Update Weaver Option 29 April 2020

**Extermination 8.4**

**The Queen of Blades**

*Some humans, I’ve learned, tend to worship the elite warriors who fought by their Seer’s side when their Empire was founded. Even if worship is not involved, they study their writings, comment on their works and their philosophies, and appear to respect their deeds, be they military or otherwise, with great respect and fondness. This is true as long as they didn’t swear themselves to the Primordial Annihilator, of course.*

 *No respect for our ancestors existed among the Aeldari before the Mark of Commorragh, and it did not arise after the end of the slaughter.*

*We had the opportunity to meet our ancestors, unlike the majority of the species of this galaxy. They were not legion; by the most accurate estimates, less than a hundred Aeldari living in the Dark City had experienced the First Fall and survived it. The three Dynasts, Urien Rakarth, Asdrubael Vect, and several leaders were, if the rumours could be trusted, all ancient Aeldari who had survived the cataclysm which had devoured the old Empire whole.*

*They were, in all aspects, the worst aspects of our species made flesh. Some delusional Aspect Warriors may try to soften my words, but the truth is that, by the time She-Who-Thirsts was born and destroyed the Core Worlds of the Empire, the nation the veterans of the War in Heaven had built to rule over the galaxy had been twisted into a nightmarish vision. The Aeldari planets were not Daemon Worlds, but the true judgement would have been ‘not yet’.*

*Despite the cataclysm and the utter destruction of most of culture during the First Fall, sufficient evidence remains if you are really interested in discovering the truth. Not many do.*

*It is not a pleasant story to listen to. The Harlequins’ dances only show a minuscule representation of the horror the Aeldari society had become before the First Fall.*

*Decadence and depravation were the master principles of our species. Altars and the immense stairs leading to them were soaked with the blood of unwilling and willing sacrifices. Temples to the Ancient Gods were defiled and burned in ceremonies few agents of the Primordial Annihilator would have disapproved of. The pursuit of sensation had seized everyone and everything. Immense fleets sailed across the stars to plunder planets and enslave billions of souls. The gardens were denatured by carnivorous flora. Each dawn saw a million beings impaled and crucified on a thousand different worlds. Each sunset saw more and more slaves be sacrificed to the unborn abomination that was going to cause the Doom.*

*In this atmosphere of cruelty and malevolence, the Aeldari were unwilling to tolerate any limits on their excesses. Moved to its logical conclusion, this meant the nobles and those who were in charge believed themselves to be Gods, and fought each other to assuage their dreams of supremacy.*

*But the Aeldari who survived the First Fall by sheer luck were paltry shadows in anything except arrogance and malevolence. Deprived of their immortality and unable to use their psychic activities without attracting She-Who-Thirsts, any Aeldari of Commorragh was not that superior physically to one of his or her Drukhari descendants.*

*Still, there was a dark legend which was still whispered far from the ears of the Dynasts, a rumour the rulers of Commorragh were neither the oldest nor the most dangerous Aeldari survivors. Xelian, Kraillach and Yllithian had done their utmost to erase it dissenter after dissenter, but it was still re-emerging from nowhere every few dozens of cycles. Some said Asdrubael Vect was guilty of it, others accused upstart groups living under the spires.*

*The Second Fall would prove the tales had, if anything, completely understated the truth. There was indeed one of the First Aeldari still alive, and she had been hiding under everyone’s noses as Lelith Hesperax, the Queen of Knives. After the Mark of Commorragh, it wasn’t exactly difficult to reassemble the fragments and find other names: Qa’leh, Mistress of Blades; First Gladiator; First Sword-Bearer; the Uncrowned Empress; Princess of the Hunt; Commander of the Abyssal Fleet; Blood of the First Line.*

*But there is one name above others that is hers and that no one will claim until the stars die and the Aeldari race vanish from memory.*

*She is the Queen of Blades.*

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**13th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**LELITH HESPERAX**

**‘THE QUEEN OF KNIVES’**

**ELDAR SUCCUBUS**

**EXTREMIS-LEVEL SWORD MASTER**

**INSANELY DANGEROUS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT LEGIONES ASTARTES AND PRIMARCH SUPPORT**

**IF MILITARY SUPPORT INSUFFICIENT FLEE ON SIGHT**

**REWARD: 1 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP**

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*This insult to the Necron dynasties won’t be tolerated. The loss of one fleet and fifteen hundred thousand phalanxes can be rightfully considered insignificant; the loss in prestige can’t. Phaeron Nammakatekh has been extinguished so thoroughly even the Nightbringer is powerless to put back together the slivers of his souls’ remains.*

*Aenaria Eldanesh has grown from minor problem to a very annoying threat, and her actions in the Bleeding Stars, if left unchecked, can lead to a general withdrawal on more than four hundred systems.*

*The defeat will be avenged. The Queen of Blades will die, and I, Imotekh of the Storm, will lead the counterattack which will extinguish her arrogant life.*

*In the name of the Silent King, the five World Engines and three Star-Harvesters of the reserve Sautekh fleet are ordered to muster at Seidon under my command. It is the will of the C’Tan and the Triarchs that the noble commander who will slay this long-ear will be raised to the rank of Phaeron, with all the privileges and command-codes the title implies.*

*Gather your best phalanxes and reequip them with the latest weapons sent from the Gloriously Divine Mag’ladroth. It is time to teach this arrogant alien princess nothing will stand against the domination of the Necrons.*

Extract from the Muster-call’s announcement of the Red Nightmare, one of the rare campaigns lost by Imotekh the Stormlord. It was also infamous for the decree issuing the first bounty in living history on someone’s life.

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*It is difficult to compare the strength of the great enemies of Lady Weaver and assess which is the most dangerous monster among the eight. The servants of the Ruinous Powers are subjects to the whims of the Four in the Sea of Souls, naturally making proper estimations utterly possible, but the beings living in the Materium are no simple matter either. Shards of the Endless Swarm do not represent the totality of the malevolence and the abilities of the C’Tan known as Iash’uddra. The less said about the Fourth and the Eighth Endbringers, the better. And my colleagues are still wondering what exactly what exactly the Sixth is.*

*Needless to say, the debate raging wherever the question ‘which is the most dangerous Endbringer?’ is likely going to continue for the next couple of thousands years, with each Inquisitor taking the rosette having his or her own opinion on the subject and plenty of arguments to justify it.*

*In my opinion, the deadliest Endbringer is the Third. The Queen of Blades, despite not being an avatar of soul corruption and/or unquenchable hunger, is a terrible opponent that most champions and heroes of the Imperium can’t hope to survive for more than a few seconds. Speed, mastery in practically every weapon forged by advanced human and xenos species, psychic power, millions of years of war experience; this Ancient Aeldari is an elemental force of destruction the instant she really decides to fight seriously.*

*The bounty on Lelith Hesperax was raised again after the Battle of Commorragh. Yet anybody but the most deluded fool will acknowledge this was purely a public relations’ move. As I write these words, the reward for the elimination of the Queen of Blades is still unclaimed. And I don’t think even a return of Lady Weaver would be sufficient to change this state of affairs...*

Extract from Inquisitorial file ZA56-66139BB88S, dictated on the order of Lord Inquisitor [REDACTED], 005M41.

**The Eye of Terror**

**Orbit of Tor Yvresse, Crone World, former provincial capital of the Aeldari Empire**

One of the most impressive successes of the Four during the Horus Heresy was clearly to turn the Primarchs against their gene-sire. But being able to corrupt and taint with their soul-taint the Gloriana-class battleships serving as the flagships of the Traitor Legions wasn’t exactly a minor victory either.

