This is totally not a teaser – 14 August 2022

This is totally not a teaser. Seriously, watch the title. And it’s way too long to be a teaser, right.

Right?

**Extinction 11.4**

**Die another Day**

*I was there, the day the Emperor slew Horus.*

*I was there, the day the Legions died.*

*I was there, and I know we were deceived.*

*But let’s begin by a proper introduction.*

*My name is Ezekyle Abaddon, once First Captain of the Sons of Horus, proud scion Cthonia, commander of the Justaerin, elite of the Sixteenth Astartes Legion.*

*I survived the final battle on the command bridge of the* Vengeful Spirit*.*

*I was there to watch the Emperor kill my gene-sire.*

*And as his lifeless corpse hit the ground, the Gods couldn’t hide the truth from my eyes.*

*It was never in our power to win.*

*We were never supposed to win the Siege.*

*I swear, on everything that ever mattered to me, that it is the truth.*

*That was the truth that was hidden from Horus and all those who had managed to keep their sanity intact until the last moment.*

*It was a truth which almost killed me, I will admit.*

*It certainly killed something inside me.*

*But I didn’t die, though I certainly felt like a walking corpse.*

*For a brief moment, fury and hatred managed to sustain me, enough days to retreat in the Eye of Terror with the remains of the Legion and bury properly the being we had called our father.*

*And then I left.*

*There was nothing left to fight for. Everyone knew it, though the majority wouldn’t admit under torture.*

*And so I departed.*

*I wish I could call it a ‘pilgrimage’, but in truth, it reeks too much of the Word Bearers’ religious nonsense for me to use it.*

*Let’s just say I went to a journey of discovery and understanding.*

*Before being plunged into the Warp, the region of space known as the Eye of Terror was the heart of the Aeldari Empire. And though the majority of its lore and its culture disappeared with the birth of Slaanesh, there were – and still are – a lot of invaluable books and secrets to discover if you care enough to spend several centuries investigating rumours.*

*I don’t know how long I stayed on this errant path, honestly.*

*But I know I decided to end it while finding an underground library which had once been protected by the Aeldari worshipping the God Hoec.*

*I learned of Ascension.*

*I learned how Horus had been duped.*

*Yes, Ascension.*

*Horus believed it was becoming a God, and the then-Four did nothing to discourage him from being so.*

*But it was never about pouring the power of trillions of souls into a Primarch’s body. On that path, you either lose your tethers to the Materium, or you explode under the Warp pressure corrupting your veins.*

*Ascension is not, and never was about elevating yourself to the level of a deity.*

*It is far simpler. It is the act of forcing the galaxy to acknowledge that your deeds matter, no matter how trifling and unimportant a single move might be.*

*You might laugh.*

*You might scream in anger.*

*But it is the truth.*

*And when quadrillions of souls die each day, having achieved exactly nothing, and are instantly replaced by untold quadrillions as ignorant as they, Ascension is perhaps the only thing we can strive for.*

*Ascending changes everything. And no, I’m not talking about the success of a military campaign, or a failure during a siege.*

*I’m speaking about all beings, be they of your own race or not, feeling in their bones and souls that you are the one who can usher a new age upon this galaxy.*

*It can be for creation. It can be for destruction. It can be for both.*

*The mechanics of Ascension itself are complicated, I will freely admit.*

*Mainly because there are no hard rules whatsoever.*

*Some of the Aeldari books pretended you can’t be helped upon this path, but it was revealed to be untrue when I tested it in reality.*

*In fact, the lore of this long-eared race was flawed; only the foundations of it were not proven wrong.*

*But at long last, I had the complete knowledge of why we failed.*

*It was not that Horus had to duel the Emperor alone in the end; it was that he was a puppet of the Four.*

*Not their Champion. Not a valuable ally. Not a co-belligerent against the foe they wanted to strike down at all costs.*

*Horus was their slave.*

*This is also why the pathetic idea spread by the Alpha Legion that Chaos would destroy itself when the Warmaster would seize the Golden Throne was sheer nonsense.*

*The Sixteenth Legion would never have ruled the galaxy.*

*Already the actions of the Siege had given disturbing warnings of the future to come: each Primarch turned into a Greater Servant of the Four would ignore the commands coming from the Warmaster, and then seize entire Sectors to serve as their private hell-kingdoms.*

*Horus was arrogant and failed.*

*He sacrificed everything and received a promised death in return.*

*As far as I know, he never knew what Ascension truly was, never mind considered walking on this path.*

