and good memories. "The two of them were inseparable for a few years. After a campaign, they spent several months together making an architectural contest out of the rebuilding of an entire Sector. Malcador had to send several messages to remind them it was the Great Crusade, not the Great Architecture Competition."

Given what the Iron Warriors had become these days, it was difficult to think it had indeed happened...but Magnus was entirely truthful.

"I suppose the Sector where it played out didn't survive the Horus Heresy."

"No," Magnus said regretfully. "After Isstvan...well, Perturabo was never the same again. He was still of flesh and blood, but he seemed to take pleasure in razing his former masterpieces. In fact, it might have really begun with Hanzo's loss. The Lord of Olympia could be harsh, but our brother seemed to be able to bring out the best in him."

The more Taylor learned about the events of the early 31st millennium, the more her feelings that it had been a tragedy on a galactic scale increased. Well, that and the sensation of a titanic waste.

"You are not that bad too...for all the massive mistakes and disastrous choices you made."

"Noticed that, didn't you?" Magnus smiled like a child who had been caught in the act of raiding the cookie-jar. "You bring back memories of Sanguinius...he had a way to forgive and yet let you still feel horribly guilty."

The Fifteenth Primarch sighed.

"I am guilty. We all know it. I made the wrong choices. I should have surrendered to Russ in person when he came to arrest me. Letting Prospero burn...was perhaps the vilest thing I ever let happen that was in my power to prevent, and there are many things I'm not proud of, Weaver. I can't repair what is broken. But perhaps, I can face my father again with some dignity this time."

It was clear the Primarch didn't expect to survive that meeting. Which was...not exactly unreasonable of him, given the magnitude of his crimes, both the ones done when he was himself, and the others unleashed per the will of Tzeentch as a Daemon Primarch.

There was a last point to speak of.

"Malicia went into the Eleventh's lair...and might have bitten off more than she could chew. Something has survived the Sixth Legion's wrath. It calls itself the King in Yellow."

Magnus the Red scowled.

"I hope, for her sake, that that arrogant child escaped. The Eleventh was...what Curze did to some worlds was worse, but his actions before he decided to embark on his mad quest were anything but pleasant."

"He wasn't your friend, then?"

"The Eleventh was not the friend of anyone," in fact, it was likely worse than that; at no point had Taylor heard Magnus or one of the other Primarchs refer to him as 'brother'. "And if the Sorceress-Queen of Malfi fell into his trap, dark times are ahead for the Calyx Hell Stars."

**Calyx Expanse – also known as the Calyx Hell Stars**

**Approaches of the Malfi Warp Crown**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**Captain Boros Kurn**

Boros was honest enough with himself to feel a certain amount of wariness as he answered Malicia's summons and entered the antechamber to her private quarters.

Until today, the sorceress had not shown the slightest inclination of following certain Tzeentchian 'traditions' of shooting the messengers when they brought bad news, but until the last few days, her warband had never suffered a significant defeat when she was present either.

And the battle they had fought in that pit of damnation which answered to the name of 'Tyrant Star' had been a defeat, nobody was going to pretend otherwise.

Boros advanced, and nine of the last surviving Malfian Change-Duellists saluted before opening the doors. Following the...miraculous resurrection of the Rubricae Thousand Sons, the Unwritten Destiny had been in dire need of new bodyguards, as the Astartes of the Fifteenth proved unwilling to follow her orders. The colourful masked warriors had been the only viable replacements which could be recruited at such short notice.

The Battle of the Tyrant Star had, fortunately or unfortunately, proved that no matter how loyal they were to Malicia, they were clearly inferior to a squad of Space Marine Legionnaires.

"Boros." Malicia was seated and facing a ritual circle. Inside this circle of glyphs burning in terrible blue flames was Ax'senaea, the former ruler of Laodomina that the worshipper of Tzeentch had transformed into a true abomination, though she almost didn't look like it today. The hair looked almost normal, if blue, and the golden light in the eyes was subdued. Something that was certainly not unrelated to the terrible scar visible between her breasts. It was an ugly-looking wound...and Malicia had done a considerable number of rituals since their escape to heal her, diminishing the size and the damage done to the arrogant...not-woman's flesh.