Though speaking about a ‘Gloriana-class battleship’ was a miscalculation in itself. There was no Gloriana-class. The M30 authorities of the Imperium had simply assigned this label to any purpose-built warship longer than twenty kilometres in length. And comparing them to normal battleships, even long and imposing ones like the Cawl-built *Enterprise*, was kind of like comparing a Primarch to an Astartes. The latter simply wasn’t able to fulfil the job of the former.

In one of the ironies so common across a galaxy of war, the construction of hulls based on a Gloriana sub-type had almost stopped before the Isstvan betrayal. The Word Bearers had built three of their titanic Abyss-class super-battleships in secret, but these lairs of heretics and traitors were not recognised as Gloriana ships but as true Starforts in their own right, closer to Phalanx than a spaceship destined to take a place in the wall of battle. But for the Imperium as a whole, an Empire which had crushed all opposition from the Eastern Fringe to the Halo Stars and from the Veiled Region to the Ghoul Stars, the Gloriana super-battleships were too expensive.

And besides, before the civil war, there were officially forty-two of these void leviathans in active service, and the *Imperator Somnium* and *Bucephelus*, the personal flagships of the Emperor, weren’t included in this category.

After Horus was killed and the Scouring purged the traitors who didn’t flee to the Eye of Terror, the Imperium had not built another Gloriana spaceship. To the expensive cost was now added the major issue of who could be trusted wielding such a power when it was obvious even the sons of the Emperor couldn’t be.

As such, in the hellish void regions of the gigantic Warp Storm, the surviving Gloriana hulls became more and more invaluable. The defeated Astartes Legions had seen their supply bases burning in the fires of Exterminatus, and what little they had been able to save was constantly mutated by daemons and the touch of the Four. The travel to a planet could last the equivalent of a day like it could last a millennium. Having your own war factory in the upper and lower decks of your flagship was an assurance your vassal warlords weren’t going to betray you the moment your back was turned.

Of course, the treatment the different Legion flagships received vastly differed. While the *Vengeful Spirit* was used as the flagship and the headquarters of the Black Legion, the *Conqueror* was more an attack juggernaut Khorne directed against annoying Astartes who had had the gall to displease him somehow.

The *Pride of the Emperor*, flagship of the Third Legion, had not been used for war purposes since the Battle of Thessala. Fazar'nzlath'hesh was more interesting in keeping its place as the True Chosen of Slaanesh, and the ship which had been once the pride and joy of the Jupiter shipyards was abandoned to the hordes of Daemonettes using the avenues and the compartments as their depravation grounds, the mad disciples of the Dark Mechanicum, and worst things it was best not to know the name of or think too long about.

To sum-up, the *Pride of the Emperor* was a Daemonship in every aspect, tainted forever by the Power of Excess.

It was also the worst-maintained Gloriana in service of the Traitor Legions, and the competition was particularly fierce in this contest, with the *Conqueror* eternally at war and the *Endurance* a hive of pestilence and decay.

It was absolutely not ready for war. At the very moment Commorragh was invaded, there were exactly six things which could be for sure be recognised as Emperor’s Children aboard, and it was best to not be too regarding on the appearance or genetic code’s examination. The hundreds of Noise Marines and Third Legion’s remnants using the flagship were busy raping, desecrating, murdering and rampaging on the Crone World below, amidst daemons, mutants and debased cultists.

With no Daemon-Primarch, pretender or real, to give the order to return the Pride of the Emperor, the atrocities on-world had not really diminished in intensity. The daemons present in the super-battleship, however, had departed for a far more important battleground.

As a result, there was absolutely no one to give a warning as seven battleships of the Death Guard materialised into reality.

By the time the Emperor’s Children and the things fighting on their side finally realised the Slaaneshi-controlled region was under enemy attack, the ritual had begun hours ago.

Nurgle, after a long period of observation, had decided to intervene. And his first order to his servants was to engineer the removal of the *Pride of the Emperor* from the Great Game. Had it been any other battleship, maybe it would have been possible to convert it to the joys of fevers and great epidemics, but the Dark Prince had tainted with so much Excess the Gloriana super-battleship that the effort was simply not worth the potential gains.

And, as remote as the possibility was, it was best to stop any attempt from the human Anathema to rescue the soul of the Third Primarch. Before Commorragh, it would been thought impossible, but lately the enemy of the Four had done too many ‘impossible’ things for the Plague Father to take any chance.

Slaanesh, too busy directing its forces in its own backyard and against Commorragh, was unable to muster more than one Legion, and the Keeper of Secrets sent to stop the ritual was no match against seven Great Unclean Ones.

A massive greenish Warp Rift opened and swallowed the *Pride of the Emperor*, banishing it from reality and un-reality for an eternity of torment and agony.

Then the seven battleships and the Plague Marines waiting aboard them turned their gaze to the planet which had once been Tor Yvresse, one of the jewels of the Aeldari Empire. Orders were barked and new instructions given.

And the Death Guard went to war.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Forty-two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Epistolary Hendrik**

There were moments in your life when you couldn’t help but loathe the fact you were a psyker. Right here, right now, Hendrik of the Dawnbreaker Guard was experiencing one.

It was extremely galling to lay with your body irresponsive on a hospital bed when other Space Marines arrived to this section of the medical facilities in a far worse state than you were and fifteen minutes later were able to walk when there was no sign of improvement of your condition.

Hendrik wasn’t blaming the Mechanicus Biologis personnel or the hundreds of men and women, of course. The Blood Legion’s Marine understood it would be unreasonable. Unlike many, many soldiers, he was part of the Dawnbreaker Guard and as such had been briefed on the potency and the limits of Bacta.

And the ant-generated substance’s most important one was definitely: do not administer it to any psyker, under any circumstance. Gold Bacta was for Lady Weaver. Red Bacta was for baseline humans. Blue Bacta was for Space Marines. In all three cases though, injecting the smallest dose to a person who drew upon the power of the Warp was a death sentence, and an unpleasant one to boot.

So there was nothing in this super-battleship which could allow him to return to the frontlines in mere hours. It was humiliating and disconcerting in one. The transhuman physiology of an Astartes had excellent regeneration properties and a top-tier resistance to psychic phenomena. What exactly had this xenos artefact done to them to leave veteran Librarians like him in such a state?

The arrival of a familiar figure allowed him to stop lamenting on his fate and the inability to fulfil his oaths at this very moment.

“Seneschal-Consort,” he saluted the woman in white medical personnel’s robe who had arrived in front of his bed. “I was unaware you were serving among the Medicae personnel.”

“Battle-brother Hendrik,” their Lady’s paramour returned the salute. “Due to the afflux of wounded guardsmen and people on every ship, the Medicae specialists have petitioned for every non-indispensable soldier having basic healing knowledge to come help them. Since I helped in the Nyx hospitals several time during the official visits, I figured I might as well volunteer. There isn’t exactly a shortage of vox-operators.”

The Marine Librarian managed to shake his head slightly to nod at his interlocutor. He was glad to see their Lady’s confidence in her consort had not been wasted. Unfortunately, the mention of the afflux of wounded didn’t exactly reassure him.

“Marshal Moltke has begun a full retreat from Utar’ragh two hours ago,” the white-robed woman explained as she checked the information provided by the machines next to his bed. “So the 3rd army’s divisions are able to send the majority of their wounded back to the hospital ships.”

“But if Utar’ragh is abandoned, the Eldar armies and the abominations will be free to concentrate on Zel’harst and all the forces fighting there.”

“I have far from a complete view of the strategic picture, but I imagine it is extremely likely,” Seneschal-Consort Wei Cao agreed. “Unfortunately, the alternative is worse. The Mechanicus has to organise the retreat and the transfer of their giant Ordinatuses and the Titans of Legio Aeris Aestus, or there will be forced to abandon most of Legio Defensor here when the rest of Army Group Caribbean arrives in the Port.”