*But I did.*

*I did, and though it was the hardest thing done in my life, I achieved it.*

*Against the Gods.*

*Against the other Legions.*

*Against the Imperium I rebelled from millennia ago.*

*Some fools will undoubtedly say, if I was so careless as to explain it in these terms, that the Gods have rewarded me mightily for it, giving me Drach’nyen as a reward.*

*They are, of course, utterly wrong.*

*The End of Empires is not a reward; it is a reminder Khorne, Tzeentch, Nurgle, and Slaanesh when she was alive, are always watching over me...and that if I falter on the path the Black Legion and I are advancing on, the Echo of the First Murder will turn against me and add one more illustrious name to its tally.*

*That was what had been decreed.*

*That was what the Gods of Chaos believed to be pre-ordained.*

*But quite evidently, I was not the only one to prepare contingencies away from their countless spies.*

*Commorragh wasn’t supposed to be destroyed like it did.*

*Slaanesh wasn’t supposed to die.*

*But it happened.*

*And now there will be terrible choices to make.*

*Could you pursue Ascension, knowing your death will wait another day?*

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**EZEKYLE ABADDON**

**‘THE DESPOILER’**

**‘THE BUTCHER OF EL’PHANOR’**

**‘THE WARMASTER OF CHAOS’**

**‘THE ARCHITECT OF THE BLACK CRUSADES’**

**‘HORUS’ HEIR’**

**EX-FIRST CAPTAIN OF THE TRAITOR SIXTEENTH LEGION**

**SUPREME COMMANDER OF THE BLACK LEGION**

**APOCALYPTICALLY DANGEROUS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTIVE THREAT**

**DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT SEVERAL ASTARTES CHAPTERS AND CRUSADE-LEVEL MILITARY SUPPORT**

**IF MILITARY HELP INSUFFICIENT FLEE ON SIGHT**

**CRITICAL INFORMATION: THE TRAITOR IS ARMED WITH THE ACCURSED *TALON OF HORUS* AND A DAEMONIC SWORD OF OMEGA-LEVEL POWER; DO NOT ENGAGE HIM UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES AT CLOSE-QUARTERS**

**REWARDS: 100 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 QUADRANT OVERLORDSHIP, IMMEDIATE TERRAN TRIUMPH, TERTIARY SENATORUM IMPERIALIS SEAT, ‘LORD SOLAR’ TITLE, ONE-USE TITHE PRIVILEGE UPON 100 WORLDS, ONE-USE MECHANICUS TECHNOLOGICAL TRIBUTE UPON 12 FORGE WORLDS, ONE-USE ECCLESIARCHY DONATION UPON 10 SHRINE WORLDS, 10 SPACEFORTS, RIGHT TO ISSUE WARRANTS OF TRADE, 20 MERCHANT CHARTERS, ETC...**

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**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

Thought for the day: Know you destination, before you set out.

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

"I am honoured my reputation has reached the leadership of the Black Legion...Warmaster Abaddon."

And since the most wanted being of the Imperium was in a good mood, why not ask a question she had in mind about the decoration.

“By pure curiosity...why the throne, if you never sit upon it?”

And though no one had confirmed it, the part of her that had merged with the legacy of Sanguinius told her that no one had used this symbol of traitor royalty since the Siege of Terra.

A slight smirk arrived on the lips of the Chaos Warmaster.

“It is impossible to remove it.” The tone was conversational, but the defensive stance remained near-perfect. There was no weakness to be found, and this more than everything gave Taylor the strength not to rush and engage the fight.

Shard or no shard, superpowers or no superpowers, the insect-mistress didn’t see a way to beat the veteran of the Horus Heresy.

Even with her Swarm, it would have been a non-trivial challenge...and his reinforcements were better than hers. She had one Eldar ‘auxiliary’. Abaddon had eight Chaos warlords, and at least two were powerful sorcerers. Seriously, unless her memory failed her, Taylor’s best guess was that six out of the eight were among the top one hundred of the Imperium’s most wanted. The one with the Dark Angel markings was not, but given that the First Legion had tried to erase all traces of the Fallen...

“I’ve tried to destroy it several times,” the Despoiler continued, “and the same can be said about the rest of the ornaments we have here. But when the Ezekarion Council Room’s appearance changes, it is whimsically and not per my desires.”

It was...interesting...and a bit intriguing.

But that was something that could be reflected about another time.

Especially as now, the pressure of the Warp was beginning to pour next to the entrance of this Strategium.

It looked like the Ruinous Powers had noticed her arrival, and they weren’t going to miss such an opportunity to kill her.

“Well, I apologise for the arrival without warning you... though it seems you anticipated my coming.”