"I hope you bring good news."

"I'm afraid to disappoint, Unwritten Destiny. Your Sorcerers have begun receiving information of catastrophes across the entire Expanse. Nine of your holdfasts outside the Malfi Warp Crown were raided by enemies presenting the appearance of the same undead Astartes in grey livery we faced at the Tyrant Star. And we're not the only ones to be under attack."

The blue eyes stared him for a fraction of a second before turning again towards Ax'senaea, who was waiting silently on her knees in the ritual circle.

"I assume you refer to the Khornate forces and the *Conqueror*."

"Yes. The preliminary estimate is that eight of their systems were raided."

The platinum-haired sorceress gritted her teeth.

"Someone should tell that bastard calling himself the King in Yellow that his attempts at being funny are not appreciated."

Ah. Yes, nine was the sacred number of Tzeentch, much like eight was the sacred number of Khorne.

"And the final losses?"

"We lost the nine light Escort Ships we went with," though Malicia already knew that, "and out of a force of ninety-nine thousand cultists and other bolter-fodder groups, a mere two thousand escaped with their lives and reached the *Natural Selection* before we translated out of that cursed place."

"You are a horrible messenger when it comes to giving out good news, Boros." Though it was a complaint, the Astartes Captain was reassured by the fact the only emotion which seemed to dominate in Malicia's voice was exhaustion.

"If you really feel like looking at this defeat in a positive light," he told her bluntly, "most of the sorcerers you deployed managed to get out in time."

He didn't add that the reason they had been able to survive was because they had left their subordinates to die and stolen the drop ships to save their own skins. As teleportation attempts – both from esoteric technologies and Warp sorcery – suffered grave malfunctions or outright didn't work, panic had spread, and the rout had been particularly violent and quick.

"My own brothers only suffered two permanent losses too. But you already knew that."

"Yes, yes I did. Ax'senaea, you can rise." Boros' eyes widened imperceptibly as the arrogant blue-haired daemon-woman presented her throat so that Malicia could place a golden collar on her once more. The last time, the 'mountain of arrogance', as some cultists had taken to call her, had needed to be restrained by Malicia and cursed to oblivion before a new 'piece of jewellery' could be placed anywhere on her body. "Say what you really have on your mind, Captain."

"It was a really colossal mistake to go to the Tyrant Star with so few troops."

"I know," Malicia answered just as bluntly as he had been. "But in my defence, I thought the bastard was dead, buried, and his damned grave contained nothing more than lifeless dust and a few ingenious traps. For the kind of threat I anticipated, ninety-nine thousand cultists and ninety-nine sorcerers would have been overkill! The rest was better employed delaying the Khornate forces across the Expanse and exploiting the weaknesses of the other enemies. It should have been easy. The biggest problem should have been the duration of the archaeological expedition. Finding a cache which escaped the vigilance of the Wolf King before the *Conqueror* arrived would have been a challenge. But it was the only one which should have caused problems!"

Frustration was heavy in the last words, and Boros wisely chose to not say anything in response. Hell, even Ax'senaea was kneeling silently without any order at the feet of the Unwritten Destiny.

"We can replace the losses." The young sorceress continued after a considerable silence. "The Q'Sal shipyards can build five times that many Warp-capable Escorts per year, and the...the bolter-fodder can be easily replaced too. The bigger problem is that given how often I used the Hour of Sandglass Screams to escape this fiend's trap, it will take a long time before it can used relatively safely again. And not having it makes any attempt to counterattack a near-suicidal mission."

Boros Kurn nodded, not saying a single word.

By a succession of rituals he neither understood nor felt the need to explore in detail, Malicia had opened a rift through space and time, allowing them to access a sort of 'pocket dimension' hidden within the Warp.

According to the Unwritten Sorceress herself, it had been the most complicated part of the plan.

The next part was supposed to be long and boring: finding a cache on a planet which was apparently utterly devastated no matter where you looked, after some Exterminatus-like weapon sterilised it.

The plan had not survived the first hour.