Hendrik had not thought about this. A consequence of being too focused on what happened on the frontlines, the Librarian supposed.

“How bad is it?” he could have used the words ‘how many thousands are we going to lose?’ but there was no reason to be rude.

“Assuming the plan formulated by the Archmagi functions, most of the forces who survived the battle should be able to return to the transports. We may have to abandon the machines of the last echelon, but most of their crew will be saved. No, the problem comes from the slaves. We have nowhere near the tenth of the capacity to send them away.”

“I thought the reports sent to Lady Weaver had affirmed we would be able to send close to two million former prisoners to Pavia,” Hendrik protested calmly.

“And it was done,” the Wuhanese-born woman confirmed. “I think the logisticians sent them to the Malta-class Starfort which was captured at the beginning of the battle against the pirates. But there are a lot more slaves waiting for a transport to take them away. By the most optimistic estimate, we have at least more than four hundred million ex-slaves in our control. And all of them have to be examined least they bring xenos poisons and evil surprises aboard our transports.”

The Space Marine gritted his teeth. Four hundred million was...an impressive number. One which was several orders of magnitude higher than anything the Mechanicus and the Imperial Guard brought to Commorragh.

“To be entirely truthful, I have been forced to use part of Taylor’s authority on Wolfgang’s behalf,” the white-robed consort admitted. “While the first two Rogue Traders who arrived will fight on our side and only needed a minimum of incentive, the others had to be persuaded by the Silver Skulls. The ships we could afford to find a spare crew can be used to transport the ex-slaves away for the moment, but they are not enough.”

“I see...why are there so many Rogue Traders in the question?” Hendrik was well-aware of the tendency some Rogue Traders had to outright ignore the rules, but surely even these rogues were not so stupid to consort with...

“We have sufficient information to believe the majority of those were part of Sliscus’ harem.”

The Librarian dearly wanted to believe the noblewoman was trying to make a joke, but her serious expression convinced him this wasn’t the case. Instantly, disgust and loathing rose in his organs. Oh how he hated these traitors, these betrayers of humanity! They had sold their souls and weapons to some of the vilest creatures in existence and expected for their disobedience to be tolerated?

“I have not the authority to support your actions, but once I am recovered I will contact our Lady to tell her you have done well.” He was perfectly sincere. The life of a single slave saved was more important than the trampled ego of a Rogue Trader in a xenos’ employ. “And once this battle is over, I have no doubt my battle-brothers and my cousins will suggest that these ships must be seized and the treacherous Warrant-bearers are to be executed.”

“I’m glad you approve, battle-brother Hendrik,” Wei Cao said. “Now I’m afraid I have the other patients to visit. Try to not exert too much energy during your recovery here.”

Soon the Space Marine was alone again, still immobilised but a bit reassured. There had been no new arrival of a wounded Dawnbreaker Guard and their Lady was safe, otherwise the Seneschal-Consort would have mentioned it.

Why then did he feel some unease when he thought about it?

**Heart of the Webway**

**Zel’harst**

**Forty-two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

“Gamaliel, tell everyone to retreat. Wait for me before the tunnels leading to the Port.”

Taylor did not wait to see if her order had been acknowledged. One mental command, and her wings and the jump pack of her armour were allowing her to exit and then increase the distance between her and the camp of the 1st Army.

She couldn’t stay and duel this monster there. Even if her opponent was willing to limit the collateral damage, sending her swarm in the middle of an unprepared army was a recipe for disaster.

Fortunately, the Eldar female had given her a reason to go away. The dark spire severed in an attack which should be impossible was collapsing, and with it the flag of the Matapan 1st and the few guardsmen who had been ordered to guard it. Marshal Groener and most of her officers had advised her to use the opportunity to make quite a few propaganda photos like the Red Army had done for the Reichstag on Victory Day. It was out of the question to abandon men like this...and if it forced the ‘Queen of Blades’ to fight her in a location where the number of allies caught in the crossfire was close to zero, all for the better.

Despite the formidable speed given by her wings and her power armour, Taylor was almost too late. The spire had long begun its collapse towards the ground, and there was no time to save a few guardsmen and return.

This fuelled her rage anew. More humans sacrificed, on the altar of the Eldar cruelty and arrogance. Her opponent was going to pay for this, the General swore, as she seized by the arms the two soldiers who had been trying to protect the regimental flag and were now falling to certain doom.

Thankfully, between her new powers and the strength granted by her power armour, the parahuman was strong enough to save them. Her flight as she went away from the ruin of the Zel’harst spire was not going to win an elegance’s contest, but she was able to descend and release the two guardsmen on the ground without crashing with them.

“Take the flag and return to your regiment, guardsmen. There will be no defence here. Go back to your Brigade and retreat with the rest of the Army.”

“Yes, my Lady!” one of the two Matapan men managed to reply, helping his comrade to stand.

Taylor turned and as impossible as it was, the Queen of Blades had already almost caught up, being barely three hundred metres away and closing fast.

“Go!”

Taylor drew again the Nebula’s Shard and called one of the gigantic worms she had ‘freed’ from one of the Zel’harst arenas. Her Mechanicus staff, Morkys and Lankovar included, had been unable to tell her which planet the Drukhari had raided to obtain them, but even the few she had taken control were excellent to demolish all opposition by their simple presence.

The adult worm – at least the commander of Army Group Caribbean thought it was an adult – was bigger than an Ancalagon-class Dragon Armour and its skin was more resistant than the armour of a Baneblade tank. It had gained the name of ‘Dune Worm’, by the way.

She landed on its head, allowing her to watch over the entirety of the battlefield without effort. Her Helspiders and millions of insects which had been left to breed while she was fighting in Corespur were now unleashed. Dozens of razorbeetles’ clouds were coming to her, attracted by the pheromones-emitters and the modifications the Biologis teams had added in the code of some lab-insects. Three armoured columns of Ondu Terrors were racing towards her too, supported by hundreds of thousands of Civilisation Termites, Ripper spiders, and Dreadnought-beetles. Millions of adult spiders were swarming the ruins, some of them carrying the Sunworms the Nyxian Tech-Priests had strapped on their backs. Sonora Bees, Bayou moths and plenty of flying insects were providing a nearly-endless aerial cover.

The presence of forty-plus thousand Queen-Tortoises and millions of Catachan ants could be considered overkill after listing this, but the golden-armoured parahuman wasn’t going to take any chance. And she had two other colonies of Ambulls digging under her feet for a sneak attack.

It was an army the like she could not have gathered together before arriving on Fay.

The human General didn’t know if it was going to be enough. If this was the same Queen of Blades the Core Crystal had mentioned, her enemy was impossibly old, and worse, certainly an Alpha-Plus Psyker. Granted with the Warp rifts opening and closing in the Dark City, there was a strong likelihood these powers couldn’t be used...but she wasn’t going to bet her life on it.

The crimson-haired Eldar was now immobile, encircled by her insect army, but Taylor would be lying if she said the expression on the xenos’ face looked worried or terrified.

 “It won’t be enough,” the voice was almost angelic, but there was a strong undertone of...not arrogance, more confidence and the kind of certainty a chess master must have when he was about to defeat one-sidedly a novice.

Taylor didn’t like it.

“We will see.”

The Queen of Blades laughed.

“Yes I suppose we will.”

The Eldar’s long blade instantly shifted to a perfect horizontal position. The parahuman kept all her attention on her opponent, preparing herself to fly away in order to keep the maximum of distance and insects between her and the sword mistress. The black-haired girl wasn’t delusional; against such an enemy, five years of sword training was not going to save her.

There was a horrible shriek and in the distance, the gates which had led to Corespur opened, letting hordes of abominations invade Zel’harst, led by six immense demons which managed to rival the pink auras of corruption which had surrounded the Naga.