“I did not,” Abaddon the Despoiler began slowly to walk away from his lieutenants, though the distance between her remained roughly the same. “Your...connection to Sanguinius made your presence on my flagship unavoidable in the long term...but I did not expect you to teleport here so soon, Weaver.”

Clouds of corrupted smoke erupted through holes in reality, but no one flinched.

“However, it is, ultimately, logical.”

Logical? The Lady Nyx wouldn’t have used the word to describe the situation.

“How so?”

The Despoiler opened the claws of the *Talon of Horus*...though there was no denying that for the time being, it was not an aggressive gesture.

“Every action,” the Traitor Marine began like he was a teacher and she the student, “cause a reaction in the fabric of the universe. Every destiny broken in the great tapestry the Architect tries to manipulate must create another destiny. Every cause is tied to a consequence.”

“What I did,” the parahuman who had absorbed the power of the Sanguinor replied defensively, “I did it of my own free will.”

“Of course!” The Despoiler looked at her like she was a naive child...and in the child part, he wasn’t really wrong, given their age difference. “Of course. But a critical choice is still a choice creating *consequences*. Once you have launched it like a spear cast in the waves, there is no turning back.”

This discussion was evolving towards things she rarely discussed in private...and Taylor would never have thought it was the damned Arch-Heretic of the Black Legion that was initiating this philosophical debate.

“I destroyed Commorragh, and by my actions, I made sure Slaanesh perished and its Aspects were fractured and dispersed.”

There was no use denying it; not with Aurelia Malys using one of them next to her. Even if the Warmaster of Chaos couldn’t feel it – and the insect-mistress wouldn’t bet on it – the Thousand Son in black armour among the warlord’s group would.

“But I doubt this is what you want to speak about, Warmaster Abaddon.”

“Yes, and no,” the monstrous weapon that for now had taken the shape of the sword seethed in fury, a shroud of murder and hatred soaking the atmosphere...yet somehow the Despoiler managed to control it without feeling the strain. “I wish to offer you...a new perspective.”

Taylor didn’t like that. At all.

But given the alternatives...

“And this perspective is?”

“You killed the Supreme Deity of the Eldar Pantheon, Weaver.”

Of all the things the Lady General had expected to hear as she prepared herself, this was definitely not it.

The surprise was considerable enough for her to blurt out her retort.

“Yes, because it had killed and devoured all the others!”

A bit inexact, given that Cegorach, God of not-funny jokes, was still around in the Webway, and there were a few other survivors, shattered or crippled, but-

“Deicide and devouring your rivals aren’t sources of illegitimacy where the Warp is concerned,” the Chaos Astartes grinned, something which allowed her to verify that yes, Abaddon’s teeth looked mostly normal. No mutations there whatsoever. “And the reality of the Eldar modifying their spirit stones to evade the Goddess of Excess’ claws proved beyond doubt that the Soul Afterlife for one of the most ancient races of this galaxy was entirely claimed by Slaanesh, whether they admit it...or not.”

Seen like this, this made a disturbing amount of sense. On the other hand...

“Why does it matter beyond this interesting philosophical debate?” The parahuman woman asked politely, continuously repressing the feelings of hatred and rage watching the *Talon of Horus* gave her. “Slaanesh is dead. And whatever hellish afterlife it created for the Eldar, I have no doubt it died with her.”

“It matters,” the Despoiler returned to teaching mode, still walking back and forth like an instructor revealing to Whiteshields that yes, excrements did stink, “because each of the Shards, the last surviving pieces of Slaanesh’s essence, are the keys to rebuilding their cycle of reincarnation and immaterial protection beyond death.”

The Lady General didn’t see the problem...and this worried her.

“One of said...shard-keys has been recovered by the irritant one next to me. And it will evolve into a proper Goddess...eventually.”

“The problem,” the Warmaster of Chaos shook his head and continued like she hadn’t spoken at all, “is that you don’t create a Domain in the Warp just like that. One Shard? One Aspect? No, it is far too weak a symbol of power and authority. You need powerful Gods or Goddesses to enforce the new status quo. In the Great Ocean, there are only predators and preys.”

The *Talon of Horus’* claws tightened brusquely.

“Many human souls have been saved by your deeds at Commorragh, Weaver. But where the Eldar are concerned, you have just ensured that if there are not utterly dedicated to one God or Goddess in particular, it is a vicious battle every time one of the Eldar souls abandons his or her mortal shell.”

Taylor glanced at Aurelia Malys. The Herald looked like she wanted to protest...but couldn’t.