The Host of Change had almost immediately noticed a ziggurat surrounded by pale yellow sands once they landed. And as scouts had been sent forwards, reports came in of things that could have been twisted animals of the ancient past of the Throneworld carved into statues, except twisted and suffering from some mutations.

They should have fled. Instead, they had continued onwards.

Malicia and the Sons of Change had been mere metres away from the ziggurat's entrance when the 'King in Yellow' had sprung his trap.

An enormous army of skeletons had emerged from the sands, some bearing armours of the Solar Auxilia of the times of the Great Crusade.

The cultists had fought them tenaciously at first, but for each bag of bones which fell, ten more rose to take its place. And then the dead Astartes had revealed themselves, screaming their allegiance to the 'King in Yellow', and using commanding positions on the ziggurat to slaughter them.

If Ax'senaea hadn't been unleashed at them, giving them and Malicia the necessary time to break through the encirclement, it was likely no one would have survived to fight another day.

As it was, as he already mentioned, the losses had been beyond catastrophic.

And given the power shown by the Enemy, one had to assume the ninety thousand-plus cultists lost would soon replenish the ranks of this army of undead, assuming that wasn't already the case.

"I will need to think a long time about a new strategy," Malicia announced, as if she could read his thoughts – which she had assured him was not the case, for all that was worth. "It's out of the question to launch a new expedition there, no matter how valuable the loot may be. I think we will need to take it slow and steady. An audacious plan has ended in-"

The ritual circle began to burn with lightning coming straight out of the Warp, and Malicia immediately screamed nine words, activating all the protection-wards of her private quarters in mere seconds.

Boros wasn't a sorcerer or a specialist in these matters. But he had seen many daemon-summoning rituals in his life, and the entity which had just manifested itself was not a minor servant of the Gods.

The wards flared and burned, and the son of Horus knew they had never reacted like that any time he was a witness to some kind of daemonic experiment.

At last, the lightning ceased, and a cackling, evil laughter was heard.

Great blue wings unfurled, and an enormous Greater Daemon allowed them to see its unholy glory.

The most disturbing part was undoubtedly was that the daemon had two vulture-like heads, not one.

"The Oracle of the Great Architect, what an honour," Malicia rose...only to kneel, as did Ax'senaea. Boros imitated them immediately. "I hear and witness, First of the Lords of the Great Conspirator, Vizier of Eternity, Master of the Past and the Future...Kairos Fateweaver."

Boros' had to fight all his instincts, which told him to draw his Bolter and melee weapon.

That was a name most Astartes who had lived in the Eye had heard at some point or another of their existence. Even when it came to the Greater Daemons of Tzeentch, this name was infamous and synonymous with apocalyptic calamity.

"**Your ambition, little one, has proven...useful for the purposes of the Architect of Fate**." One head began.

"**You should have been flayed for what you did**," the other head croaked, before weirdly, the two heads spoke together.

"**Your expedition forced the King in Yellow to strike before it was ready to reveal itself. For this alone, you will continue to enjoy Change's blessings**."

"I humbly thank the Master of Fortune. I will repay-"

"**The King in Yellow must be destroyed**!" The first head croaked, not letting the Unwritten Destiny finish what she was about to say.

"**The Usurper must pay for its presumption and arrogance!"** The other head approved.

"**Do not let him claim Eternity and Death**." The chorus of the two heads was sinister and incredibly angry. "**Do not! The souls of Change belong to Tzeentch! All those who deny this glorious truth will be tortured atop the Well of Eternity for ninety-nine million years or the end of all things, whichever takes longer to happen!**"

"I am His truest and most dedicated servant," Malicia declared loudly, "but if I attack the Tyrant Star with all the strength of Malfi and the other systems I rule, how can I be sure to achieve a different result? The undead did not stay down for long. The blasphemous Astartes serving this abomination were killed by Ax'senaea by the dozens, and yet they were already rising once again minutes later. What the slaves can enjoy, the Master is sure to have for himself. How can I succeed when I don't know how to put an end to the reign of the Usurper?"

Nine eyes – two per head, five on the rest of the rest of what the Greater Daemon's odious manifestation let them see – fixed on them malevolently.