“**WEEEEEEAAAAAAVVVVVEEERRRRR**!”

Of course facing *only* an aeons-old Eldar would have been too simple...

**The Queen of Blades**

She was almost impressed by She-Who-Thirsts. Almost being the key word.

Amnaich the Golden. N’Kari of the Unspeakable Excesses. Kyriss the Perverse. Kruult the Pale Death. Sidroh the Sinuous. And in sixth position, at the place of honour, was Shalaxi Helbane, the Monarch of the Hunt. Judging by the familiarity of its corrupted essence, Aenaria was reasonably sure She-Who-Thirsts had created this servant from an aspect of Kurnous before transforming it into something absolutely repulsive. Not that the five other servants accompanying it were better in that regard, really.

“**WEEAAAAAAVVVVEEERR! THE DARK PRINCE WILL CLAIM YOUR SOUL**!”

The Sword-bearer laughed again. It looked like *someone* was angry....though maybe the word was far too weak to be appropriate. Even with a large field of breached walls, razed spires and burning defences, the Queen of the Arenas could feel the endless ocean of seething hatred fuelling the predators of the Empyrean.

 It wasn’t one of the Void Dragon’s legendary rampages, but it was a start.

There were millions after millions of insects, six Champions of She-Who-Thirsts, and sixty-six Legions of Excess to provide some entertainment.

This cycle was going to be many things, but not boring.

 “Can I propose a contest?” she asked the human perched on top of one of the worms which had been supposed to be part of an arena competition where she had planned to participate.

There was no answer, save all the insects attacking at once.

This time she was forced to fight seriously. Her armour was good, but there were hundreds of thousands of fangs, pincers, blades, and bone-piercing appendages coming at her in an impressive coordinated offensive. Wielding Ala’ra in both hands, the Queen of Blades began to dance, launching a long-range severance at the big worm, and frowning when the walker-sized thing bled but was not divided in two near parts like she had intended. Khaine’s bloody hand, this was exciting!

In the first heartbeats she tried to pursue her golden-armoured opponent, but the winged human was no fool. The moment she tried to jump on the backs of the armoured insects, the aerial threats descended in a fury and there were so many of the things she was forced to execute a series of twenty dangerous attacks before the first wave was spent.

And then the Aeldari who sometimes answered to the name of Lelith Hesperax was forced to jump swiftly again as six claws and six purple-oozing blades chose her to be their next victim.

“**THE DARK PRINCE HAS CHOSEN YOU**!” The corruption’s agent was a deathly pale white-pink, and a combination of traits which might have had an Aeldari resemblance if they weren’t in the middle of scales, fangs, long tongues and a lot of mutations unpleasant to glance at.

So this was Kruult the Pale Death. Aenaria wasn’t impressed.

“No. First Blade. Death’s Dance.”

The survivor of the War in Heaven became again a merciless blade, swift and impossible to follow. Ala’ra severed two legs, and this was only the beginning. It took her ten strokes, two of them to remove the insects attacking both Kruult and she, but the Keeper of Secrets’ eye-hurting envelope was sent back screaming to the Palace of its Mistress. Pathetic, but what could you expect from an entity created by Morathi’s cult?

A sea of Helspiders surrounded her, while lesser arachnids threw silk, venom and small darts in a vast saturation bombardment. Now that was more unusual from the regular arena fights...and far more dangerous as well.

“Second Blade. Sapphire Strike.”

The length of Ala’ra shortened and adapted for close-quarters combat. Once it was done, the extermination of the spider’s attack was far simpler. Any inhabitant of Commorragh save herself would have died from this tactic. There were too many insects, and she had to produce a small amount of effort to counter every attack. Yes, that was definitely an opponent which could have destroyed the Fallen Scorpion. Poor Arhra, he was always too slow.

Barbed ants and more Helspiders charged her, supported by an aerial force of bees and moths.

It could have been her end, if her senses weren’t so good.

A heartbeat before striking, the Ambulls came from below in a near-perfect synchronicity.

But she was the Queen of Blades, and in four sword strikes the trap was deactivated in blood and dead insects.

“Time to raise the level of difficulty, I think.” If she fought like this with no increase in skill and speed, the insect-mistress was going to last until her swarm was extinguished and this was not fun at all.

A pink ray tried to impale her from behind, and the First Sword-bearer parried the treacherous strike negligently.

“Learn your place, filth,” the Queen of Blades told the Keeper of Secrets from where the attack had come, before accelerating. “Third Blade. Blood’s Lamentation.”

Sidroh the Sinuous or another abomination sharing its appearance tried to avoid her strike. It wasn’t really one could describe as successful. One-third of its torso was shredded, and a good kick in the head was her method of farewell before the Keeper returned to explain to its part of the Primordial Annihilator its total failure.

For good measure, two half-strikes with limited penetration ensured one Legion of Excess was going to end shortly after in the Empyrean.

Having eliminated a lot of the hindrances, the situation was a bit clearer for her eyes. Kyriss the Perverse was missing several arms and its defeat was only a question of time as ants and beetles were busy destroying it from the outside and the inside. N’Kari wasn’t exactly in a better situation as Sunworms directed brilliant blasts of light and bees launched uninterrupted raids on its head and what should be its torso.

And a spear was thrown directly at her feet, a feat so transparent the Queen of Blades wondered how the Keeper of Secrets had managed to reach her.

“**ALL-MIGHTY SLAANESH WANTS WEAVER**,” Shalaxi Helbane stated, “**BUT YOUR SOUL WILL ALSO PLEASE THE DARK PRINCE IMMENSELY**.”

The Succubus leading the Cult of the Strike gave a disappointed expression to She-Who-Thirsts’ hunter. Sending Amnaich against the little queen of the swarm was arrogant in the extreme, since defeat in detail was a certainty, but that was Excess’ problem, not hers.

“You are too weak.”

The Keeper of Secrets’ materialised a new spear and went on the attack, a shriek of loathing coming from its essence. It was so easy to anger these perversions...

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

It should be remarked that if Slaanesh was at its full power, an invasion targeting its Palace and the Empyreal lands surrounding it would have been the height of idiocy, unless the full power of another Chaos Power came to challenge it.

Unfortunately for the Dark Prince, its power was severely diminished, and what was available right now was spread on multiple fronts, trying to stop or at least ‘win’ a temporary stalemate.

Too many Legions of Excess had been sent to Commorragh, and withdrawing them was unacceptable for a variety of reasons going from pride to the fact the Doom of the Aeldari really needed the tasty souls to compensate the ones it was losing by virtue of causality.

At the same time, Ka’Bandha the Angel’s Bane had to be defeated. But the Bloodthirster was far from alone. Eight hundred and eighty-eight Blood Legions had invaded the Slaaneshi realms, led by eight hundred and eighty-eight Bloodthirsters. This was a horde which would have sundered an entire Sector in the Materium, and many Legions of Excess which had been banished from Commorragh reformed in the plains only to face an endless army of Bloodletters coming straight at them.

Alas, the huge Bloodthirster leading the armies of the Skull Throne in this war was far from the only servant of Khorne which had decided the invasion of the Dark City was the perfect moment to settle some old grudges. By the time Fazar'nzlath'hesh was busy fighting for its very existence against the Angel’s Bane, the Daemon-Primarch of the World Eaters opened a new front.