“The problem is not that Eldar don’t believe in Gods or are unwilling to create new ones. The problem is that these deities are weak. The powerful dominate the weak. Slaanesh was powerful. The replacements Cegorach tried to establish are not. Divided, godlings are vulnerable and will, in due time, be crushed. And then Chaos will rule them all.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**62 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The moment their Lady disappeared, Gavreel tried to fire his Volkite Blaster at the Eldar.

A second after, an invisible attack slammed him into the ground and his fingers were unable to fire his weapon, for all his mental and physical efforts to do so.

The Sergeant of the Dawnbreaker Guard fought it with all he had...and he was unable to move a finger.

“This is a fine mess...”

The pressure increased and a heartbeat later, Gavreel was standing again...disarmed, and realising that what had happened to him had also neutralised the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

And though the blade the long-eared xenos had not changed from location, this part of the battlefield was now bathed into a sea of silver psychic power.

“For the Webmistress!”

Over a hundred spiders, about thirty of them of the Adjutant variety, launched a coordinated attack upon the monster which had neutralised all the Space Marines.

Acid, silk, darts, and a lethal variety of organic weapons were hurled.

A second later, the attacks were all parried, and the arachnids were levitated like they weighed no more than gas-filled balloons.

Gavreel grimaced internally.

Everyone had known the gap between the Queen of Blades and they was an abyss which would likely never be decreased in their lifetime, but receiving this kind of one-handed humiliation after years of training and the Ymga Monolith Campaign was just insane.

“Everyone better calm down.” The crimson-haired being murmured, examining with a keen eye the ‘Sword of Paths’ that they should have never let close to Lady Weaver. “This is-“

“We won’t calm down!” The very recognisable proclamation came from Artemis, of course, who despite being levitated in an undignified manner, still tried to fight against the psychic power restraining her. “You have committed the greatest sin imaginable! You have attacked the Webmistress!”

“Your mistress is fine, little spider.” The Queen of Blades said in a bored tone, not bothering to look in the direction of the ‘Adjutant-General’.

This didn’t convince at all the furious arachnid...well, it convinced no one, including all the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard, and they could even add the dozen or so Ultramarines present. But as they had all been disarmed like everyone else, there wasn’t much they could do.

“No, she is not!”

“She is.” The silver power increased, in a clear warning of ‘shut up, you don’t know what you’re talking about’. “Whether she will be fine after her trials, I can’t say. But the Sword of Paths doesn’t kill those who wield it, and the same applies to those facing the challenges once its power is triggered. Your Queen will return.”

“When?” Gamaliel asked in their name.

For the first time, the Queen of Blades looked...somewhat displeased.

“The clowns have changed some runes, and they screwed up the calibrating array, so...I would guess the trial will take between thirteen of her heartbeats...and thirteen million.”

“This is...unacceptable! The Webmistress must return at once!”

The psychic pressure diminished, and Gavreel felt at last he could move...he didn’t, though.

The Queen of Blades was too close, and dying for nothing would...not solve anything.

“Believe me, if I could, little spider, I would have already done so,” the Eldar swordswoman glared at the rest of the Eldar delegation. “Many of them have already been sources of mighty headaches and this latest joke is worse than the rest of Cegorach’s manipulations. I may have to cut down one or two to make an example...”

“I do not care about these perfidious long-ears! In the name of the Swarm, we want the Webmistress to return! Immediately!”

Lelith Hesperax sighed.

“I am not going to repeat myself-“

“I really hope you love cold showers, then!”

Feigned boredom turned instantly into an expression which made Gavreel’s two hearts beat faster.

Artemis fell on the ground, the psychic levitation failing...and suddenly the Queen of Blades was in front of the Adjutant-General.

Gavreel shivered, for he hadn’t seen the monster *moving*. Not a flicker. Not a shadow. Not the after-image of extreme speed. Nothing.

The tank-sized golden spider found herself contemplating the edge of an extremely long sword pointed at one of her eyes.

“I’m really sorry,” the veteran of the War in Heaven purred, “are you threatening me?”

“Err...”

For a brief interval of time, the seemingly unshakeable loyalty of the spider seemed to falter. But it was only for a very short duration.

“I am! No warm showers, no warm baths until the Webmistress is back to lead us!”

Many Astartes used these few seconds to seize discreetly secondary weapons, now that they were able to move and prepare...the spiders might be a bit too talkative, but they were only saying the obvious.

But the attack to kill Artemis never came.

“You love her, don’t you?” The ancient monster asked.

“Of course we do! She is the Webmistress! And don’t try to change the subject!”

“I would not dare...and if I deal with the devouring pests on this planet while your mistress is away?”

Despite the fact the golden arachnid was way taller than the Queen of Blades and towered over her, it failed to be impressive. The hopeful tone also betrayed Artemis’ feelings.