"**Eight were forged at the dawn of Mankind**," the first head croaked.

"**By the will of the Four of Old**," the second head revealed, "**one is wielded by the Despoiler**."

"**The King in Yellow was born a son of the Anathema**."

"**The sins of the father are not the sins of the son**."

"**But what the father and his true sons will choose, the Usurper won't**."

Hearing this, Boros Kurn felt very lucky he wasn't in the Eye of Terror anymore. What in the name of Horus did Abaddon wield that had a Greater Daemon so...respectful?

"What is **Tzeentch**'s will?"

"**Prepare your armies**." The order slammed into them with the violence of a storm. "**And when the Blind is given eyes once more to see, sail to the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods!**"

Kairos Fateweaver disappeared and blue flames erupted. For all their attempts to evade it, they were all projected against the walls.

It went without saying that the pain from it was easier to handle than everything the Vizier of Tzeentch had just said.

**High Orbit above Ardium**

**Dreadnought *TFNS Midgard***

**100 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

There was a moment when you had to wonder if the Ruinous Powers would cheer when Leet and Borek died.

Taylor had reached the point of asking herself that question ten minutes ago, and nothing she'd heard since had convinced her that it was illogical to think so.

"Leet," Taylor stopped the Tinker from continuing the current attempt to explain why they'd entered contact with yet another xenos species and seconds later went to war with it. "Is your goal in life to be hunted by half of the galaxy?"

"Err...no?"

"You could have fooled me." The Basileia of Nyx had a feeling this was the kind of meeting you needed to enter drunk in order for the next hour to be halfway tolerable. Not that the parahuman knew for sure, it was extremely difficult to get tipsy these days with how changed she was. "If half of the time the Tech-Priests had not stopped you, my feeling is that the interstellar conflict of you against the galaxy would be truly in its opening stages."

"Err...we arrived with the *Midgard*?"

"That's one of the reasons I didn't release you into Dragon's claws. She's extremely angry. Did you really think the improper way you used ancient technologies would be forgiven?"

"Err...we killed a stupid Vandire?"

"That could be a point in your favour."

Leet smiled, something which was...weird. He had apparently not cut his hair or shaved his beard in a long, long time, and the effect was like he was trying to copy of some of the feudal-beard cultures which existed in the Imperium.

"That could be a point in your favour," Taylor repeated, "because stupid or not, the Vandire Clan is at the top of my list of political enemies. But if you were really intending to do it as an act of good will, you would have eliminated all witnesses...moron."

Both the Tinker and the Duardin at least had the grace to look very sheepish.

"Err...does that mean-"

"That everyone in the Nephilim Sector and beyond knows you were the one to kill him? Yes, obviously. And worst of all, you didn't even bother informing me after the fact. I had to learn it from a Rogue Trader visiting Nyx on a totally unrelated issue. If she hadn't, I wouldn't even be aware of it. Is there a good explanation for it, or is the reason for this lack of communication simply the fact you were too busy playing and losing video games against an Artificial Intelligence?"

"Err..."

"The latter," Borek had the honesty to answer. "The latter, shiny manling."

Taylor exhaled.

"Typical. I'm almost in the mood to gather an escort of Mechanicus ships and then let them escort you towards the boundaries of the Galactic Core region so that you are hurled against the problems you just created."

"Now we're talking about a real challenge! "Borek cheered while Leet...well, his face was an interesting shade of red.

"Thanks to us you could buy the *Midgard*!"

Somehow, Taylor found in her the strength not to strangle the Tinker...for now.

"Leet," the Angel of Sacrifice hissed between gritted teeth, and the walking disaster stepped back. "I am not angry about the opportunity of buying the *Midgard*, even if I wished I could have been warned about the opportunity of purchasing it before the transaction was a done-deal. What I am utterly furious about, however, is that you used my reputation and my name to seal the bargain when I certainly didn't authorise you to do so. You are not my Herald, my Ambassador, or acting in any diplomatic delegation I'm aware of. I had given you strict guidelines on what you could and couldn't do when you left Nyx. Speaking in my name, concluding extremely important deals in my name, and doing things which could destroy or sink relationships with the Duardin civilisation was not among the list of 'permitted things'. Do it again, and I will send you to Terra and let the Emperor decide if you are salvageable. Am I clear?"