Angron utterly loathed the Emperor’s Children and their decadent ways, and it had taken a single rumour of one of the Bloodthirsters of its entourage for the Red Angel to gather a powerful Blood Legion and start a new war. Now the World of the Immortal Sorrows, formerly Tor Elyr when it had been part of the Aeldari Empire, was the main target of what was for all intent and purpose an unplanned Blood Crusade. The Daemon Primarch was massacring everything in its path, and what managed to avoid it was pillaged, destroyed, decapitated and stained with oceans of blood. The Daemon Prince Elyssar’sirath, ruling this world in the name of the Dark Prince, had already tried to face Angron and suffered a one-sided defeat which had ended with a large axe tearing apart its essence. The Aeldari souls were still boiled in rivers of tears, but the lakes and the oceans of the Immortal Sorrows were slowly but surely taking a reddish colour as Titans of the Legio Audax slaughtered thousands of Daemonettes. The pink and the violet shades were losing their peerless artifices and glamour, as Flesh Hounds were hunting everything bearing Slaanesh’s mark and some things which didn’t.

Unless something was done rapidly on this planet, the Blood Legions were going to emerge victorious on this world. But none of the available Keepers of Secrets or the Daemon Princes the Dark Prince kept to guard its walls had a chance in hell to challenge Angron and slow down its progression. And this world wasn’t the only one where Bloodthirsters had decided to pile up skulls by the millions.

On Torvendis, the Daemon Prince Doombreed had come in person with eight Blood Legions to remove Lady Charybdia, Princess of Slaanesh, from her throne. Skarbrand and Khârn were testing their mettle by slaying everything that moved before the altars of Aktosha. World Eater warbands thought to be long extinct reappeared to wage terrible conflicts against Slaaneshi fortresses, military assets and slave-markets.

This was not a large skirmish or some test. This was all-out war between the Powers of Blood and Excess. And Excess was losing badly.

It did not pass unacknowledged.

There was a strident shriek in the Empyrean. In the Causeway of Secrets, a gigantic maelstrom of blue energy opened, and from it the Scintillating Legions of Tzeentch poured through. Millions of Blue and Pink Horrors were joining the battlefield, though whether the chief goal was to fight the Khornate daemons or to critically weaken the Legions of Slaanesh was only known to the Architect of Fate.

But the Great Conspirator had joined the war. The Palace of Slaanesh’s foundations trembled as the Lords of Change cast their sorcery against the other Legions, and the situation became even more chaotic.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

**Thirty-nine hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

“This is like watching an elfish female version of Sephiroth carving up the legions of DOOM!”

There were reassuring things about Leet. Not many, but they existed. His passion for video games never abandoning him could be said to be one of these points which made him tolerable sometimes.

Unfortunately, Dennis couldn’t deny his description of the situation Taylor faced about a couple of kilometres away was incredibly accurate.

Thank whatever good luck existed in this galaxy that Dragon had agreed to build three of Leet’s flying cameras and disguising them as servo-owls. If she hadn’t, they wouldn’t have anything to see what was happening to the insect-mistress.

There were too many demons between the angelic parahuman and the Lava Line to send fighter-bombers or any form of sizeable aerial support.

The Tinker next to him was unfortunately not joking when he compared the spectacle to a game of horror/science-fiction.

There were abominations everywhere. Millions, maybe billions of eldritch monsters, each more repugnant than the other, with towering mutated snake-like things serving as sub-commanders for legions of pink succubae and beasts that no real world could have possibly given birth to.

For the time being, the demonic legions died by the millions. Many of their elites were busy fighting Taylor and the Eldar hell-liker who had presented herself as the Queen of Blades. And the Salamanders and the Tech-Priests manning the Lava Line had had hours to prepare.

The forces of depravation, decadence and sins perished in columns and armies to learn this painful lesson. Improvised catapults collapsed makeshift barrages and drowned the abominations in oceans of magma. Trenches were abandoned to the enemy only for it to be annihilated when mines opened the ground on geysers of molten rock and brilliant eruptions of fire.

If there was one lesson to be remembered from this battle, Dennis swore, it would be to always stay in good terms with the Chapter of the Salamanders. The dark-skinned Astartes were on a holy mission to broadcast their disgust of the Ruinous Powers, and there would be no mercy and no surrender. Dozens of tanks led by the super-heavy *Obsidian Chariot* were firing implacable salvos methodically, stopping dead the demonic counter-attacks. The Marine and Mechanicus artillery was bombarding with inflammable substances the enemy, and the list of substances used to cause more devastation included promethium and napalm.

Dennis had thought Army Group Caribbean and the fleet which had transported them here had made Commorragh and the Eldar species as a whole burn. He was beginning to rethink his opinion on this issue.

There was fire everywhere, and the volcanic-theme which had been limited to only a small section of Zel’harst was now enlarged and increased in size again. It was so hot in this large furnace that the regiments of the Imperial Guard had already been withdrawn and the Titans had retreated with them. The ground was becoming instable as the sons of Vulkan had somehow managed destabilised the Eldar portals to increase the flow of lava, and the conditions imposed every member of the rear-guard to wear a power armour or be mechanically augmented. It was no problem for the Astartes or the Skitarii, but it was an environment where the standard Nyx carapace armour was showing its limits.

“Where does this monster come from anyway?” Leet asked. “The Imperium and the Necron forces have been hammering the Eldar for nearly two days. Why is this monster only intervening now?”

“Judging by Trazyn’s quick escape, I would say this Eldar female fought the Necrons for a few hours before challenging Taylor,” Dennis replied as he fired his Fay bolt pistol in the mass of incoming demons and a detachment of Knights took position to send the horrors back to hell where they belonged. “As for the reason why she was late to the massacre, my guess is as good as yours. Maybe this long-ear was locked outside the Port of Lost Souls. Maybe she was on the other end of the galaxy fighting greenskins. Who cares anyway? I’m just happy this xenos killer wasn’t here when we arrived at Commorragh.”

The time-stopping parahuman would have been far from convinced two days ago that a single being, no matter how powerful, could change the outcome of the one-sided slaughter delivered on the Port of Lost Souls.

This was before seeing this athletic alien in tight black armour fight legions of demons and Taylor’s swarm like she was at the opera and the rest of the battlefield were mere figurants for her glory.

The word impossible had lost more and more importance, but the very thought of surviving in the middle of this nightmare was completely and utterly ridiculous. Thanks to the efforts of the Salamanders, the insects hidden in the subterranean levels of Zel’harst were fleeing in their direction, giving the master parahuman an endless source of arachnid and other insects as reinforcements. On the other side, it was hell hath no fury powered by unlimited wrath, loathed and cruelty. Some demons were more than ten metres tall, and the number of claws, spikes, fangs, tentacles and other monstrous appendages. Taylor was raining a crystal bombardment with her sword, and pink clouds of acid and corruption were materialising with zero warning.

It was already nearly miraculous – no pun intended – that the former member of the Undersiders could survive in this, but at least she had a few millions spiders and millions more of her pet insects.

The Eldar who had presented herself as Lelith Hesperax and the Queen of Blades had none of these advantages. The alien wore armour and wielded one long sword – which Leet had been prompt to name *Masamune*. As far as the holo-video allowed them to see – demonic energy provoked bad interferences with modern technology – this enemy was not using any kind of special power, be it a Warp-fuelled one or something like they had as parahumans.

She was just too fast, too skilled, too...too everything. There were flashes and limbs and claws were severed. Blood flowed faster than eye could follow. The demons were shredded before they knew they were under attack. Chitins which would have required anti-tank shells to wound seriously were slaughtered in a single blow.

Her crimson hair dancing in the hellish atmosphere of Commorragh, the Queen of Blades fought like a storm of death, and nothing seemed to be able to prevent her from claiming victory after victory. Of the six gigantic creatures which had assailed Taylor and the Eldar female, only the largest, the spear-wielding one, was still fighting. The others had been cast down, defeated by attacks distorting the very fabric of Commorragh when they connected with the equivalent of demonic flesh.

More giant demons had come to replace the lost ones. In three hours, a lot of them had suffered the same fate.