“You would do that?”

“As long as you don’t try to turn my showers cold next time I visit...and you won’t devour any member of my race for the time being.”

“Adjutant,” Emperor’s Champion Sigenandus barked, “we don’t need that sort of xenos scum! We have-“

The light of Macragge’s sun was not particularly potent today. But suddenly, it seemed as if a cloud had passed before it.

Except, of course, as Gavreel looked at it, it was not a cloud.

This was the next aerial wave of the Tyranids coming for Hive Asculum.

“Sigenandus, close your mouth!” How in the name of the Golden Throne the enemy had managed to rebuilt its strength so quickly, he didn’t know, but there were going a lot of firepower to deal with that! “Adjutant, I...suggest we strike a bargain here and there...we are really, really going to need it...”

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald Aurelia Malys**

“And then Chaos will rule them all.”

Aurelia stopped breathing.

For all the Harlequins’ proclamations, for all Eldrad had confirmed this was the truth...hearing it from the mouth of one of the dark souls bringing the Primordial Annihilator closer to ultimate victory was horrifying and fuelled her worst fears.

“But you aren’t a warrior who boasts easily of what he can do before victory is won,” the golden angel they had called *Maelsha’eil Dannan* said firmly, giving away no emotion or sign of contrariety. “Nor have you acted to usher this age of damnation for all Eldar.”

The two being faced each other, and if the Herald of Atharti had difficulties breathing again, it was because the room was saturated with their power.

Everything in them was seemingly created to be complete opposites. The wielder of the Primordial Murder of the Young Race was a titanic thing, his black soul clad in black armour.

Weaver was incredibly smaller and built for speed. She was the Light.

The monster the younger races called the Despoiler was the Darkness. Not the Darkness of blindness which led to damnation; though what he was...it may be worse. It was the sullying of noble deeds done in the name of **purpose** and loyalty. It was respecting an oath even when you knew it was incredibly, completely wrong. It was the false dawn before the sunset. It was evil righteousness preceding slaughter and savagery.

Aurelia shivered.

Weaver’s anger...was absolutely justified. Looking at this creature...no, at this monster, suddenly using the Sword of Paths did not seem that wise a move, survival of her race or not.

“Whether the Eldar achieve their salvation or their damnation is of no concern to me,” through her connection to Atharti, the young Herald could feel the truth ringing behind that statement. “This is not my story. I will not play a part in it, and I will not waste resources supporting a game which will not help the Black Legion. By your actions, Weaver, you broke the military power of the Webway Cities. The survivors are insignificant in numbers, unworthy of my time, and can’t recognise loyalty and brotherhood no matter how long I would explain it to them. Why would I engineer the doom of the Eldar, when they are already defeated?”

This time, the Primordial Annihilator manifested its fury violently and loudly.

For brief seconds, it rained acid and fire.

A tide of darkness screamed, and a small army of Annihilator’s slaves came into being.

The black titan who had been an eternity ago one of the human’s Space Marines struck a single blow with the currently sword-shaped abomination.

There was a terrible shrieking, one which forced her to conjure a sound-dampening incantation, and even then she was forced to place her hand upon her ears.

The attack of the Primordial Annihilator vanished like it had never existed.

“Slaanesh’s death created a mess,” no true slave of the Primordial Annihilator could have done what just happened, but the monster continued to speak like it was an ordinary feat which had been accomplished, “but I suspect, Weaver, that the one who gave you the orders knew exactly what kind of anarchy was about to be unleashed against the last Legions before you went to burn the Port of Lost Souls.”

The golden-winged woman stayed mostly immobile, save to give a simple nod.

“You suspect correctly.”

Then the master of the black-armoured Space Marines turned towards her, and Aurelia did not like at all becoming the focus of his attention.

“Should I explain your little plan to Weaver, or do you want to do it yourself, *you who bear the Mark of Ulthwé*?”

That the last words were spoken in a perfect if very ugly dialect of Aeldari was like a slap in her face.

“I will speak myself, thank you.”

The courtesy gave her the urge to vomit, but the monster had let her choose...for what it was worth.

“We can’t recover four out of the six Shards which were expelled from Excess’ essence upon her death.” Admitting it was humiliating, but there was no use pretending at this hour. In fact, it was still likely putting a brave face, for the fifth was held by the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom, and all the ‘diplomatic overtures’ had ended in full-scale battles. “Each of the four has been sized by one of the different facets of the Primordial Annihilator; forcing them to liberate the Aspects would require assaulting each Chaotic Power’s Domain directly.”

That it would be the equivalent of a suicide went without saying.