"YES! Yes, you are very clear."

"He didn't do that much damage... shiny manling." Borek took out his pipe and began to light up the very smelly object. "The Duardin Core Admiralty was a shadow of its former self when we arrived, and the last sentinels on the shipyards were extremely happy to get rid of a ship they couldn't use without a proper AI. There isn't a High King anymore, and the *Midgard* was more or less the reason there was still someone living there. In fact, the moment the poor cousins will be paid, it's likely they will disperse to different Kingdom-Bastions."

"I'm delighted to hear it," Taylor replied acidly. "Especially when the price in food would have been astronomical were I not a Sector Lady with very deep pockets."

This time Borek had the good grace to not be satisfied with himself.

"Oh. Yes. That's because they're heavily in debt to the Bank of Stone."

"You spoke of kingdoms, their bastions, and the old defunct organisations, the Admiralties, which answered to a High King." The insect-mistress frowned. "Why is a bank involved in this mess?"

"Not *a* bank, *the* Bank, manling," Borek expelled a large cloud of smoke from his mouth after inhaling it from his pipe, which gave her the urge to vomit when it reached her nose. "When we were ruled by a High King, things were simpler. The Admiralties were all ruled by an Admiral, Bastions were built left and right, each under a Shield-General, and both Admirals and Shield-Generals were the sworn lieges of the High King. The merchants and everyone else stayed in their place, and the warriors used their axes and hammers to deter all the ugly alien mutts from disturbing the Ancestral Duardin Kingdom. But while I was away...things went bad."

"The negotiators of the 'Core Admiralty' told me there was a civil war. The High King died, and there were too many Heirs vying for the crown."

"Every High King always has too many Heirs," Borek sniffed in a manner an Eldar would have approved of. "But there are plenty of traditions and rules. No, there were plenty of traditions and rules. And for some reason nobody was able to explain to my face, they didn't work. The Great Kingdom is no more, manling. I spoke wrongly after Commorragh. You manlings dealt far better with your civil war than my people did."

From the Slayer, this was as close to an apology as she would get.

"Okay. And the situation in the Galactic Core?"

"There are over five hundred little kingdoms of Duardin for sure right now," Borek grunted, "maybe as many as seven hundred. Most of them don't control more than a single Bastion. They can't defend the important mining and trade zones. And the Guilds gained importance and spread as a result. You hail from a Kingdom, but you work for a Guild. If you are a Warrior, you are in the Guild of the Axe. A smith, the Guild of the Furnace."

"I am beginning to understand," Taylor nodded. "The Bank of Stone is the Guild of Banks, am I right?"

"They're calling themselves the Guild of the Talion," the Slayer corrected, "but you understand how it works."

"The Slayers?

"They threw us into the Guild of the Errant," it was clear this didn't please the Duardin warrior at all. "Traditions went to hell while I was away."

"And that's why you want to return to the Core, I take it?"

"Everything is wrong with those Guilds." It was not a growl, but it wasn't an amicable statement either.

"I see. I will make a decision concerning Leet and yourself soon. Please leave us."

Fortunately, the two troublemakers hurried away...certainly they were going to celebrate their good fortune with the two other Slayers that had survived the Battle of Ardium.

Then and only then did Taylor turn towards the last two beings present in the room.

"Commodore Yang Wen-li. Admiral. My sincere gratitude for trying to control these two weapons of cosmic destruction."

"Oh, it was nothing..." The Asian-looking officer protested, only to be immediately interrupted by the Artificial Intelligence.

"Don't listen to him. Save the times when I could threaten those two menaces by withdrawing their video game privileges, they were out of control and forced us to choose between Charybdis' maw or Scylla's jaws."

"An...interesting metaphor."

"But sadly accurate."

"Indeed." Taylor smiled. "By all rights, the best thing I could do would be to release you. You don't belong in this time period, and I was told you aren't exactly impressed by the methods of the Imperium."