The vox cracking with new orders from Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn made Dennis grimace.

“Lord Dennis Peters, we must withdraw to the next defensive line. The abominations are trying to flank us by the south-east.” This was the logical solution to the problem posed by the Salamanders, who simply couldn’t be everywhere at once, and the Skitarii had seen their numbers depleted by several days of heavy fighting.

“If we retreat now, we won’t be able to help her Majesty of Spiders.”

Dennis chuckled.

“Like anything we can do now will be able to provide her the firepower she needs.” The General had been right to leave her Dawnbreaker Guard behind; the Space Marines were skilled and would have provided excellent firepower for a few minutes. And then they would have died one by one. They couldn’t fly with golden wings, and the more insects Weaver used to protect them, the fewer were available to parry the realm-destroying attacks of the Queen of Blades. “All we can do is ensure the Gate to the Port of Lost Souls stay open, no matter the cost.”

It wasn’t what the first or second set of plans had called for. But the plans were useless now, as the circumstances had vaporised their prerequisites. There was only killing and killing again, repelling the demons and give the rest of the army time to withdraw safely.

“We retreat, yes.” Everywhere he watched, Commorragh dissolved in a painting of apocalypse and hellish bestiary. And it was far from over.

**General Taylor Hebert**

It had taken less than ten minutes of battle for Taylor to realise she had exactly zero chance to kill Lelith Hesperax, no matter how many insects she sent against her enemy or how much power she poured in the Nebula’s Shard.

It was not pessimism or cowardice. Several years of training with Space Marines and many, many duels had at least allowed her to develop a sense of when she was outmatched.

And the difference between the Queen of Blades and her was so great it wasn’t even funny.

As much as it was disgusting to admit it, Taylor was proportionally weaker than this Eldar sword-queen than she had been in the Endbringer fight against Leviathan. It was incredibly scary when she thought about it, given the millions of Death World insects mustered in her swarm and the powers granted by the Emperor.

But it was also true.

In speed alone the ancient Eldar was lightning-fast, and if it was an exaggeration, it wasn’t by much. She had stopped relying on her eyes to detect the moves of this Endbringer-level opponent. Even when she slowed down, the races of Hesperax were more than a blur than anything else.

Could this xenos have won against Iash’uddra or Ka’Bandha alone and unsupported? Yes, the answer was yes, a thousand times yes. It didn’t matter how strong and how much powerful something was when the enemy was too fast to be touched.

The Greater Demons had paid an astonishingly high price for presuming the contrary. Six monstrosities had wanted to kill the two of them at the very beginning. She had killed one. The Eldar arena-fighter had accounted for the four others.

And now it was time for the last of them to be defeated.

“**SLAANESH WILL MAKE YOU PUNISH YOU UNTIL YOU DON’T REMEMBER YOUR NAME!**” roared the tall purple abomination armed with a spear taller than she was. As always, the threat would have been a bit more impressive if in the next second the long blade of Lelith Hesperax...or was she supposed to call her Aenaria?...well, the Sword of Vaul of the Queen of Blades had not separated the disgusting head from its shoulders.

Several tall demons tried to punish her for this slaughter. Three silver flashes and more of the servants of Excess were banished From Commorragh by overwhelming force.

The next attack was directed at her and four more bees died to give her a chance to evade this blow in time. This was bad. Whether she tried or not did not appear to matter; always the Eldar seemed to know the perfect angle of attack, the perfect opportunity to wound her, and sacrificing her insects was the only way to remain safe. It was true there were shields integrated with her equipment and a golden aura protecting her body, but Taylor didn’t want to test if it was going to be enough against such a monster.

In the time it had taken her to reflect on her never-sufficient feinting and diversions, Lelith Hesperax had slaughtered over three large Ondu Terrors and likely as many Helspiders.

And then the flow of Daemonettes and other demons brutally stopped.

This was...very surprising. The remnants of the chaotic formations were torn apart, and for a few seconds she was alone with her swarm facing the Queen of Blades.

“They are coming,” the red-haired enemy told her, not even turning her head in her direction, her eyes fixing a point in the new hordes of mutated succubae and other depraved horrors assembling to launch a new assault.

The prediction was exact. About thirty second later, two things emerged from the ranks of the Damned. And yes, ‘things’ was an accurate description, if one didn’t want to use ‘demon’ or ‘abomination’.

The first was slightly taller than the Queen of Blades, and if you stayed far away from it, maybe you could mistake it for an Eldar or a humanoid being. But the aura of pink it was soaked in left no doubt to the thing’s allegiance. It wore a crimson red cape, made from the flayed skins of living beings and tainted with the blood of innocent. Its armour was abyss-black, and screaming mouths with fangs appeared and disappeared everywhere. The worst part was the face and the head, though. There lied a mask of a substance which appeared to be gold, but was undoubtedly corrupted and evil. Maybe it had been an Eldar in times past. But if it was true, this was no longer the case. Thanks to the power of Sanguinius’ ruby and the Emperor’s blessing, the insect-mistress knew there was nothing but Warp essence underneath. This thing was a Daemon-Prince now, no matter what it had been when its soul was a living, breathing being.

The second thing was even more horrible to watch. It looked half-snake in the lower form, half-centipede in the upper body, and there were plenty of spikes, claws and appendages everywhere to make her wonder how many animal parts had been mismatched to create this vision of hell.

One thing was sure, it wasn’t going to be an easy fight. The pink aura and the sensation of evil were less than what she had experienced when facing the Naga, but these two were quite close.

“The Dark Prince must really be desperate to send you two,” the tone employed by the Queen of Blades had changed. It was beautiful, but it had gained a bitter edge. It was provocative, almost mocking. “But I suppose that once the Monarch of the Hunt is defeated, there’s not much left in the Palace save the rejects.”

“**Kneel**,” the vaguely humanoid demon hissed in a voice which was a chorus of torment and loathing. “**Kneel before your Emperor**.”

Lelith Hesperax snorted.

“Your memory is failing you, Most Idiotic Presence. I never kneeled to you while you had the crown of the Empire on your head. And I won’t now.”

This was the former Eldar Emperor? Standards must have been quite low to gain the title.

The parahuman woman realised a bit too late she had spoken the last words out loud.

The red-haired female burst into laughter and began to snicker, giggling and continuing a laughing fit as she sat on top of a dead Dreadnought-beetle’s back.

The reaction of the Daemon-Prince was a bit less amused.

“**YOU DARE? YOU DARE, PATHETIC MON-KEIGH**?” Yes, that answered all right her question if the thing had been an Eldar in a previous life. “**I AM THE EMPEROR OF THE AELDARI**!”

“Ah, no. You’re not.” The tone of the first Sword of Vaul’s owner was falsely apologetic. There was a non-hidden joy in the red irises. “The young Swarm Queen here is a new claimant to the throne. The Core Gate has recognised her claim and well...technically she has just fought me and her performance was somewhat acceptable.”

At this moment the words appeared to fail the demon and Taylor had the urge to face-palm, having a good hint of what was coming.

“The old Emperor is dead and what’s left of the Empire is a ridiculous field of ruins and arrogant imbeciles...me excepted. By virtue of being the last Aeldari not corrupted by She-Who-Thirsts and having opposed the pathetic flesh-bags who filled the ranks of the Pleasure Cult, I, Aenaria Eldanesh, recognise Taylor Hebert as Empress of the Aeldari. All hail the Aeldari-human Empress...all boo the false-pretender Malekith!”

And the Queen of Blades genuinely giggled once more.

“**YOU HAVE BETRAYED YOUR RACE FOR THE LAST TIME!”**

“No, that’s my line.” Lelith Hesperax inclined slightly her head before widely smiling. “Malekith. Rakarth. Know that I have always considered insults of the highest order to the legacy of the warriors who fought and died for the hope of a better galaxy. Now I am going to kill you. If you have any last words before we proceed to the execution part?”