At the height of their strength, with their full Pantheon behind them, maybe the Aeldari of old would have had a chance.

Now?

A single facet of the Primordial Annihilator, even the weakest one looking like a huge mutant rodent, would crush them effortlessly.

“That’s all very interesting and all,” *Maelsha’eil Dannan* said in a clearly interested voice, but which also betrayed that she wasn’t about to throw herself against the Primordial Annihilator to save them, “but I don’t see where I’m expected to play a role. I can’t fight the Ruinous Powers one-on-one and win directly. The only one who has that kind of power...well, he’s sitting on the Golden Throne in a near-dead state.”

“But you are,” Aurelia spoke very carefully, “the Empress of the Aeldari.”

The reaction of the Light-shrouded Destroyer of Commorragh didn’t make itself wait.

*Maelsha’eil Dannan* laughed, and quite loudly at that.

Slowly but surely, the tainted Space Marines waiting before the only exit laughed too.

The Despoiler didn’t.

“That’s an empty title,” the golden-armoured arachnid-mistress declared once her hilarity receded. “Your Empire doesn’t exist anymore, I got the title on a technicality, and the one who confirmed it...well, I’m pretty much certain she did it as a jest, and to throw it into the faces of the favourite servants of Slaanesh.”

The Primordial Annihilator howled, but though an infernal blizzard lowered the temperature by at least fifty degrees, everyone here was in power armour and had his helmet sealed...save the infamous Despoiler, who didn’t seem to be affected by the cold.

“Maybe it was,” the black titan shrugged, “but a claim is a claim. And if the information I found is right, the Queen of Blades is one of the Muses of the old Empire. The only one who didn’t submit to Slaanesh.”

“Muses?”

The sum of information the Space Marine they called ‘Abaddon the Despoiler’ was aware of was...frighteningly and horrifying.

Anyone else, Aurelia would have already been busy preparing a team to kill a too-acknowledgeable enemy...

“The Muses were the six most powerful High Priests and Priestesses of the Empire of a Billion Moons. Before our race eventually fell to corruption, they formed one of the councils advising the Phoenix Court. Only the Phoenix Throne itself could give them orders, though the Emperor and the Empress needed the support of five of them to dismiss a Muse if he or she was unworthy of her title.”

“Hmm...I see.” The black walls for a moment seemed to be crying in blood...fortunately it quickly receded. “I suppose they used that rule to banish the Queen of Blades before the Fall.”

“Partially incorrect,” their ‘host’ intervened. “There is a right of trial by combat, if the Muse felt the accusations were unfair. According to the writings of some long-dead chronicler, the Queen of Blades challenged the other Muses. After one lost his head in front of Emperor Malekith, the survivor promptly lost their nerves and withdrew their accusations.”

Horrifyingly well-informed might be an *understatement*...

“So she is still a Muse...no wonder the...no wonder her approval counts for so much.” The next chuckles of *Maelsha’eil Dannan* were joyless. “I thank you for the revelations. It doesn’t change the fact I didn’t see a lot of Eldar trying to get in my good graces, call me Empress, or asking my opinion about their laws those last decades. Thus in my opinion-“

“Is it because you failed...or you didn’t try?”

The Herald of Atharti wondered what exact game the Despoiler was playing...he couldn’t...no, that didn’t make any sense...

“What are you saying, *Warmaster Abaddon*?”

“I am saying, *Lady General* *Weaver*, that every Empire needs an Emperor. It’s not that complicated. The absence of a claim, the unwillingness to enforce it, or the absence of the claimant...they are all grounds of invalidity.”

The tone might have seemed thoughtful, but each word had been spoken with devastating precision. It was as if the black titan wielded his tongue like one did a scalpel.

“Every Empire needs an Emperor.”

And the Primordial Annihilator’s wrath overwhelmed everything.

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**Fields of Pharsalus**

**62 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Elena Kerrigan**

One hundred and sixty-one.

That was the number of Traitor Space Marines Elena had slain in the cataclysm which had ravaged the Fields of Pharsalus.

Obviously, those had been far from her only kills of the day.

Some part of it had to do with the importance of her victims.

Elena didn’t know how it worked, but something in her, something powerful, had pushed her to find and certain oath-breakers across the battlefield.

Some had been the commanders of the Word Bearers Host.

Many were not.

It was not an assassin’s place to question the design of the Emperor, but Elena guessed those targets had been marked for death because they were vital to the cohesion of the Traitor Seventeenth Legion.

It was the best idea she had. It might certainly be a correct view of the true goal. After the Siege and the early thirty-first millennium, Primarchs and High Lords had believed the Chaos Astartes broken forever. Many centuries later, it was acknowledged as the ridiculous idea it was.

Better to make sure that once they were truly defeated, the Word Bearers would not imitate the symbol of the Alpha Legion and grow new heads like a Hydra.

“Though with their losses and the destruction of the Dark Council, it would be incredibly difficult to rebuild a Chapter, never mind a Legion.” The Callidus Assassin whispered to herself.

Still, better to make sure the Traitors were dead and gone.

Before this whole madness began and she landed on Fenris, Elena would have been exhausted to death if she tried to kill ten Chaos Marines by herself, never mind one hundred.

Now that the Primarch Corax had given her...a lot of things she didn’t fully understand, she was constantly reenergised.

It was both exalting...and troubling.

Elena let the power she had already nicknamed the ‘wings of shadow’ pour over her.

And for the first time, the pull to eliminate the enemies of the Golden Throne wasn’t anywhere to be found near him. No, it was far, far to the north-west. In fact, it was suspiciously feeling like it was towards-

“**DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR**!”

Elena jumped.

A second later, the location she had used as an observation – the ruined head of a decapitated Reaver Titan – vanished in an explosion of black flames stinking with the sorcery of the Warp.

The air began to smell foul.

And as the wind changed direction, a silhouette in the shape of a Space Marine revealed itself.

“**This was your last assassination, spawn of the False Emperor**.”

The body had once been those of a Word Bearer Legionnaire, but no more.

In two seconds, enormous wings of red chitin erupted from the back, and the gauntlets mutated in enormous claws.

Elena frowned. That amount of power...it should have been nearly impossible for the Arch-Enemy to summon it on the Fields of Pharsalus.

She didn’t know how she knew it, but it was suddenly iron-clad in her mind.

The Ruinous Powers, the Four Abominations of the Warp, had suffered a significant defeat, their Titans and their Legion enduring colossal losses before finally breaking and fleeing.

Yet they had invested enough energy to send one of their slaves, and as the red armour remodelled to show glyphs of ruin and damnation, it was obvious they hadn’t chosen a lesser daemon.

“Should we do the presentations?” Taunting her opponent might give her an opportunity. “I am-“

“**The Angel of Shadows**,” the Possessed growled, and his mouth, hidden by the red ceramite, was revealed...for a heartbeat, as it transformed into a hideous maw, with fangs a Death World animal would have been jealous of. “**Or you might be, one day. All I see is a crippled raven and a foolish girl fooling themselves they can hunt what is not meant to be hunted**.”

“Those are big words,” Elena replied, “for someone whose entire Legion is about to be embrace extinction.”

The intensity of the murderous aura tripled, and the being ceased to have any resemblance, be it ever so slight, with the body of a Space Marine.

No, the thing had some parts of a Seventeenth Legion’s power armour, but no one would ever mistake it for a Space Marine.

Yet for such a powerful being, the winged daemon seemed oddly...wounded.

The daemonic wings were never graceful or free of scars, but those had more holes than many cheese she could name.

“**I am Argel Tal. And by the will of the Gods, your actions against the Seventeenth Legion stop here and now**.”

“I don’t take orders from Traitors...and from what I have seen, they are not Gods...merely parasites which never fail to screw-up at every turn.”

The daemon roared in fury and charged.

Elena ran to meet his assault, green blade in hand.

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

“Every Empire needs an Emperor.”

If Taylor had just had a doubt that Abaddon the Despoiler intended to return to Terra and siege the Imperial Palace a second time, these words made sure said doubts were erased.

The refusal to bow to the Ruinous Powers was surprising and somewhat welcome, for it meant that no matter how much they tried to corrupt him, Horus’ Heir was still denying them his soul and allegiance.

On the other hand, that meant the Chaos Warmaster was dangerously sane and not drunk on the power of the Warp.

Not a good combination in someone you had likely killed millions directly, and engineered the deaths of trillions of souls...if not more.

There was no hesitation in her about what had to be done.

Not that there was much of a choice, as the Ruinous Powers shrieked and attacked.

Taylor threw herself in direction of Sanguinius’ crystalline statue...and screamed.

***I will die today***.

*She saw. She saw the Blood Angel Legion break on a world of red dust covered in bones, the souls of the sacrificed surrounded in them by an evil ritual which stank from the Word Bearer’s foul machinations.*

*She saw the discipline of the Ninth Legion break right as an endless horde of Khornate demons fell upon the disorganised Astartes, and the Angel’s Bane led the charge, roaring its malevolent joy for all the hells to hear it.*

*Thousands of broken red armours drowned into the ever-growing sea of blood, before the corrupted liquid began to turn them into monsters-*

“NO!”