"Your Empire is a foul parody of everything the Federation strived for!" Admiral declared, and Yang Wen-li sighed, looking very much like an ordinary man out of his depth. Of course, appearances were often disappointing at first...

"Maybe." The Artificial Intelligence made an annoyed sound. "Okay, certainly. But there's an enormous difference between the Federation and the Imperium."

"Oh, and what is that?"

"The Federation is dead." Taylor declared bluntly. "I am willing to accept it was a far better place. I know for sure that with the knowledge invented and stored inside the STCs, the Federation was able to give everyone a Golden Age or as close to it as is humanly possible. The rights of the individual, the freedom to speak what's on your mind, free press, and all sorts of things which were able to satisfy quintillions of Federation citizens...in every aspect the Federation is superior to the Imperium. But when it came to the test of survival, when the greatest test was to protect the lives of its citizens...the Federation failed utterly. No human state tried to keep the banner flying by the time the Emperor launched the reconquest of the Galaxy. A few nations may have kept a few of its ideals, but the Primarchs confirmed it: no one went to them and declared 'I am a citizen of the Federation'."

The black-haired parahuman smiled.

"I wish Mankind lived in a galaxy where everyone is living a peaceful life, really."

"One where there are Artificial Intelligences?" Admiral asked sardonically, her human avatar crossing arms in a defying posture.

"Well, yes," Taylor admitted. "From what I discovered during this campaign, the Artificial Intelligences of the Federation were the victims of a type of a malicious techno-virus capable of infecting reality itself. It wasn't their fault, and had the C'Tan responsible not done what it did millions of years ago, it is entirely possible the Federation would have survived far longer than it did."

"But now that you have a cure, this Aethergold you placed in presence of my core-"

"Aethergold is an extremely recent creation, and it is created from Noctilith, which we don't have unlimited stocks of in the first place. And of course the demand is monumental."

"What now?" Yang Wen-li asked as his AI companion made a stubborn expression with her avatar.

"I was very convincing with the Custodes, who contacted the Captain-General and obtained a protection order for the *Spirit of Eternity* and every member of Admiral's crew. I was told that the Emperor has been informed of the situation, though for now, how to deal with this situation is my problem to handle. I also asked my Necron ally, Phaerakh Neferten, for a diagnosis of the *Spirit of Eternity*. Her professional analysis is that the Curse is present, but Aethergold negates it completely."

"Good," the AI said in a tone that was almost petulant. "You can be reasonable, despite your ridiculous and superstitious angelic appearance..."

"Good for you, not so good for me," Taylor countered. "Do you have an idea how much the Aethergold cube we placed around your core is worth?"

"I suppose," the Commodore grimaced, "that the answer is somewhere between the 'too high for my pay grade' and 'it will take millions of years to repay that'?"

"That's a good summary, yes."

"You aren't going to seize my body!" The Artificial Intelligence threatened.

"Don't be ridiculous," Taylor rolled her eyes. Why was everyone so melodramatic these days? "I don't have any intention of damaging a ship which, for all I know, is the last of its kind. Besides, I'm sure you have some weapons that you didn't dare use on the lackeys of the Vandire Clan for fear of friendly fire."

The guilty silence which followed showed that her informed guess had been correct.

"I want to strike a bargain. You are a cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence. You must have had at least a partial database of a Template Standard Construct library installed in your AI's core before your deployment. For each STC template you're willing to sell to me, I'm willing to guarantee personally fifty years of protection for you and your crew."

"Just like that?"

"In the interests of...not giving half of my Mechanicus Tech-Priests heart attacks, we would give you a base and some independent infrastructure to play with. Your crew, beginning with Mister Yang Wen-li here, would be treated as the equivalent of an exiled Planetary Governor, with princely amenities and an enormous discretionary budget."

"You value my technology, but you would keep me as a prisoner in a golden cage."

"Do you have a solution that doesn't make you turn genocidal the moment I remove the Aethergold cube?"

"Err..."

"The alternative, of course, is to be able to in one hour erase the prejudices of quadrillions of humans where AIs are concerned...prejudices which are alas completely justified because the moment an AI gains full sentience, it begins to turn genocidal against its creators?"

"That is...ahem...let's negotiate, angelic one."