“**KILL HER! KILL WEAVER AND ELDANESH! MIGHT SLANNESH WILL CLAIM THEIR SOULS**!”

A new endless wave of demons surged to attack again, and the battle resumed, more terrible and merciless than ever.

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**32nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**URIEN RAKARTH**

**‘THE PROPHET OF FLESH’**

**ELDAR HAEMUNCULUS**

**FLESH-CRAFTER ABOMINATION**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**UNKNOWN RESURRECTION AND CLONING ABILITIES**

**EXTERMINATUS WEAPONS AUTHORISED IF PRESENCE CONFIRMED**

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

**THE XENOS IS TO BE INCINERATED COMPLETELY UPON TERMINATION**

**REWARD: 690 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SUB-SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP**

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**The Queen of Blades**

The sheer expression of loathing daemon-Malekith had given her once she had recognised her human sparring partner as Empress was something Aenaria was not going to forget for millions of cycles. It was absolutely delicious to see the horror, the disgust, and the hatred fight for emotional control on the fake golden face.

Truly and in all modesty, the Queen of Blades thought her joke had beaten everything Cegorach had done and would ever do. The last Emperors must be rolling in their graves; not that said monuments still existed, but the very idea made her heart beat faster in amusement.

“**COME AELDARI LEGIONS! PUNISH THE USURPER AND THE BETRAYER!”**

The Empyrean answered Malekith’s order, which almost surprised the Queen of the Arenas. In times past, it had been Morathi holding the leash of her pathetic son and the lamentable spawn had little influence; once the military campaigns who had been destined to earn the Phoenix Crown were over, ‘Emperor Malekith’ had been rarely attending state affairs, preferring going from orgy to orgy and other depravities than truly ruling.

Bah, it took folly to empower Malekith, and She-Who-Thirsts was an entity of folly and hedonism. The slave and the mistress were exactly of the same mould. The hordes of Daemonettes and the armies drawn from the corrupted population of Commorragh were just puppets for their selfish desires, like during the Fall.

The creature which had been Rakarth tried to stab her in the back with many long blades.

“**YOU COULD HAVE BEEN MIGHTY SLAANESH CONSORT!**” The former Haemonculus screamed as she devastated the ranks of the slaves mortal and immaterial.

“The abomination our species created because we were arrogant and stupid has no consort or any equal,” the Succubus leading the Cult of Strife corrected. “The only type of relationship the Dark Whore and all the facets of the Primordial Annihilator have with their servants is slavery. The only question is if you are a favoured or an unfavoured one.”

“**IN THIS CASE YOU WILL BE DRAGGED TO THE PENS WITH THE REST OF THE CATTLE! ARRGGH!**”

The ‘Arghh’ part had been uttered as a long spike of crystal had impaled the upper part of the body Rakarth now used. It was a particular ingenious manner to use *Elsar’bryn*...especially as it began to pulse in golden light.

The explosion which followed was particularly spectacular, but alas insufficient to completely destroy the ‘favoured slave’ of She-Who-Thirsts.

“It was a good attempt,” the veteran of the War in Heaven commented as she landed on another very large worm, back to back with the little human Queen. “But the Swords of Vaul were not built to destroy permanently entities of the Great Ocean. Neither will the C’Tan blade you have on your wrist, though it might be more useful. The Primordial Annihilator was created after them, you see.”

The golden-armoured youngster flinched at her close presence, a reaction which reassured the Queen of Blades. If the human wasn’t afraid of her now, the First Sword-bearer would have wondered what it took to accomplish this deed.

“And what would it take to permanently kill Rakarth now?”

“**WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? KILL THEM!**”

A single move and a few hundreds of thousands handmaidens of Excess were disintegrated by Ala’ra.

Still, the question deserved an answer.

“An Anathema to the Primordial Annihilator or me,” Aenaria watched for a few instants the child she had crowned Aeldari Empress reform broken insect clouds into new lethal weapons of war and cause a lot of trouble to Malekith’s army. “Why Rakarth?”

There were plenty of good reasons to want the Master Haemonculus dead, beginning with the experiments he ‘tested’ on every planet he visited.

“As long as he lives, his knowledge of flesh-crafting can be used to build new armies of Eldar,” the young human answered reluctantly as she rose once again on wings of gold, protected by thousand of bees, hornets and insects she had rarely bothered learning the name of. She followed at a leisurely pace, delighting on hearing the screams of hatred uttered by Malekith as the great worm smashed away one more Keeper of Secrets. “What would it take for you to consider his permanent elimination?”

The ancient Aeldari woman’s opinion of the swarm-mistress rose a bit higher. So many beings in this galaxy began with ‘I want you to kill this hindrance’ and never considered the fact she might refuse or kill the waste of genetics for their arrogance.

So killing the new Daemon-Prince Urien Rakarth. If Aenaria did it, the Doom was going to be in a very, very unpleasant mood and would likely break all limits to hunt and destroy her. And the other Three were not going to stay idle either. Decisions, decisions. She-Who-Thirsts and the Excess Legions were getting weaker for every inhabitant of Commorragh killed in this battle. And whatever happened before the end of the battle, the generous use of volcanic materials to drown Zel’harst in flames guaranteed the Dark City was not going to be a haven anymore.

“I want a new arena, my Empress,” the Queen of Blades said cheekily, not missing the muttered curse voiced by her interlocutor. “Do not blame me! You asked the Core Crystal to be recognised as a claimant!”

“I didn’t think there would be a former Emperor nearby to take offense,” the human retorted childishly. “And we both know the title is just an empty word. None of the Craftworlds will ever bow to me.”

The Queen of Blades shrugged. The human wasn’t wrong, though she thought the effect of Commorragh’s destruction was perhaps going to convince several outlier groups to amend their ways where humans were concerned.

“You are free to think this, little Queen,” it was not like she truly desired the return of the Empire. It would have been better the Necrons won, all things considered. At least it would have been relatively quick, compared to the long and humiliating period of decadence which had led to the Fall. “Right, my conditions. I want a new arena, since you and your forces destroyed my last performance scene. I heard from the chatter of your troops you are the ruler of a world, so don’t bother saying it’s not something you haven’t the power to do.”

Her ears were good, but the grumbling she heard in return was not something she could decipher.

“Let’s go back to the arena. I want one million seats for the public, and the stadium better be full when I visit. I also want a superb lodge and installations worthy of my rank. Lodging, relaxation quarters, a palace for my Wyches...”

Whether she was Lelith Hesperax or Aenaria Eldanesh, she had a rank to uphold. It was out of the question to battle in front of a half-dozen thousand drunkard humans and lesser beings unworthy to watch a glance of her dagger in hand.

“And here I thought I had seen the last of the arenas when I razed the Menelaus one...” the little Queen of the Swarm sighed. “Fine, I accept your conditions. But you’d better give advance warning when you decide to visit.”

“Of course,” as funny as it would to provoke some humans into doing something stupid, the last time she had done it, one of her arenas and the world upon it had been vaporised by the weapons the tiny-ears called Exterminatus. Doing it once had been far more than enough to realise she was not attracting more spectators that way.

And on this word Aenaria channelled her psychic energy for the first time in Ala’ra. Instantly, the Queen of Blades heard the shriek of rage of She-Who-Thirsts as it tried to suck her soul and failed, her protections being as strong as they were during the War in Heaven.

The First Sword of Vaul created a couple of thousand blades, all imbued with the silvery brilliance of her power.

“Sorry Rakarth, I prefer the terms of the new Empress than yours.”

The Daemon-Prince was fast, so it probably saw her moving.