**I will die today**.

*The vision changed.*

*She saw. She saw small squads fight in a world of jungles and water. A world where insects looking like enormous mosquitoes appeared to be placid while the foe was routed by the sons of Sanguinius.*

*Until in one devastating strike, the mosquitoes revealed themselves to be daemons, and the skies turned green, the very air became putrid, and the earth was a morass of foul things.*

*The Blood Angels did their best but-*

“NO!”

**I will die today**.

“NO! THIS WON’T HAPPEN! STOP THESE LIES!”

The battlefield is different this time.

The structure looks familiar; a Hive of billions await the coming of the storm.

Yet the defenders can’t be called ‘normal’. There are Space Marines, including some of the Ninth Legion...but their Mark IX armours look mangled, their banners are in tatters. It looks like there are on their last rope. And their ‘allies’ are hardly those she would wish. The guardsmen who should support them are inexistent; the auxiliaries are xenos species she has never seen before.

And then the storm breaks.

But it is not a familiar tide of daemons this time. It is an ocean of fur and claws, tails and maws in conflict with each other, red eyes shining with cowardice, and strange weapons which should malfunction, even if you used Ork standards.

Every second, millions of the giant rats are killed by their own weapons, but with every minute, billions take their place, and it does not take long before-

“LIES! YOU ARE AFRAID OF WHAT WE HAVE PLANNED FOR YOU AND-“

**I will die today**.

The emotion of acceptance was akin to slamming her head into an adamantium wall...only more powerful, because at least with that problem, the pain would have been only physical.

This was an error to touch this shard of Sanguinius.

It was an error to try to assimilate it.

The fragment of Hope and Sacrifice had been tainted by an eternity in the Eye of Terror.

It was-

**You will die today.**

Lie. Hope.

**You will die today.**

Lie. Sacrifice.

**You will die today.**

Lie. Administration.

There was Light.

There was a golden chrysalis which emerged from the darkness.

It was her. It was like looking at herself in a mirror.

It looked exactly like her...winged and clad in gold.

**YOU WILL DIE TODAY!**

She was the Angel of Sacrifice.

She fought the battles where the hopes of Mankind were at risk to die.

By Administration, she ruled the Swarm.

And everything around it was swallowed by darkness.

**So be it. You will not be my servant...you will be erased from the great tapestry of Fate.**

**You will be forgotten. There are always more skulls for the Skulls’ Throne.**

**In time, they will worship something you never were. Decay will once again reign upon the worlds you claimed as yours.**

**Administration can’t resist Anarchy, no-no! They will fall-fall!**

Taylor summoned all her strength. She drew both her swords and struck the darkness.

The laughter of thirsting abominations arrived to her hears.

And under her, a maelstrom of pure, unaltered malevolence opened a multitude of eyes, none of them having belonged to an uncorrupted species.

Just looking at it, fear submerged her. Most of the thing was impossible to perceive, but it was something horrible, it was the original sin, it was-

“NO! NO! NO!”

A small gate of pink energy opened, and one hand appeared.

Taylor seized it.

There was a thunderous screech.

And as soon as the nightmare had begun, it was over.

She was back before the throne, in the Strategium of the Vengeful Spirit.

Though her surroundings, the seat and everything looked like they had been the target of an artillery bombardment.

A very vigorous bombardment of artillery.

And her right hand was placed in those of Aurelia Malys.

“I’m sorry! I thought-“

“You did well,” the Eldar had screwed up by bringing them here, but...this time she had saved her life. “Thank you.”

It was almost funny to observe a smile bloom on the face of the Eldar female.

She had an inappropriate urge to laugh.

No, this would have to wait.

First, there was the little matter of the Ruinous Powers’ latest trap.

They had tried to kill her, and if she was honest, the parasites had come very, very close this time.

But they had failed, thanks to the Herald of a nascent Eldar Goddess, who could reach where most psykers would never be able to plunge, no matter how suicidal they felt.

They had failed, and now was the time for retribution.

“My name is Taylor Hebert.”

 She was supposed to feel strong after merging every shard of Sacrifice in her.

She really didn’t felt all-powerful. This trap had drained her. But there was something different around her.

It was as if she could hear the beating heart of a dangerous galaxy. It was if something sleepy was listening to her words.

“And I am Empress of the Aeldari Empire. You have taken things that were never yours to begin, parasites.”

Taylor felt their displeasure, their hatred, and their willingness to torment her for the rest of her eternity.

And right now, they could do absolutely nothing.

“Give them back. Give back *everything*.”