Taylor tried hard to not look too satisfied with herself.

"I still think your appearance is ridiculous, by the way."

What would the AI say, if she saw how she looked in her Eldar Aspect?

**The Warp**

**The Garden of Nurgle**

**Goddess Isha**

There was never a pleasant day in the Garden of Nurgle. That was assuming, of course, that you considered the green fog and the other phenomena of **Decay** which dominated everything above the rotten trees something as ordinary as a 'day'.

All one could do was to divide the present between 'unpleasant' and 'let's avoid that at all costs, shall we?'

Contrary to what one might think, Isha wasn't exactly a prisoner of the Chaos God which had created this infernal Garden to be its Domain.

Yes, she was in a cage. Yes, the entity which was **Decay** incarnate fed her foul mixtures against her will.

But the cage was always open. And her jailor knew very well most of its vile recipes were utterly unable to affect her for longer than the equivalent of a blink of an eye.

Oh, she knew Nurgle was not doing it out of the goodness of its heart. No Chaos God was able to do a good action without trying to twist it until it was a mortal's worst nightmare. And if the Grandfather of Decay had a heart or something that could look like the shadow of a sense of morality, Isha had never seen it during her imprisonment.

No, the cage was always open, because there was nowhere to go.

Let's assume, for argument's sake, that Nurgle decided her imprisonment had to end, and that she was allowed to pass through the Garden without being attacked a single time. The latter part, anyone would note, was vital. Isha was far weaker than when most of the Aeldari Pantheon had been devoured, and the different facets of the Primordial Annihilator had all grown stronger after having no opposition for so long. Any of the 'Greater Daemons' was a serious opponent for her now, especially if they combined their strength.

But let's assume Nurgle would enforce it.

The moment Isha had a toe outside of the Garden, **War** and **Change** would assault her. They would likely be joined by **Anarchy** too.

It didn't really matter if it was one, two, or three opponents, in the end. One Chaos God was largely sufficient to kill her and devour her immortal essence.

Leaving the Garden of **Decay** was a death sentence. Staying was a curse and a dangerous course of action. Yet there was no alternative. The new Goddess just born, the hope of the new Aeldari, could not protect even herself and needed to hide within the Human Seer's light. And while it was tempting to think Isha would be able to do the same...it wasn't really possible. She had stayed far too long in the Garden. Her natural immunity to **Decay** was sufficient to survive if she was bathed into the flames of an Anathema. But some parts of her would need to be...purified. The process would be visible to every keen eye in the Warp. It would be the complete failure of the 'let's hide' strategy, perhaps risking the existence of two Goddesses instead of one.

So Isha stayed.

At least there was a hope, beyond the Garden of Nurgle.

And she could listen to the furious rant of the Grandfather of **Decay**.

For once, it was...mildly amusing.

"**What happened to all these stories of Abominable Intelligences razing worlds and incinerating humans by the trillions? What horrible scenarios have misled me? Why is she using insects when I was here before her? Why is she pleasing to the patron** **of berserkers and the ugly volatile, but not simple, humble Decay? WHY IS SHE WINNING?"**

A volcano of pus and plagues erupted, and Isha stepped back in her cage as the Chaos God vented its fury in its own Domain.

For many heartbeats of hers, the cauldron of damnation brewing the most disgusting substances imaginable was spared the anger of Nurgle. The rest of the Garden? It was razed, all insects, plants, and slaves dissolving into an ocean of green corruption.

It didn't last, of course. The twisted cycle of life and death was eternal here.

Within seven more heartbeats, rotten trees and flowers so ugly any mortal would tear his eyes out to forget their horrifying appearance were growing again. They might even be higher than their 'predecessors', and soaked in an even worse curse of putrefaction, while the daemons dancing in large grotesque circles invented new diseases.

"**I apologise, my dear**," Nurgle said sweetly, turning in her direction at last. "**Weaver has been a bit of an annoyance lately.**"

"***The young always seek to overturn what their elders have done. Such is life***."