But it likely saw nothing else as her blades found her mark and its essence was severed beyond the point of regeneration and a strike in the Great Ocean annihilated every principle, feeling and memory which had allowed it to claim the name of Urien Rakarth.

**Outer Approaches of the Port of Lost Souls**

**Magnificent Xelian Gate**

**Thirty-six hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

The death of a part of the Primordial Annihilator, as tiny and insignificant as it was, was no gentle thing at the best of times. The Battle of Commorragh was not this optimal circumstance, and the reality the sons and daughters of Isha were condemned to She-Who-Thirsts’ monstrous embrace if they died was not something that improved the situation.

The immense majority of the humans fighting in Commorragh heard a horrible shriek when the Dark Prince and several hundred freed slaves instantly died. Dozens of guardsmen, former prisoners and rear-area corpsmen would suffer mutations and terrible nightmares until the Inquisition took charge and purged them.

Faer Machdavar did not care about the Mon-keigh, and even if he had, it would have been to ask how many of the loathsome pests the scream had killed.

But, to repeat the obvious, at the moment the High Farseer of Biel-Tan did not think about Mon-keigh or any of the other primates and lesser species struggling to survive. His thoughts were entirely turned towards the damage the shriek of agony had inflicted to his forces.

“Report,” croaked the blue-silver-armoured High Farseer once he had found the strength to stand up after the aftershocks of She-Who-Thirsts’ scream.

“Situation is...extremely confused,” one of the senior Autarchs answered. “Our reserves are...in a major state of disarray. Psychic contamination levels are extremely high, especially among the Striking Scorpions and the Warp Spiders.”

The next heartbeats saw a litany of disastrous news converging towards his flagship. Everywhere the death scream had struck hard and the forces of Biel-Tan and the other Craftworlds had been mentally crippled in an instant. The hosts of She-Who-Thirsts had also suffered, but since the handmaidens of their Doom were not being of flesh and blood, they had recovered faster, slaying and destroying hundreds of spirit stones.

“At least one Legion of Excess has invaded River Khaides and is attacking the main army of Arach-Qin!”

“There are more disjunctions in the Sprawls! They are coming! They are coming!”

“I can’t contact anyone in the Kher-Ys’ upper chain of command!”

“Seal the Utar’ragh Gates! Seal these Khaine-damned Gates before we are all roasted!”

Faer Machdavar tried to calm himself and watch the threads of the future, but a mere mental light touch with the barrier separating reality from the Great Ocean told him this would be suicide. The dark ocean was boiling in chaotic energies, and the wrath of She-Who-Thirsts was impossible to properly describe.

Whatever events awaited in the short-term future, it was impossible to take the risk of seeing them so close to Commorragh.

“Inform all our Seers, Farseers, Warlocks and all active-gifted personnel they must not use their abilities anymore. The influence of the Primordial Annihilator is far too strong around us to perceive anything important.”

“High Farseer, if we do this...”

“Yes, I’m perfectly aware of the repercussions.” Not being able to use any passive skill in Commorragh had been bad enough. The training of a Seer from a young age was to use said abilities until it was an instinctive reflex. Learning they couldn’t do so had deprived the armies of Biel-Tan of a potent part of their advantages. But if they couldn’t use them outside of the main sub-realms, it was even more catastrophic.

They were utterly blind, and their armies had been severely beaten.

“How many Aspect Warriors and frontline assets did we lose?”

One of the High Autarchs cleared his throat. The fact he clearly didn’t need physically to do that was an ill omen.

“Based on the last predicting data, more than nine hundred million of our warriors have been lost. Kher-Ys armies have lost two hundred million, Arach-Qin three hundred, and Nacretimeï one hundred and fifty.”

So they had lost more than one billion and a half Aspect Warriors and other war specialists in this...battle. It didn’t escape him that he wanted to use quite another word, one far uglier than ‘battle’, but could not resolve itself to do so.

“It is clear we can no longer accomplish what we came for,” Machdavar stated as more and more crimson black and crimson lights appeared everywhere on his console to show the destroyed and crippled formations of the Tempest of Blades. “Order a general withdrawal from Commorragh. We can no longer-“

“Autarch! Autarch! The Outer Gates are closing! The Outer Gates are closing!”

The High Farseer and most of the command structure of the Expeditionary Force shouted in disbelief as the Gates they had arrived by suddenly flickered out. Panicked communications informed them this was no unique and isolated event. In less time than it took to say it, the large arteries leading to the Dark City were no longer connected to the rest of the Webway.

“How?”

They were trapped. As long as the Yngir device was active, the Biel-Tan warships weren’t able to enter into the Port of Lost Souls. Now they couldn’t retreat anymore, and the Legions of Excess were advancing on all fronts.

Weaver. It was the fault of this upstart Mon-keigh called Weaver. Clearly the modifications brought to the Webway nexus before had only been precursor attacks before the death strike.

“Is the Gate the primates used to invade Commorragh still active?”

“Yes, High Farseer!” It was all the confirmation he needed. The thief which dared holding a Sword of Vaul against its legitimate owners was responsible for this. And Faer Machdavar didn’t need psychic powers it was also certainly guilty of doing something which had also provoked this psychic explosion.

Weaver. Everything was Weaver’s fault.

“There is a solution.”

Nobody had seen the portal open, but when the Great Harlequin spoke, hundreds of eyes turned in his – or her? – direction.

The colours were those of the Masque of the Frozen Stars, and yet there was...something wrong in his or her behaviour.

“And what is this solution, trickster of the Laughing God?” Faer Machdavar asked, trying to show no hint of how desperate the Biel-Tan forces were of any opportunity to survive the defeat coming to greet them with claws and excess.

“We have a weapon which might be of use against your enemies.” The Harlequin laughed, and the High Farseer did his best to not shiver at the guttural tone. “We have...the Abyss of Dreams.”

**The Warp**

**The Hunting Grounds**

If the Harlequins of the Frozen Stars had been a bit less arrogant, they would have destroyed the ancient weapon called the Abyss of Dreams the moment their God had advised them to.

But the Great Harlequin who had made this discovery had not done so.

 If the Harlequins had been a bit less convinced of their own infallibility, they would have wondered at the price one needed to pay to activate such a terrible weapon capable to sunder the barriers between the sub-realms of Commorragh.

But the Troupes of the Frozen Stars weren’t reasonable or willing to seriously investigate whether their actions truly helped the galaxy or not.

The weapon was activated. And one instant later, exactly six hundred sixty-six Harlequin and six hundred sixty-six Biel-Tan souls were torn from their bodies and thrown into the Sea of Souls.

This was, unfortunately for them, merely the activation price. Before the Fall, it would have been paid without the question, for the Aeldari were protected by their Gods. In this age? It was a fate worse than death. And it was merely the beginning of the sacrifice. If the Aeldari wanted to let the Abyss of Dreams active, they would have to sacrifice one thousand three hundred and thirty-two souls per Eldar micro-cycle, which was roughly equivalent to forty minutes for a human.

Obviously, the Aeldari which had been randomly sacrificed to power the Abyss of Dreams could care less about this. As the battle intensified between the Four, their souls had been thrown in the Hunting Grounds. It was far deeper than any place the light of the Astronomican had ever reached...and it was part of Khorne’s realm.

The Harlequins and the Aspect Warriors did not take long to realise this. Not when they had a pack of very large Flesh Hounds straight in front of them which all howled in satisfaction.

There were ‘merely’ eight thousand eight hundred eighty-eight of them. Never let it be said that Khorne did not give fair odds to those who had so generously shed blood for his personal amusement.

For all their flaws and arrogance, the Biel-Tan warriors and the Masque of the Frozen Stars fought together to the end.

Unfortunately, death was not a release in Khorne’s realm, merely the beginning of something far, far worse.