"**Very true!"** all traces of anger were gone, and sometimes the Aeldari Goddess which had been called the Last Avenger was extremely worried by this behaviour. Khorne, at least, you could rely on to be always angry. But the 'cheerfulness' of Nurgle was in most instances not an act. It was genuine. And it was more than a little disturbing... "**By the feathers of the idiot who conspires, she might even turn against the Anathema! My rotten flowers know we didn't need much incentive to push the son against the father to engineer this beautiful...what do the mortals call it? Ah yes, the Horus Heresy.**"

Isha's mood soured. It was never a pleasant cycle when one saw a promising race be slaughtered in uncountable numbers because the Chaos Gods felt it might one day present a threat to them. To be fair, the Human Seer had been a bigger threat than most. But the things of the Sea of Souls which had been unleashed...if Isha had not been a Goddess, she would have gone mad watching the calamities engineered by the Four.

"**This is very unfair! Unfair! UNFAIR!**" Nurgle tried to sing, but the result was a cacophony which was sure to scare any creature not utterly corrupted by its morbid influence. "**I really hoped one of my Champions would rise to the occasion, but they're all terribly lazy. What a shame. Fortunately, I am a merciful and generous Grandfather. I am going to give them a mission**."

"***A mission to kill the new Empress of the Aeldari*?**"

Isha almost hoped Nurgle was that impatient. Many of **Decay**'s assets and slaves were out of position, and the young Demigoddess had many allies and strengths to be an effective counter to any Herald of Diseases.

"**No!**" Nurgle exclaimed joyously. "**We need to begin...with the beginning**."

The enormous ladle resumed the stirring of the cauldron, and Nurgle opened one of his/its many maws, this one dripping with a yellow substance which smelled like death and rotten meat.

"**The Calyx Hell Stars are crowded with young and brash fools these days**," Nurgle tasted the liquid of the cauldron with its seven tongues before grunting in satisfaction. "**We have...let's see...an aspirant Conquering Queen, a sorceress who received a lesson of humility recently, an angel which is not an angel,an Usurper testing the limits of my benevolence...and some rats crawling through tunnels, thinking in their delicious cowardly minds that I can't see them. And the Anathema's servants, can't forget them. They always love to ruin my parties**."

Nurgle laughed, and after a heartbeat of hesitation, an infinity of its daemons laughed with him.

"**It is time, I think, to remind the featherless vulture why a million plans aren't necessary if the first one you have succeeds**."

"***Some of your nemeses***," Isha pointed out carefully, "***will begin with a significant advantage over your Champions. A nice powerbase and plenty of altars aren't to be underestimated***."

"**A rather prudent and wise argument, my dear**," Nurgle approved before rotting and vomiting something vile in its cauldron. "**That's why unlike the other Three, I am not going to rely on a horde of useless servants to fulfil my grand and beautiful mission**."

A Greater Daemon rose from the nearby pools of yellow-green pus.

"**My dear grandchild**!" Nurgle gurgled. "**Travel on the wings of pestilence and fever. I want two of my beloved grandchildren to come and heed my words!**"

"**Yes, Grandfather! Who I am to summon before your cauldron**?"

"**My grumpy Mortarion and my devoted Typhus**," The Lord of **Decay** answered, and Isha froze, for those were two names which were never any good news when spoken on their own, never mind together. "**Let them know a crown of Tyranny is forged...and it is my will to make it *rot*.**"

**Author's note**:

And on this note, the Cataclysm of Macragge and the Extinction Arc are over.

There are many things left unsaid, but that's what the next arcs are for, no?

I have decided, after a lot of brainstorming, that the next arc will be a mini-arc of 3 Interludes (at least that's the plan). While I don't have a provisional title for any Interlude update right now, the Arc's name will be *Tyranny*.

We will return to Macragge and visit several other locations of this dangerous galaxy, obviously.

But the two big areas of interest won't be where Taylor will travel to (that's why in part it's an Interlude, obviously).

No, the bigger events will happen on the Throneworld of Holy Terra and the Calyx Hell Stars.

To quote Taylor, victory in war has been won, but now the Imperium has to win the peace, and this may be more problematic than a hundred Black Crusades with three Primarchs' returned from the dead and other momentous events...

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment on my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption