**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 philosophies, and appear to regard 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 to tell the tale. 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 every regard, 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 dominion the veterans of the War in Heaven had built to rule over the galaxy had been twisted into a nightmarish caricature. The Aeldari planets were not Daemon Worlds, but honest assessment would have included the word ‘yet’.*

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

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

*Decadence and depravity 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 limitations 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 of their predecessors in everything except arrogance and malevolence. Deprived of their immortality and unable to use their psychic abilities without attracting She-Who-Thirsts, any Aeldari of Commorragh was not that superior physically to one of his or her Drukhari descendants.*

*Nonetheless, there was a dark legend which was still whispered far from the ears of the Dynasts, a rumour that 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 by dissenter, but it still re-emerged from out of 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 the slivers of his soul’s remains back together.*

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

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

*In the name of the Silent King, the five World Engines and three Star-Harvesters of the Sautekh reserve 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 entails.*

*Gather your best phalanxes and equip them with the latest weapons sent from the Gloriously Divine Mag’ladroth. It is time to teach this arrogant alien princess that 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 on someone’s life in living history.

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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 impossible, 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 Endbringer, the better. And my colleagues are still wondering what exactly the Sixth is.*

*Needless to say, the debate raging whenever the question ‘which is the most dangerous Endbringer?’ is raised will likely continue for the next couple of thousand 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 against for more than a few seconds. Speed, mastery of practically every weapon ever 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 moment 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, a 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 the Gloriana-class battleships serving as the flagships of the Traitor Legions with their soul-taint wasn’t exactly a minor victory either.

Though speaking about a ‘Gloriana-class battleship’ was a misnomer in itself. There was no Gloriana-class. The M30 authorities of the Imperium had simply assigned this label to any purpose-built warship with a length of more than twenty kilometres. And comparing them to normal battleships, even large and imposing ones like the Cawl-built *Enterprise*, was akin to comparing a Primarch to an Astartes. The latter simply wasn’t able to fulfil the role 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 completely 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 the *Phalanx* than a spaceship destined to take a place in the line 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 into the Eye of Terror, the Imperium had not built another Gloriana. Added to the ludicrously high cost was now the major issue of who could be trusted wielding such power when it was obvious even the sons of the Emperor couldn’t.

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 burn 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, or 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 differed vastly. While the *Vengeful Spirit* was used as the flagship and 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 interested in keeping its place as the True Chosen of Slaanesh, and the ship which had once been the pride and joy of the Jupiter shipyards was abandoned to the hordes of Daemonettes using the avenues and compartments as the playground for their depravity, accompanied the mad disciples of the Dark Mechanicum, and worse things it was best not to know the name of or think too long about.

To summarize, 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 the service of the Traitor Legions, and the competition in this regard was particularly fierce, 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 aboard which could be with any degree of certainty be recognised as Emperor’s Children, and it was best to not be too demanding 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 to the *Pride of the Emperor*, the atrocities on-world had not really diminished in intensity. The daemons present on 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 its first order to its 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 the Gloriana super-battleship with so much Excess 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 have been thought impossible, but lately the enemy of the Four had done too many ‘impossible’ things for the Plague Father to take any chances.

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 that you were a psyker. Right here, right now, Hendrik of the Dawnbreaker Guard was experiencing one.

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

Hendrik wasn’t blaming the Mechanicus Biologis personnel or the hundreds of men and women, of course. The Blood Legion’s Marine understood that 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 limits of Bacta.

And the ant-generated substance’s most important flaw was definitely: do not administer it to a 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 into 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 within mere hours. It was humiliating and disconcerting in one. The transhuman physiology of an Astartes had excellent regenerative 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 a white medical personnel’s robe who had arrived in front of his bed. “I was unaware you were serving among the Medicae personnel.”

“Epistolary Hendrik,” their Lady’s paramour returned the salute. “Due to the influx of wounded guardsmen and former slaves on every ship, the Medicae specialists have petitioned for every non-indispensable soldier having basic medical knowledge to come help them. Since I helped in the Nyx hospitals several times 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 move his head slightly to nod at his interlocutor. He was glad to see their Lady’s confidence in her consort had not been misplaced. Unfortunately, the mention of the influx 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 other Warp abominations will be free to concentrate on Zel’harst and all the forces fighting there.”

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

Hendrik had not thought about that. 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 that blunt.

“Assuming the plan formulated by the Archmagi works, 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 their crew will be saved. No, the problem comes from the slaves. We have nowhere near even 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 we did,” 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 four hundred million ex-slaves under our control. And all of them have to be examined lest they bring xenos poisons and other 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 for can be used to transport the ex-slaves away for the moment, but they are not enough.”

“I see...why are so many Rogue Traders being deemed questionable?” 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 evidence 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 stomach. Oh how he hated these traitors, these betrayers of humanity! They had sold their souls and weapons to one of the vilest creatures in existence and expected their treason to be tolerated?

“I don’t have 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 completely 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 cousins will suggest that these ships must be seized and the treacherous Warrant-bearers executed.”

“I’m glad you approve, Epistolary Hendrik,” Wei Cao stated. “Now I’m afraid I have other patients to visit. Try to not expend too much energy during your recovery here.”

Soon the Space Marine was alone again, still immobilised but somewhat reassured. No other member of the Dawnbreaker Guard had been brought in wounded since he’d arrived 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**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

“Gamaliel, tell everyone to retreat. Wait for me in front of 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 allowed 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 into the middle of a friendly unprepared army was a recipe for disaster.

Fortunately, the Eldar female had given her a reason to change location. The dark spire bisected 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 a few propaganda photos like the Red Army had done for the Reichstag during the Battle of Berlin. It was out of the question to abandon her 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 the better.

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

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

Thankfully, between her new powers and the strength provided by her power armour, the parahuman was strong enough to save them. Her flight as she moved away from the ruin of the Zel’harst spire was not going to win any prizes in terms of elegance, but she was able to descend and release the two guardsmen on the ground without any of them crashing.

“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 his feet.

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

“Go!”

Taylor drew the Nebula’s Shard once more 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 of were excellent at demolishing all opposition through 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 nickname of ‘Dune Worm’, by the way.

She landed on its head, allowing her to observe 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 Razorbeetle clouds were coming to her, attracted by the pheromone-emitters and the modifications the Biologis teams had added to the genetic code of certain 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 to their backs. Sonora Bees, Bayou Moths and plenty of flying insects were providing a near-endless aerial cover.

The presence of forty thousand-plus 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 chances. And she had two more colonies of Ambulls digging under her feet for a sneak attack.

It was an army the likes of which she could not have dreamed of gathering 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, even 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 stationary, encircled by her insect army, but Taylor would be lying if she said the expression on the xeno’s 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 one-sidedly defeat a novice.

Taylor didn’t like it.

“We shall see.”

The Queen of Blades laughed.

“Yes, I suppose we shall.”

The Eldar’s long blade instantly shifted into a perfectly horizontal position. The parahuman kept all her attention on her opponent, preparing herself to fly away in order to keep the maximum amount 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 were 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 easy...

**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 twisted into something absolutely repulsive. Not that the five other servants accompanying it were any better in that regard, though.

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

The Sword-bearer laughed again. It looked like *someone* was angry....though maybe that word was far too weak to be appropriate. Even with the torrent of unbridled emotions created by millions of deaths in the large battlefield 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 upon 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 certainly 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 she had planned to participate in.

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

This time she was forced to take matters more seriously. Her armour was good, but there were hundreds of thousands of fangs, pincers, blades, and bone-piercing appendages coming at her in an impressively 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 bisected into two neat 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 swiftly jump again as four claws and four 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 a resemblance to Aeldari if they weren’t in the middle of scales, fangs, long tongues, and a lot of mutations unpleasant to even 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 a merciless blade again, 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 herself, but the Keeper of Secrets’ eye-hurting manifestation was shredded and its essence sent back screaming to the Palace of its Mistress. Pathetic, but what else could you expect from an entity created from 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 than 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 the change was complete, the extermination of the spiders’ attack was far simpler. Any inhabitant of Commorragh save herself would have died from this assault. There were too many insects, and she had to invest a small amount of effort to counter every attack. Yes, this was definitely an opponent able to destroy the Fallen Scorpion. Poor Arhra, he had always been 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 near-perfect synchronicity.

But she was the Queen of Blades, and in four sword strikes the trap was reduced to 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 exterminated to the last bug, and that was no fun at all.

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

“Learn your place, filth,” the Queen of Blades sneered at the Keeper of Secrets who had launched 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. Its attempt wasn’t really what one could describe as successful. One-third of its torso was shredded, and a good kick to the head was her method of farewell before the Keeper returned to explain its total failure to its part of the Primordial Annihilator.

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

Having eliminated a lot of the hindrances, the situation was a bit clearer to her eyes. Kyriss the Perverse was missing two 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.

“**ALMIGHTY SLAANESH WANTS WEAVER**,” Shalaxi Helbane declared, “**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 a humiliating defeat 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 pointed out that, were Slaanesh 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 across multiple fronts, trying to stop the offensives of its rivals, 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 could 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 occasion 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 had opened a new front.

Angron utterly loathed the Emperor’s Children and their decadent ways, and it had taken but a single rumour muttered by 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 intents and purposes a spontaneous Blood Crusade. The Daemon Primarch was massacring everything in its path, and what managed to avoid this fate 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 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 violet shades were losing their peerless artifices and glamour even as Flesh Hounds hunted everything bearing Slaanesh’s mark and some things which didn’t.

Unless something was done quickly, 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 stood a chance in hell of challenging Angron and slowing down its advance. And this world wasn’t the only one where Bloodthirsters had decided to pile up skulls by the billions.

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 unnoticed.

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 joined the battlefield, though whether the chief goal was to fight the Khornate daemons or to critically weaken the Legions of Slaanesh was known only 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 a female elfish 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 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 disguise them as servo-owls. If she hadn’t, they wouldn’t have any way 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 last, 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 hellcat 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 depravity, decadence, and sins perished in columns and armies to learn this painful lesson. Improvised catapults fired 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, creating geysers of molten rock and brilliant eruptions of fire.

If there was one lesson to be learned from this battle, Dennis swore, it would be to always stay on good terms with the Chapter of the Salamanders. The dark-skinned Astartes were on a holy mission to broadcast their disgust with 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 the demonic counter-attacks dead in their tracks. The Astartes and Mechanicus artillery was bombarding the enemy with flammable substances, and the list of things 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 the 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 repeatedly increased in size. 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 unstable as the sons of Vulkan had somehow managed to destabilise the Eldar portals to increase the flow of lava, and the conditions forced every member of the rearguard to wear a power armour or be mechanically augmented. It was no problem for the Astartes or the Skitarii, but it was an environment in which the standard Nyx carapace armour reached its limits.

“Where did this monster come from anyway?” Leet asked. “The Imperium and 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 into 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 killer xenos wasn’t here when we arrived at Commorragh.”

Two days ago, the time-stopping parahuman would have been rather skeptical if someone told him that a single being, no matter how powerful, could change the outcome of the one-sided slaughter delivered upon the Port of Lost Souls.

That was before seeing this athletic alien in tight black armour fight legions of demons and Taylor’s swarm like she was on a stage and the rest of the battlefield were mere battleground actors for her glory.

The word impossible had lost more and more meaning, but the very thought of surviving in the middle of that 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 towards the battlefield, giving the master parahuman an endless supply of arachnids and other insects as reinforcements. On the other side, it was hell hath no fury powered by unlimited wrath, loathing, and cruelty. Some demons were more than ten metres tall, and the number of claws, spikes, fangs, tentacles, and other monstrous appendages was uncountable. 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 there, but at least she had a few million spiders and millions more of her other pet insects.

The Eldar who had declared herself to be Lelith Hesperax and the Queen of Blades had none of these advantage. The alien wore armour and wielded a long sword – which Leet had been prompt to dub *Masamune*. As far as the holo-video allowed them to see – demonic energy caused bad interferences with modern technology – this enemy was not using any kind of special ability, be it a Warp-fuelled one or anything resembling their parahuman powers.

She was just too fast, too skilled, too...too everything. There were flashes of light, and limbs and claws were severed. Blood sprayed faster than eye could follow. The demons were shredded before they realised they were under attack. Chitin which would have required anti-tank shells to penetrate was penetrated 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 crackling with new orders from Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn made Dennis grimace.

“Dennis, we must withdraw to the next defensive line. The abominations are trying to flank us from 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 stays 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 giving the rest of the army time to withdraw safely.

“We retreat, yes.” Everywhere he looked, 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 into 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 galled her to admit it, Taylor was proportionally weaker against 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 quick as lightning, and if it was an exaggeration then not 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 blurs 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 powerful something was when the enemy was too fast to be touched.

The Greater Demons had paid a painfully high price for presuming the contrary. Six monstrosities had wanted to kill the two of them at the very beginning. She had killed two, the weakest ones. The Eldar arena-fighter had accounted for the three others.

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

“**SLAANESH WILL MAKE A PRIORITY OF PUNISHING YOU UNTIL YOU DON’T REMEMBER YOUR NAME!**” roared the tall purple abomination armed with a spear longer than she was tall. 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, if 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 offence. Three silver flashes and more of the servants of Excess were banished from Commorragh through overwhelming force.

The next attack was directed at her, and four more bees died to give her a chance to evade the blow in time. This was bad. Whether she tried or not did not appear to matter; the Eldar always 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 that there were shields integrated into her equipment and a golden aura protecting her body, but Taylor didn’t want to test if it would be enough against such a monster.

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

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

That 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 fixed on a point in the distance where the new hordes of mutated succubae and other depraved horrors were assembling to launch a new assault.

The prediction was correct. About thirty seconds 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 similar humanoid being. But the aura of pink it was soaked in left no doubt to the thing’s allegiance. It wore a crimson cape, made from the flayed skins of living beings and tainted with the blood of innocents. Its armour was pitch-black, and screaming mouths with fangs appeared and disappeared on it randomly. The worst part were the head and face, though. There sat 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 that had once been true, it was no longer so. Thanks to the power of Sanguinius’ ruby and the Emperor’s blessing, the insect-mistress knew there was nothing but Warp-essence beneath. This thing was a Daemon Prince now, no matter what it had been when its soul had been attached to a living, breathing being.

The second thing was even more horrible to look at. Its lower half was serpentine while the upper body resembled a centipede, and there were plenty of spikes, claws, and other 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 still 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 arrogance and loathing. “**Kneel before your Emperor**.”

Lelith Hesperax snorted.

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

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

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

The red-haired female found this hilarious and began to snicker, giggling, and finally bursting into a fit of laughter as she sat on top of a dead Dreadnought-beetle’s back.

The Daemon Prince was a bit less amused.

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

“Ah, no. You’re not.” The tone of the Sword of Vaul’s owner was falsely apologetic. There was a poorly 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 words appeared to fail the demon and Taylor had the urge to facepalm, 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 Cults, I, Aenaria Eldanesh, recognise Taylor Hebert as Empress of the Aeldari. All hail the human Aeldari Empress...all boo the false-pretender Malekith!”

And then the Queen of Blades broke into giggles once more.

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

“No, that’s my line.” Lelith Hesperax inclined her head slightly before smiling widely. “Malekith. Rakarth. Know that I have always considered your very existence an insult 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. Do you have any last words before we proceed with the execution?”

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

A new endless wave of demons surged to attack once more, 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 acknowledged 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, disgust, and 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 ever 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, the lamentable spawn having little influence; once the military campaigns over who was destined to earn the Phoenix Crown were finished, ‘Emperor Malekith’ had rarely attended state affairs, preferring going from orgy to orgy and other depravities over 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 of the exact 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’S 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 THAT 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 portion of the body Rakarth now used. It was a particularly ingenious manner of using *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 designed to permanently destroy 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 proximity, a reaction which reassured the Queen of Blades. If the human wasn’t afraid of her by 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 hundred thousand handmaidens of Excess were disintegrated by Ala’ra.

Still, the question deserved an answer.

“An Anathema to the Primordial Annihilator or me,” for a few moments Aenaria watched 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 conducted 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 thousands of bees, hornets, and insects she had not bothered learning the names of. She followed at a leisurely pace, delighting in hearing the screams of hatred uttered by Malekith as the great worm smashed away yet another 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 making demands to her 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 abandon all restraint in its efforts 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. “Don’t 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 change 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 had 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 stage. I heard from the chatter of your troops you are the ruler of a planet, so don’t bother claiming that’s not something you have the power to do.”

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

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

And on this word Aenaria channelled her psychic energy into Ala’ra for the first time this battle. 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 over yours.”

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

But it likely saw nothing else as her blades found their 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 that 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 vast majority of the humans fighting in Commorragh heard a horrible shriek 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 on his forces.

“Report,” croaked the blue-silver-armoured High Farseer once he had found the strength to get back on his feet after the aftershocks of She-Who-Thirsts’ scream.

“The situation is...extremely confused,” one of the senior Autarchs answered. “Our reserves are in a state of...major disarray. Psychic contamination levels are extremely high, especially among the Striking Scorpions and 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 beings of flesh and blood, they had recovered faster, slaying hundreds of Asuryani 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 those Khaine-damned Gates before we are all roasted!”

Faer Machdavar tried to calm himself and observe the threads of the future, but a mere light mental touch of 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 scrying them so close to Commorragh.

“Inform all our Seers, Farseers, Warlocks, and all active-gifted personnel that 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 active skill in the heart of 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 physically need to do that was an ill omen.

“Based on the last predictions, 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 and a half billion Aspect Warriors and other war specialists in this...battle. It didn’t escape him that he wanted to use a quite different word, one far uglier than ‘battle’, but could not resolve himself to do so.

“It is clear we can no longer accomplish what we came for,” Machdavar stated as more and more 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 cried in disbelief as the Gates they had arrived through 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 that 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!” That was all the confirmation he needed. The thief which dared wield a Sword of Vaul against its rightful owners was responsible for this. And Faer Machdavar didn’t need psychic powers to know 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 for 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 flinched at the price one needed to pay to activate such a terrible weapon capable of sundering 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 hesitation, 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 keep 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 in human metrics.

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 into 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 Aspect Warriors did not take long to realise this. Not when they had a pack of very large Flesh Hounds right 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.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

If someone asked her the question and she was forced to answer bluntly and honestly, Taylor had never expected the Queen of Blades to be able to permanently kill a Daemon-Prince. It was true the Eldar blade-mistress was more powerful than her. But killing this sort of opponent and ensuring the foe stayed dead for all eternity was something no one save the Emperor had been renowned for in the last thirty-five millennia.

So yes, she had bargained with the crimson-haired Eldar armed with a long and dangerous Sword of Vaul, but that didn’t mean she really believed Hesperax had the ability to do it.

Apparently, she did.

It had been...horrifyingly quick, at least. The short-lived demon had been impaled on so many blades that whatever Warp stuff was used for the body had been shredded beyond recognition before the final blow was given.

It went without saying that, after having the confirmation her opponent was using her as a test dummy to have fun with, the last thing the insect-controller wanted to do was continue the duel. The problem was...the Eldar sword-queen had not given her the chance to disengage, and her swarm was more and more depleted as their battlefield had become more volcanic hellhole and seas of lava than Eldar fortress with every second. Not to mention the little issue of the hordes of demons trying to slaughter them all. The immaterial Daemonettes poured ceaselessly from newly-activated Gates. Ex-Emperor ‘how dare you’ Malekith had fled with impressive celerity, tail between his legs, when Rakarth had been erased from existence, but the foot soldiers and the mutated things playing the role of horses were sent in uncountable numbers.

It made sense, in a way. The ancient Eldar had killed, by her most conservative estimate, over thirty-six Greater Demons, including names like Heartslayer, Leiwa’quasca, Rhug’guari’ihlulan, Zarakynel the Bringer of Torments, and Ses’tash of the Vile Caress.

Quality had not worked, obviously. Therefore the Ruinous Power of Excess was sending quantity from thereon, along with one or two major four-armed things to lead the hordes and exploit any opportunities that may present themselves.

And in the meantime, the parahuman General was left to fend off a relentless series of attacks. It wasn’t going well. Shortly after disposing of the Daemon Prince and thus fulfilling her part of the bargain, Lelith Hesperax had shattered the first shield of the *Angel’s Tear*, and if the golden aura hadn’t been there to protect her, her armour would have been severely hammered by the force behind the attack.

The problem was speed. Constantly staying on the move was not an issue, between her equipment and her wings. It was being fast enough which was impossible. In the last five years, the former supervillain of Brockton bay had seen Space Marines spar and fight with amazing speed. More recently, she had seen Rogal Dorn and the Naga fight seriously, and these two left the Astartes in the dust.

The Queen of Blades was so far above them that if Taylor was not there to see her with her own eyes, she wouldn’t have believed it.

Having nothing better to do, Taylor sent ten of her last Ambulls in an underground attack combined with a moth-bee aerial assault. All of them were killed so fast she wasn’t sure the ambush had been acknowledged as such.

And then suddenly the ground began to twist and disappear. Okay, what sort of devilry had the demons tried now?

Fortunately, her wings were perfectly able to carry her in the air indefinitely, so if anything it was the demons which were once again going to come out the losers in this debacle.

The bad news was most of her insects which couldn’t fly, like the Ondu Terrors or the Queen-Tortoises, were doomed and plunged into the darkness which was swallowing everything at an impressive speed.

Their entire surroundings became darkness. Fire and lava fell and were extinguished in the inky blackness. It was like being plunged into a realm of night and loneliness, with Zel’harst being destroyed piece by piece.

And were those tentacles seemingly swallowing the demons?

The insect-controlling parahuman flew faster, and seeing a wall of darkness progressively erect itself, a wall which was cutting her off from the rest of Zel’harst, tried to break through before it was too late.

To her stupefaction she suddenly stopped moving in that direction and was rendered immobile. An orb of silvery psychic energy surrounded her. And the creator of this miniature prison was not exactly difficult to find.

“That was a very bad idea, little Queen,” the crimson-haired Eldar spoke. “The Abyss of Dreams would have killed you instantly.”

Taylor had a few seconds to watch as the Queen of Blades walked on a sort of silver carpet to approach her. So the Eldar blade-mistress was using her psychic capabilities to create a psychic version of a footbridge from nothing.

“What is this phenomenon?” Weaver asked as the silvery support was enlarged to create a rather spacious platform which reached under her prison. Said psychic trap deactivated a second later, but her opponent didn’t show a single sign the duel was going to resume, instead sheathing her Sword of Vaul by her side. It had to be noted that the scabbard had also materialised from out of nowhere.

“An ancient weapon from the War in Heaven my race used to temporarily neutralise the Star-Devourers,” the sword-mistress spoke melodiously. “I thought all of them had been destroyed during the conflict. Evidently, the Harlequin must have found one and managed to restore it to a serviceable state.”

“Err...great.” All lights save the psychic silver aura of Lelith Hesperax and her own golden radiance had been extinguished by the darkness. She still had forty thousand insects flying around, but if this lasted for a long enough time, they would eventually need to land to rest and recover from the effort. “How long is it going to last?”

The only thing now which was proof there was something else than this realm of darkness was the rain of debris hitting her insects at irregular intervals.

“Until those who activated this weapon release us,” the Queen of Blades replied with a smile Taylor didn’t like at all. “The Star-Devourers of the Necrons used to exploit a flaw in the psychic matrix, but I am powerful enough to imitate their technique. So we have to wait for our jailors to release us.”

“And why would they do something so stupid?”

“Because the power sustaining this weapon is paid in Aeldari lives. Each activation, if I remember right, requires roughly one thousand and three hundred deaths for the equivalent of two-thirds of one of your human hours. And then the price gets higher. The leaders who used this weapon are linked to the weapon and spend the lives of their soldiers as currency.”

“That’s...horrible.”

The Queen of Blades frowned.

“I was the one who told the Phoenix Court these weapons were best abandoned. They never managed to kill an Yngir with one in the first place, or to imprison one for very long either. But it seems the Harlequins managed to steal one out of the existing stocks before they were all destroyed. Stupid. We aren’t immortals anymore.”

The parahuman General made a dozen bees land on the platform before asking her next question.

“So we have just to wait until those who activated the weapon all die or release us?”

“Not exactly,” and here the oppressing feeling of very bad news returned, “The Abyss of Dreams will sunder the sub-realms and ravage any sub-realms the Harlequins have marked beforehand. Not the Port of Lost Souls or Zel’harst here, they can’t access the former and the latter is the activation battleground, but I would not be surprised if they send us the legions of She-Who-Thirsts really soon.”

“**They did**.”

Suddenly the Queen of Blades stopped smiling and once again unsheathed her sword so quickly Taylor’s eyes didn’t follow.

“After the pathetic son, the depraved mother...” it was uttered in a whimsical voice, but the tone was definitely loud enough for the Eldar blade-mistress to be heard.

“**I am the favourite Arch-Priestess of the True Goddess**.”

Corrupted pink energy burned in the darkness and a new Daemon Prince approached. Or rather a Daemon Princess. Like the previous ones the aura created revulsion and a horrible sense of wrongness, but it was impossible to miss the creature had been an Eldar female. And she was almost naked, armed with a twisted black spear.

“I should hope that is the case,” the First Sword-bearer mocked her, and Taylor didn’t need to be a genius to notice the sheer hate behind these words. “Most Priestesses of a religious cult have the good sense to not destroy the Empire they are part of.”

“**I** **did not destroy the Empire! I made it ascend to its true divine place in the galaxy!**”

Aenaria the Queen of Blades laughed, before stopping as she regained of herself.

“That was a good one. Let me educate you, Morathi, on what the other species of this galaxy think of us. They think we are arrogant imbeciles. We dominated the galaxy, and we managed to wipe out our entire civilisation...and create a new part of the Primordial Annihilator which would siphon the souls of our dead.”

“**You understand nothing, poor unloved crone**,” the pink aura tripled in size and the sense of wrongness grew nearly unbearable. “**I am now more powerful than you ever were and-**“

Too many flashes of silver to count cut off what seemed to be winding up to a grandiose speech. For a second, the abyss was illuminated by a column of silver light.

“No you weren’t.”

The scream of a beast echoed.

 “I will send your pathetic son join you in oblivion soon, ‘Arch-Priestess’.”

And then for the second time in less than five hours, Excess lost one of its great abominations.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

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

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

Tziz was not going to pretend the Battle of Commorragh had given her a deep abiding love for xenos, quite to the contrary.

The sermons and ‘revelations’ of Imperial propaganda had greatly underestimated how evil some species could be. Some traitors would of course try to say that Commorragh was the lair of the Eldar sub-species called the Drukhari, and that the Eldar monsters were a special case.

The ex-Callidus Apprentice didn’t think so. Yes, most of the tortures and other abominable and heretical deeds had been committed by the long-ears, that much couldn’t be denied. But the Dynasts of Commorragh couldn’t have kept their realm of suffering and ignoble slavery if they hadn’t been supported by billions of mercenaries, and an incredible percentage of these willing servants weren’t Eldar.

The reptilian Sslyth had sold their services as bodyguards for powerful patrons. Galg harpoon-masters had been caught torturing humans in pools filled with carnivorous fish. Caradochian Air-Enforcers had patrolled the skies over the flesh-markets, and the Hydras of the Anti-Air Regiments had slaughtered them when they were in range. Groevian Fiends had served as bounty-hunters for the long-ears, and they had been far from the only ones. Has’reel, Loxatl, Nekulli, Varitoren; countless xenos species had decided to side with the Eldar and were now receiving the punishments their crimes deserved.

In this case though, it wasn’t the gallows, the pyre, or any execution method favoured by the Imperium. Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper had after consultations ordered that the former xenos mercenaries were to be used as cannon-fodder to slow down the offensive of the Arch-Enemy at Zel’harst.

This was a spectacle Tziz was sure few humans had ever seen this millennium. Tens of thousands of xenos, ranging from huge stone-like giants to tiny, horrible-looking reptiles, were walking, crawling, and slithering in neat columns, escorted by guardsmen and guardswomen. Obviously, they were horribly outnumbered by the pincers, maws, and fangs of the former Eldar servants, but that was what the Penal explosive collars around the necks of the xenos were for. They would die to give Army Group Caribbean a few hours to withdraw properly, or they would pay the price.

The woman now answering to the name of Gabriella Jordan frowned as she saw a smaller column of xenos going in the opposite direction, towards the sector where the landers and atmospheric transports waited to continue the evacuation.

“A problem, Captain Jordan?” The Commissar-Colonel waiting a few feet away on her right asked her.

“No, Commissar-Colonel,” she replied. “I’m just...not happy to see we are sparing some xenos. Even if they are former slaves and didn’t participate in the torture of human prisoners. I know from some Navy envoys we don’t have the capacity to evacuate a fourth of the slaves currently waiting on the Vileth platforms. Consequently, I can’t say I’m really happy to hear some xenos are sent away with priority.”

For some reason which had everything to do with the circumstances under which the invasion of Commorragh had been launched, the transport capacity to evacuate the former slaves was incredibly limited, and the bad news was just starting there. There were plenty of whispers that once these tortured martyrs arrived at Pavia, the problem was where to debark them. Pavia Primus was rumoured to have served as the testing area of an Eldar poison diffused in the entire atmosphere. Since no one having the tiniest amount of intelligence was going to suggest using the crippled hulk of the *Empire of Sin*, this meant the survivors of Commorragh had to either stay on one of the Malta Starforts, one of the pirate habitats which had not been smashed apart during the Battle of Pavia, or one of the empty supply ships of Operation Caribbean. The only other alternative was the growing trickle of Imperial reinforcements arriving hour after hour, but there weren’t enough of them. Most of the hulls rushing to the Eversprings Gate were warships, and those were badly needed for other tasks.

“Understandable,” the grim-faced man nodded. “I won’t say I don’t share the same views to some extent, but the orders of the Inquisition take precedence over our ideals. And really, there aren’t many species Lady Inquisitor Harper has ordered to be spared. We have only the Brachyura, the Akvrani, the Axlo, the Uluméathic, the Naiad, and the Stryxis that don’t deserve a bayonet right between the eyes or whatever will kill one of those xenos. The rest can go and fight against their former masters.”

Tziz didn’t listen to this explanation and become convinced this was the right thing, but then, these words weren’t supposed to be satisfying.

“Speaking of which, how bad is it at Zel’harst?”

“Bad enough,” Commissar-Colonel Vulpahan admitted. “The Salamanders are forced to drown the battlefield in lava to slow down the enemy, and the air is increasingly tainted by psychic...things. Most of the Guard regiments are back in the Port of Lost Souls now. Only those who have high-tier void-sealed equipment available can risk facing the perils of the Arch-Enemy and the environment.”

The last sentence was uttered so quietly she almost missed it.

“We can only delay them...”

**The Abyss of Dreams**

**Thirty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

Optimistically, she was going to get out of this ‘Abyss of Dreams’ soon. When this happy event happened, Taylor would make sure to kill each and every Eldar who had dared use this weapon against her. And if it was the Biel-Tan Eldar again, extermination would go from being one of the top things to do after Commorragh to her first and absolute priority.

If it wasn’t Biel-Tan, it would be the murder-clowns. The more time spent in this dimension of darkness and monsters, the less the insect-controlling parahuman liked it.

There was no military support which could reach her, and even if there was, what good would it have done? There was no place to resupply and the autonomy of a Thunderhawk was not unlimited. Any Space Marine, guardsman, or other potential ally who somehow found a way to enter this prison of darkness would be trapped like she was.

In circumstances like this one, using her insects as scouts would have been the logical option. But the General had quickly abandoned the idea. Without any ability to breed more, she had to be patient and thrifty with those she had. Especially because she was pouring a lot of her emotions into them since this realm of oblivion had closed around her.

It reminded her too much of the locker and her trigger. The solitude alone was terrible, and the demons arriving from time to time made things worse.

“**Weaver! Know that you are going to die under the blade of-**“

A strike of the Nebula’s Shard pulverised the head of the creature which had tried to sneak up on her.

The pink sparkles of corruption swiftly dropped towards the animated tendrils waiting below.

In the distance, there were noises of battle and screams of agony. Certainly the Queen of Blades destroying whatever idiotic opponent had decided it was a good idea to challenge an invincible monster.

But as tempting as it was to unleash her frustration and her other emotions on the monsters which somehow arrived here, the golden-armoured commander knew she had to rest and wait. Unlike the red-haired Eldar, her endurance wasn’t limitless. If she exhausted herself too much, she was going to die, and the consequences of that...well, she had no idea what would happen. Imperial propaganda pretended Saints went back to the God-Emperor’s side until they were needed again, but first there was no one who had ever returned to confirm these words, and second she had no idea how badly it would affect the Chapters of the Blood. Her personal opinion was to avoid finding out for as long as possible.

Taylor breathed loudly. There was nothing to do but wait. Wait and hope that outside, her friends, allies, and subordinates could handle the demons coming to kill them. Hope the Archmagi and the Custodes could prepare Objective J without her help.

And if she came out of this alive, Weaver was going to make sure the Eldar remembered the error they had made for all eternity.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Souls**

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

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“But it has never been done before!”

If the Tech-Priest in front of him had been of a rank inferior to Magos and not essential to certain Noosphere duties, Gastaph would have demoted him. And in all probability, this disgrace would have been followed by a quick deployment to the frontlines. There was a lot of action there, he was told.

But everyone was under pressure, and so the Martian Archmagos chained his irritation.

“That is a fact I’m well-aware of, Magos. Now by the Great Cog and the sacred oils, I will repeat my question. Have you finished your task?”

To his satisfaction, the Magos answered with a positive cant.

“Let it be known, Archmagos, that I vigorously oppose the principles and ideas of associating non-blessed xenos technology with Omnissiah-blessed machines. This is something that goes against every sacred law!”

“Duly noted. Your accusations will be relayed to the Adeptus Custodes,” it was only fair, in Hediatrix’s opinion, that the party who had given the order took responsibility for it, one way or another.

The communication was switched off, and the master of the *El Dorado* turned towards the lone hololithic figure of Archmagos Felicia 24-Toledo, waiting silently for his decision.

“The preparations are done. Activate the J-Gate.”

The order was relayed across two Arks Mechanicus and through hundreds of thousands of implants of the servants of the Omnissiah, part by part, an ocean of energy was diverted from the suns of Commorragh to an immense portal which had stayed dormant for the entire duration of the Battle of Commorragh.

One by one the ‘keys’ were placed in matrixes which had stayed inactive for thousands of years, perhaps longer.

This was in many ways a triumph of human perseverance. It was also one of desperate improvisation. Three of the xenos ‘keys’ had been owned by Sliscus the Serpent, but the other three hadn’t, and the Adeptus Mechanicus and the other Imperial forces had searched all the realms of Commorragh for them. Since it was not possible for psykers to use their Warp-based powers, a certain number of Craftworld Eldar had to be captured to feed their energy into the Gate, along with many xenos witches and sorcerers of other species.

And this didn’t take into account the logistical and mechanical challenges to supply the non-psychic energy the Gate required. Gastaph Hediatrix had been forced to go meet the Necron leader in person to be sure that the technical problems and potential catastrophes would not be an issue plaguing their endeavour at the worst possible time.

“All sub-level activations completed. Main activation of the J-Gate...now!”

The first second, there was nothing but a dead Gate. The one after, a maelstrom of green psychic and non-psychic energy coalesced together in the middle of the gigantic circle the xenos had built an eternity ago.

Soon the energy covered everything and the surface of the Gate was akin to a green mirror. A green mirror ten times the width of the Eversprings Gate.

“J-Gate activated,” one of his subordinates reported rather unnecessarily. “Systems and energy transfers are occurring within the estimated projections.”

“Outstanding,” replied sincerely the Archmagos commanding 24th Fleet. “Immediately prepare a Destroyer for emergency departure through the Eversprings Gate to contact the Astropaths at Pavia. We need to be sure Force X is on the other side and ready to play its role. And contact the Custodes representative on the *Enterprise*. Tell him we are still able to complete Objective J in the timetable we were given.”

It was something which was, in all honesty, completely extraordinary. Gastaph had calculated the probabilities a battle in the Port of Lost Souls would face, and the odds had been grim. The possibility of holding the sub-realm against the first Eldar counterattacks had been worse, and taking control of the Port for long enough to activate the J-Gate had been associated with words like ‘impossible’, ‘ridiculous’ and ‘are you raving mad?’

And yet, they had achieved it.

Now they just had to make sure their very improvised – and possibly heretical – power coils and unsound mechanical achievements didn’t blow up in their faces during the time it took for Force X to transit here. As the estimations for this translation were supposed to take close to a standard Terran day, it was not going to be easy.

“I think the Fabricator-General will be very impressed, no matter the number of doctrinal accusations we will face,” Archmagos Felicia 24-Toledo noted.

“Agreed,” the Archmagos Prime replied, not commenting on the fact being impressed and supporting someone were two very different things. “This is the first phase of Objective J done. Is the second phase still on schedule?”

“The Nyxian Biologis teams assured me they were five point one minutes ago. They voiced strong reservations against the conditions they have worked under, however. They want Lady Weaver to be present to limit the risks.”

“It is not going to be happening,” the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard had confirmed the Chosen of the Omnissiah was still alive, but contacting her was not possible at the moment, and allowing her to abandon the frontlines would have been a tough order before the events of the last hour. “Detach elements of the 5th and the 12th Skitarii Legions under your own authority if you think J-2 needs to be protected by more military firepower than they are surrounded with.”

“By your command,” the representative of the Fabricator-General bowed before disappearing from the hololith.

None of the Tech-Priests assigned to the J-2 assignment would be punished, obviously. The schedule they were all operating under did not leave a single second for major flaws or technical delays, and to make matters worse most of the assumptions made before entering the Eversprings Gate had long been acknowledged as obsolete.

Archmagos Dominus Xiarch-33-Io, commanding officer of the 1st Skitarii Legion, entered the bridge of the *El Dorado* five seconds later.

“The lines hold at Zel’harst, Archmagos. But all simulations are unanimous: we will either need to send more xenos to die against the forces of the Arch-Enemy, or we will need to delay the withdrawal of the God-Engines of Legio Defensor in the next two hours.”

“I don’t think you need my input to make that choice,” Hediatrix remarked with a faint hint of humour. “But I presume there is another problem.”

“Yes, Archmagos. The destructive methods of the Adeptus Astartes, as effective as they were, have accelerated the problems the Knights are suffering on a volcanic battlefield like this one. One of the premises of Colossus was we would be able to withdraw the God-Engines of Princeps Surena before the Knights. I don’t know if the machines of Taranis and the other Knight Houses will be able to hold that long.”

“Even with the reserves we have rebuilt after the abandonment of Utar’ragh?” Gastaph Hediatrix inquired. It had been one of the reasons the retreat had been made in such a short amount of time. Moreover, the Arch-Enemy had sent an uncountable amount of abominations and there had been plenty of Eldar to kill. A pity they had not been able to diffuse a sufficient amount of Kane particles for maximum lethality, but Utar’ragh was now a pyre where nothing could survive.

“Even then,” the Skitarii commander confirmed.

Hediatrix studied the data sent on his personal console-section before grunting.

“You’re right. I will try to devise a response with the forces we have available. Unless you have a recommendation?

“I do,” Dominus Xiarch-33-Io replied immediately. “The Angel’s Sword power armours of the Guard were dispersed across dozens of regiments to avoid, if I understood correctly, ‘administrative issues’. But at this very moment, the Commissars and elite soldiers are here, in the Port of Lost Souls, because most of the regiments do not have the equipment necessary to survive near the lava fields of Zel’harst. I propose to regroup them into a single formation and send them as an armoured fist to support the Space Marines.”

It was not a bad suggestion, really. There had to be some five hundred power armours of this template available in the theatre, and the performance had been perfectly satisfactory for a trial run. Of course most of the armour wearers had not fought together in this battle, but then if they were alive right now, they were adaptable, skilled...and lucky.

“You have my support to convince the Lord Commissar to release said armours. Begin deployment as soon as you are ready.”

The Skitarii commander saluted and exited the *El Dorado*’s bridge.

“STC status updates?”

“No changes in the last hour, Archmagos. There has been no recent discovery of STC material among the tons of archeotech we have successfully recovered from the Eldar thieves.”

Gastaph Hediatrix internally sighed. It would have been too much, he supposed to find one more. Eleven templates or relics of STC’s origin just hadn’t the same prestige as *twelve*...

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**Colonel Tom Cameron**

“Once more, we go into the jaws of death...”

This time, however, the tanks of the Adeptus Astartes and the Imperial Guard weren’t the first into the fray. As the last guns which were still in position poured a last long-range bombardment onto the horrors, tens of thousands of men charged with maddened battlecries and ferocious imprecations on their lips.

They were not guardsmen, these men and women. They were former slaves who, through no fault of their own, could not be allowed to leave Commorragh alive. The evil of the Drukhari had known no bounds, and many viruses, plagues, and corruptive mutations were ready to be triggered in their bodies if they managed to leave Commorragh. Hundreds of Tech-Priests had tried to disarm some of these genetic horrors, but even the specialised Biologis teams which could be spared for these tasks required a lot of time and experiments, not to mention secure facilities, to study the Eldars’ evil works.

Most of these requirements couldn’t be provided. Secure labs existed, but only aboard the Mechanicus ships, and in too little quantity to make any difference. But the biggest problem was time. There was no time to disable the plagues and the other eldritch things awaiting only the equivalent of a bio-detonator to devour their hosts.

There was no time and thus countless former prisoners were going to die.

The only thing the Imperium could make sure of was that they wouldn’t die without fighting back.

“Concentrate your fire on section B! Fire at will!”

The abominations attacked again. It was like a hurricane of violence nothing could prevent from reforming and launching a new offensive every time it was broken.

But break they did, again, and again. It didn’t matter that they had hundreds of thousands of former mercenaries now sprouting tentacles and maws where no normal being should have any. It didn’t matter that the Eldar within their ranks were more awful-looking than usual. It didn’t matter that the hosts of the Arch-Enemy included millions of daemons.

The oaths had been sworn. They would bleed the heretics and the monsters until the order came to retreat.

Whirlwinds launched hundreds of missiles, and the big guns of the Space Marine armoured formations roared in fury. The Silver Skulls had concentrated three of their Land Raiders and twenty Predators, supported by Vindicators and Bombards. The Fellglaive *Obsidian Chariot* gave the signal for the entire Salamanders battleline to ignite a new inferno amidst the dozens of others erupting everywhere.

It was complete madness. The air seemed to be on fire, and mere kilometres away a maelstrom of darkness was growing, shattering the broken Eldar monuments and buildings the invasion hadn’t had the time to ruin.

In this apocalyptic battlefield, the infantry couldn’t survive, but they died valiantly. For years the Commorragh Eldar had tortured their prisoners, taunting them endlessly how unlucky they had been to be captured alive. Now most of these monsters were in league with the Arch-Enemy, and that made the long-ears thrice-damned: heretics, xenos and soul-damned. No foe’s condemnation could be more deserved, by the Golden Throne!

But they died. There were too many servants of the Arch-Enemy for any other outcome to be possible. Five or six lines were utterly wiped out, but further back more daemons materialised to take their place.

“CHARGE! CHARGE FOR HIM ON TERRA!”

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

Once more they charged. Predators, Land Raiders, and of course the new Khans and Cataphracts, the only Guard tanks able to follow the infernal pace imposed by the Howling Griffons and the Flesh Tearers. Four smaller Titans walked with them. Above them gunships and power armours brought on a strict volunteer basis provided the aerial support necessary to fend off the flying abominations.

There was fire. There was death. They were likely outnumbered a million to one. But they went on the attack nonetheless.

Because the line had to be held. Because the victories already won, while impressive, were not enough.

Because the Saint had asked it of them, and they wouldn’t disappoint *her*.

His Cataphract’s cannon sent hundreds more daemons back to the hell they had spawned from, and Tom Cameron smiled before barking new orders to his driver.

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

Watching from the fortified position he and the rest of his uninjured Space Marines were defending, Agiel recognised the situation on the frontlines was not brilliant. In fact, it was almost impossible to believe something could survive in the realm which a few days ago had been a citadel of the depraved Drukhari.

That was, fortunately and unfortunately, wrong. Fortunately, because for all the darkness, the volcanic eruptions, and the millions of insects assailing the daemonic armies, the Black Rage was still kept at bay, unable to break the psyche of any true son of Sanguinius. The Brothers of the Red and their brothers of the Blood were unaffected by it, and this meant that somewhere in this miniature black hole devouring the sub-realms of Commorragh, Lady Weaver lived.

Not that there had been much doubt on the subject. Agiel would have to be blind to have missed how several thousand formations of the Ruinous Powers had refused to engage the Astartes lines and instead chose to disappear into the darkness.

Since the things which crawled out of this realm of night were attacking everything in sight, it was not difficult to make the hypothesis that whoever had activated this terrible weapon was no friend of the Warp abominations – at the top of the list of suspects came the Eldar, obviously.

But Lady Weaver lived.

Unfortunately, she was far away from them and all armoured formations had to hold the line until the Basileia of Nyx was back.

Agiel frowned, an expression which was hidden by his red helmet. That was not exactly true, even if it was how he had presented it to the scouts and battle-brothers who were still able to fight. Or rather it was not the complete truth. Lady Weaver was incredibly important, but the Chapter Master had, like all the senior commanders of the Adeptus Astartes, been informed that Objective J was not complete. Some progress had been made, but more time was required.

More time was required to make sure Commorragh would become a graveyard neither the Eldar nor the Ruinous Powers would stop shivering about for the rest of their lives.

And so the Space Marines and their allies paid this price again and again. Despite the lava oceans created by the Salamanders, there were always more legions of daemons to assault them. The Salamanders had unleashed enough incendiaries to give birth to ten volcanoes, and yet the tenacious sons of Vulkan would surely have been overrun if they were alone.

But they weren’t.

Howling Griffons had fought uncountable horrors step by step, while their brothers of the Silver Skulls protected crippled Titans and dragged hundreds of tanks and war machines unable to continue firing at the enemy away to safety. Flesh Tearers ravaged the flanks of the corrupted xenos, buying hour after hour with the blood of Cretacia.

Iron Drakes and Heracles Wardens, Angels Sanguine and Brothers of the Red, and more contingents of the Blood were manning the lines with guardsmen in power armour and metal-built Skitarii. The Black Templars, for all their fanaticism, proved a decisive rallying point for the mortals as their encouraging battle-cries never stopped.

Many glorious pages of history would be written about this great battle, Agiel was sure. But a lot remained to be done, by the Primarch’s feathers. And they were still hopelessly outnumbered.

“We should have brought more Astartes,” Agiel remarked on the frequency allowing him to speak with his counterpart of the Iron Drakes in private.

“True,” Dupleix conceded as the Brothers of the Red’s bolters and tanks thinned the advancing horde by a third of its elements while the hungering darkness and the lava devastated the rest. “I honestly didn’t believe the jokes some Guard officers made about Lady Weaver’s luck, but I’ve since changed my mind. I am far from a specialist on Saints of the Ecclesiarchy, but I don’t think beginning the Battle of the Death Star and then the Battle of Commorragh within less than a century can be considered *normal*.”

“I share your opinion,” the Nyx-based Chapter Master agreed. “And I don’t think the other Lords of the Blood will tell me I’m wrong. Next operation,” he was going to optimistically assume there would be one, “we will bring far more Space Marines. I’m thinking of petitioning Baal for at least ten thousand.”

“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst?” The Master of the Iron Drakes chuckled. “I can live with that. Our good friends the High Lords of Terra may not like it, though.”

“Unless the Tech-Priests lied through their metallic teeth, Lady Weaver allowed the Mechanicus to recover enough archeotech to buy a few Sectors,” the son of Sanguinius cheerfully reminded him. “I think the favour of the Fabricator-General may not be the hardest thing to claim.”

“More Titans, Knights, Kastelan robots, and Skitarii? I can live with that.”

Agiel Izaz laughed. He could as well, really. Add a few million guardsmen, because the gold-winged General was technically a member of the Imperial Guard, and that should serve as the core of a respectable force...and he had absolutely no idea if it would be enough, to be honest.

Commorragh was not the average battle a Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes fought, not in a thousand years.

But first they had to finish the battle. And as a Warhound was assaulted by winged daemons, Agiel gave new orders and drew his not-so-new power katana. There were corrupted xenos and abominations to educate.

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**100th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**ASDRUBAEL VECT**

**‘THE BLACK HEART’**

**ADMIRAL OF THE BLACK HEART**

**SADIST TORTURER-SCHEMER**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

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

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

**REWARD: 10 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

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**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Hidden Blade**

**Eighteen hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

Among the many Khaine Dandra weapons which had been salvaged from the Fall, Asdrubael had in his young years sworn to himself a good dozen of them would never be used inside Commorragh, save to prevent a total victory of She-Who-Thirsts or another entity as dangerous as the Dark Prince.

The Abyss of Dreams was one of those, although he had never been able to claim one for his future hypothetical Kabal. Even by the standards of rarity of the Dynasts and the Dark City, this pre-Fall weapon had been more rumour than fact.

But apparently the Harlequins of the Frozen Stars had been more successful than him, for all the good it was going to do them.

Asdrubael Vect was not the most psychically gifted person of Commorragh, but there was no way he could miss the soul-screams of the tricksters and the Biel-Tan idiots they had convinced to participate in this folly.

“I suppose I should thank them, for all their stupid intentions,” the Dynast-killer mused conversationally. “They saved my life, after all.”

Unfortunately for him, like too many things the Harlequins and the delusional Craftworld Farseers did, it was too little, too late.

The creature which had once been the Arch-Priestess Morathi had been swallowed by the storm of darkness, but his left arm and his right ear had already been severed from his body, not to mention the deep lacerations inflicted upon the rest of his flesh.

In theory, these weren’t crippling wounds. When the technology you had available allowed you to be reborn as often as you wanted, an arm and an ear were nothing.

But the weapon which had drunk his blood had been daemonic in origin. The wounds had not only hurt his flesh; they had also damaged his soul and were even now trying to seep corruption into his veins with every heartbeat. It would have been rather fascinating to see if the wounds would reopen when his mind transferred to a new body, but alas this question would remain a mystery to him.

The secret facilities Asdrubael Vect had spent the last cycles building and hiding from the eyes of the Dynasts’ agents to ensure his immortality were burning wrecks, radioactive dust, or worse. She-Who-Thirsts alone knew what Rakarth had tried to do with brand-new gene-labs when he had succumbed to the lies of the Lord of Dark Delights.

And the resulting invasions and counter-invasions had recently torched all the other Haemonculi facilities. There would be no resurrection for him, not unless he successfully escaped out of Commorragh. And since most of the Webway was convinced he had opened the Gates to kill the Dynasts, a warm welcome was unlikely to be found in Pandaimon or Shaa-Dom – assuming they still existed right now.

No, fleeing was not an option anymore, if it had ever been one in the first place. Morathi had wounded him too badly. His sole consolation was that he had outlived both the depraved leader of the Cult of Pleasure and Rakarth. Their utter annihilation had not been a small-time and unremarked phenomena, and the pink energies had grown out of control each time.

With great effort Asdrubael had climbed stairs and taken a fighter up to one of the last spires still standing in the entire sub-realm of Hidden Blade. It was the end of him and it was the end of Commorragh; the very least he could do was to find a nice spot from which to observe the final act.

There were even some benefits: whoever had owned this spire had left thorn-liquors and plenty of other drinks and appetisers behind when they had fled the sub-realm. Too bad having only one arm did not allow him to enjoy everything, but life in Commorragh had always been unfair for as long as he remembered.

The spectacle, on the other hand, was simply sublime. Darkness was everywhere, swallowing, rupturing, and then grabbing parts of the sub-realm to fuel the Abyss of Dreams. Sometimes it rained darkness, often the onslaught manifested as a gigantic maw which devoured everything in its path. The Legions of the Great Enemy weren’t spared by this cataclysm; Morathi had been far, far from an isolated incident, and judging by the hundreds of thousands of Daemonettes arriving and leaving Hidden Blade, the Abyss of Dreams was gaining ground everywhere the Harlequins of the Frozen Stars had been able to make preparations.

“I do not envy you, clowns,” the former Supreme Lord raised the skull he used as a cup in salute. “Your souls are going to be food for the facets of the Primordial Annihilator, and you have angered them mightily!”

The enmity of She-Who-Thirsts was kind of a given, since they had cost the Dark Prince one of its favourite pets. The Chaos Power of Blood wasn’t likely to congratulate them for cheating with a highly-psychic device and staying in the shadows. The Great Liar was not something you wanted to disturb the threads of, and the Grandfather of Pestilence...it should be very, very happy to see them, for reasons it was best not to contemplate.

“**Do not worry! You will soon share their torments!**”

Asdrubael clicked his tongue at the lack of civility and courtesy before glancing at the hourglass of crystal surrounded by empty bottles. Was it too much to ask to not be disturbed until the final sunset came for Commorragh?

“Former Emperor Malekith, what a surprise!” he didn’t try to find out where the daemon was; the corruption of the Great Ocean was everywhere. “I didn’t think you would come to meet me personally, since you’ve been so very busy running away from the Queen of Blades...”

The first purple sword-strike missed him by less than a half-finger. The second found its mark directly in his chest. The third shredded his left leg. The pain was ten times more dolorous than the wounds he was already mentally struggling against.

The golden-masked figure at last emerged out of the pink clouds, and Vect could not avoid thinking how sad it was that the humans had more taste than the former Aeldari in front of him.

“**Your soul belongs to Slaanesh.**”

“Asdrubael Vect does not belong to anyone, *coward*.”

And then the Drukhari who in another life would have been the ruler of Commorragh pressed the detonator of the Soul-Obliterator he had recovered before coming to this spire.

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

If Malekith had been sixteen centimetres closer to Asdrubael Vect, the Daemon Prince would have been the third greater servant of Excess to be obliterated forever on the same day.

Small mercy for a being which had none, the former Aeldari Emperor was spared soul-destruction. But the Daemon Prince who continued taking the name of Malekith was not fast enough to evade the psychic shockwave generated by the soul-obliterator and was instantly banished back to the Warp in a shriek of loathing few beings could have equalled.

It went without saying this unconventional method of banishment didn’t faze the Lord of the Dark Delights in the slightest. The Dark Prince had lost so many Daemon Princes and Keepers of Secrets against the Queen of Blades and the Anathema’s Saint that one more or one less wasn’t going to make any difference worth mentioning.

The death of Asdrubael Vect...that Slaanesh had no choice but to acknowledge.

At no point had the Lord of the Black Heart ever sworn his allegiance to the Prince of Pleasure. But until Weaver began to burn Commorragh in an unprecedented pyre, that was of no importance. Each and every one of Vect’s plans for the future would favour the Great Serpent. Forcing the Drukhari to unite under a single banner would make the Dark City a lair of depravity, excess, and murder. Trillions of souls would be tortured in the slave-markets and the dark pits.

All of these possible futures had been lost, without any hope of recovery, and six entire Legions of Excess vanished with them. These were not the only consequences, but those were the most visible: these Legions had already been repelled from Commorragh, and now the counterattack they led against several Bloodthirsters and the shock troops of Khorne was replaced by a gigantic hole in the defensive lines, an outcome so shocking that the Bloodthirster in command of that part of the battlefield waited the equivalent of eight seconds before leading its troops into the breach.

It was a catastrophe in front of the Palace of Slaanesh. The situation was similarly complicated across the galaxy.

Experiencing a shortage of future souls, She-Who-Thirsts had no choice but to choose its battles carefully. The events of the Horus Heresy and before couldn’t be changed, but everything else was up for grabs.

And causality was not a kind judge.

Where the laws of reality reasserted themselves, the assets of Excess were crippled or devastated. Anti-Imperial rebellions which should have led to quick and easy triumphs became hard-fought campaigns where humanity gave as good as it received. Maiden Exodite worlds were able to continue years-long campaigns of skirmishes and delays while in another reality their defeat would have been brutal and swift.

And those were the planets and theatres where the Youngest God had the upper hand. There were plenty of scenarios where this wasn’t the case. There were dozens of instances where the Imperial forces inflicted major defeats to the Ruinous Power. And there were hundreds more where Tzeentch and Khorne ordered their agents and champions to intervene, while in a thousand other future, past, and present threads, they would have failed to act.

The Warp was in turmoil, and the consequences for the Doom of the Aeldari promised to be very, very unpleasant. Before the first shot was fired in the Battle of Commorragh, Khorne had been the most powerful of the Ruinous Powers, in as much as it was possible to measure such things. Tzeentch was second, Nurgle was third, and Slaanesh was fourth; however the difference of power between the last two was slim.

This was no longer the case. As Drukhari souls stopped tormenting their billions of slaves and the future of pain and suffering was extinguished forever, Slaanesh was by any standard absolutely weaker than Nurgle, having lost close to a thirty-sixth of its influence-power-essence.

The paradoxes weren’t over, clearly. The forces of the Imperium had not finished fighting the Battle of Commorragh, and there were still massive fleets of Drukhari and Asuryani locked out of the Port of Lost Souls.

But there was no possible way to deny it now.

Whether the Imperium fell in a thousand or a million years, humanity had inflicted one of the greatest defeats to Chaos ever.

Slaanesh shrieked and raged. For the Cadians manning the walls of their homeworld, this translated into three hours of pure hell, when tears of madness rained on their homeworld and many, many starships summoned to defend the Cadian Gate were lost for months in the Warp.

Soon however, the Dark Prince was forced to shift its attention back to its crumbling realm.

The Legions of Blood and Scintillating Legions had made great gains. But they were not the worst problem anymore. On the Bridge of Fools, an immense army marched to war. The banners of Decay were surrounded by millions of daemon-flies and horrors of plague and epidemics, and behind them, seven Daemon-Princes of the Death Guard had convinced many Plaguebearers to leave the Garden. There were seven Great Unclean Ones, and seven hundred seventy-seven Plague Legions...with more certainly coming, as holes in the aether appeared and disgorged sickness directly on the outskirts of Slaanesh’s domain.

Nurgle had decided to intervene, and now Excess could tremble.

**The Abyss of Dreams**

**Fifteen hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

From the moment she had been elevated to the Planetary Governorship of Nyx, Taylor had been careful to keep the promises and the oaths she made in public and private. It wasn’t just because the previous administration had been fond of changing the terms of a contract every time it suited them, though she wasn’t going to pretend anything which emphasized the difference between herself and the Menelaus dynasty was a bad thing from her point of view. The people who worked under her deserved to know what she would and wouldn’t do if they broke their part of the agreements tying their businesses together.

Thus when she had negotiated Rakarth’s death against a brand new arena for Lelith Hesperax, Taylor had every intention to fulfil her part of the bargain. Frankly, it helped that according to the staff she had assigned to bounty-analysis on the *Enterprise*, the sum of money the Imperium promised to anyone who could put down Rakarth for good was absolutely indecent. And the parahuman General knew the Heracles Wardens and the Iron Drakes had terminated plenty of clones by themselves. It would be child’s play to claim Rakarth had been eliminated on her command; seen from a certain perspective, it was the truth after all.

And then she could spend a few billion for a big arena and the security which went with it, and use the rest of the resources and the money to accelerate the modernisation of the Nyx Sector and give a large boost to its economy.

No one had warned her, however, that the Queen of Blades had the behaviour of a primadonna, at least where her arenas were concerned.

“The entrance will need three statues at least ten metres tall and the eyes will need to be emeralds.” The red-haired Eldar declared, and then disappeared again in the darkness to slay more abominations.

The commander of Army Group Caribbean rolled her eyes. She knew better than to comment through the speak-casters of her power armour what she thought of Hesperax’s ego. In spite of the ruckus caused by demons, debris, and many falling objects inside the Abyss of Dreams, the Eldar appeared to be able to hear everything she muttered or whispered, and the ‘punishments’ did not take long to follow. The first time, the silvery platform had disappeared, and it had not been recreated since.

Taylor had been two words away from cursing the Queen of Blades lengthily, before realising that it would be a waste of time. At best, she would amuse the blade-mistress. At worst, she would irritate a being which had a good chance of being far older than the Emperor and that no parahuman could realistically hope to escape from.

Besides, the Abyss of Dreams continued to get more and more dangerous, whether you took the appearance of new demons into consideration or not. The tendrils of solid darkness were everywhere at once, and the sort of ‘hurricane’s eye’ trapping them was visibly shrinking significantly; it couldn’t take more than a few minutes to ‘explore’ the prison of night while flying at a leisurely pace.

Good news, more and more of her insects were finding themselves sucked up in what increasingly looked like an unholy mix between hurricane and maelstrom of darkness. Bad news, most of these insects weren’t able to fly, so the only utility she could find for them was to kill them and take their energy to give herself a few more hours of endurance. The concept left a bad taste in her mouth, but it wasn’t like she’d found any alternatives, and frankly, even with her parahuman power plenty of insects got shredded as she took control of them.

“The Abyss of Dreams is going to be deactivated soon,” the Eldar blade-mistress glided next to her on a psychic rope that even a professional equilibrist would have in all likelihood found insanely dangerous. “If the activation process is still reliable, the parties involved in the activation will be forced to feed sixteen thousand souls to the Great Ocean in a thousand heartbeats or so, and the soul-bargain will get worse from there.”

Since she didn’t have any other ‘Eldar expert’ on hand, the insect-mistress had to rely on this –relatively – optimistic assertion.

“And when they do deactivate the Abyss of Dreams?”

“It will take between three and six of your hours for the darkness barrier to fall down. Oh and I want the fireworks animation to be spectacular. Not the cheap items the mud-classes of your civilisation are entertained with.”

“**WEEAAAVVVEEER! You have nowhere left to hide! I, Lushcrix Lashtongue, am going to bring your soul to the Dark Prince**!”

The abomination which had emerged above them was like all servants of Excess: its very sight generating instinctive disgust and revulsion. Eyes, breasts, and maws were all in the wrong places, and of course, there was that vomit-inducing pink colour. Seriously, by the time this was over not seeing anything in pink or light purple was going to be a relief.

“The only power you have over human souls is the one their owners have chosen to give you,” she retorted to the slave of Chaos as one of her Sonora Bees stabbed it with its large stinger in what should be the neck. “And I choose to give you none.”

Of course, this was the moment more demons decided this was the perfect time to be sucked into the Abyss of Dreams.

And this time there were a lot of winged abominations and Greater Daemons...at first. The Queen of Blades once again threw herself into the battle, and Taylor only had to attack the survivors.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Eight hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**First Naval Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

There were moments when Wolfgang Bach preferred dealing with the Necrons. It wasn’t because he particularly enjoyed the presence of Destruction-Overlord Sitkah; at the best of times, the icy politeness of the xenos reminded him that the metallic xenos long ago abandoned most of the preoccupations humanity fought for.

For the moment though, the Necrons had a rigid hierarchy – if one didn’t count Trazyn the Infinite – and since the assault on Commorragh had begun, they had not played political games with the humans. They were also busy razing Mar’lych and everything trying to impede their fighting retreat, so one could argue they were vital from a strategic and tactical perspective.

The same, unfortunately, couldn’t be said about certain officers of the Imperial Navy.

“You are taking dangerous liberties with the privileges which have been granted to you, *First Secretary*,” the low-pitched voice of Admiral von Kisher echoed on the bridge of the *Enterprise* and no doubt countless others, as the superior officers not on the frontlines were able to hear the content of the hololithic conference.

It should also be noted the words First Secretary had been uttered like a curse. No doubt that if he had not had a formal title, the commander of the Ultima 70th Battlefleet would have tried to call him Ensign or Midshipman – the ranks his time at the Naval Academy of Kar Duniash had granted him.

Wolfgang stared at this figure in blue, lengthening the period of silence. The young man didn’t like what he saw. The blue uniform was covered with so many decorations that it could have likely stopped a shot from a laspistol if all the metal was used for protective purposes. It was all according to regulations, of course. But a bit of humility had never hurt anyone, and when most of the people watching this council of war had a few minutes ago been busy organising the evacuation operations or trying to assess the magnitude of their losses, arriving in parade uniform was not likely to endear you to most commanders already present on-site.

“Is he?” the two words were uttered loudly, and nearly everyone turned their eyes in the direction of their speaker. “First Secretary Wolfgang Bach is doing exactly what his Lady has ordered him to do until she returns.”

The jaw of von Kisher trembled and his brown eyes narrowed, but the Admiral didn’t dare open his mouth to counter the words which had been spoken. It would take a very brave man to naysay the Great Khan of the White Scars Chapter, after all.

“We acknowledge the laws of the Imperial Navy to police and command its own squadrons,” continued Hibou Khan, who, in his massive white armour and with a gigantic hawk perched on his shoulder, looked like a warlord of the old legends brought back to life. “But it only grants you command of the Navy starships.”

August von Kisher didn’t quite look like someone was extracting his teeth one at a time, but he was not far from that point. As arrogant as the curly-haired Battlefleet commander was, he had no doubt studied the order of battle and knew the only Navy warship above a light cruiser’s tonnage in the Port of Lost Souls which was not part of the Ultima 70th was von Schafer’s Grand Cruiser, the *Indomitable Resolution*.

There were other units, but the overwhelming majority were destroyers and frigates, and most of them had already formed their own arrangements to fill the holes created by the Eldars’ ravages.

“Lady Weaver trusts First Secretary Bach,” the Golden Sons’ Space Marine commanding the Battle-Barge *Sanguinius’ Light* added. “I have no reason to believe her trust has been misplaced. The space forces of the Blood will obey the orders issued by the *Enterprise* until the General chooses to rescind them.”

Wolfgang nodded in silent gratitude. He already had the support of Hediatrix and the other Archmagi to back his decisions, but having another Battle-Barge and fourteen Strike Cruisers to make his position unassailable was far from unwelcome.

“A single commander who is familiar with the battlefield and has a prepared set of tactics to employ is better than ten who must fight in the unknown,” Hibou Khan declared. “The White Scars are in agreement with the sons of Sanguinius.”

Had he been in private, the blonde-haired son of the Bach family would have breathed a sigh of relief. The White Scars’ fleet was powerful, boasting the two Battle-Barges *Jaghatai’s Pride* and the *Star Hunter*. In addition they also had six Strike Cruisers faster than any other capital ship currently mustered in the Port, and fifteen smaller escorts. Not to mention their reputation and influence. The Salamanders were one thing, but the sons of the Khan had even more prestige among all the Adeptuses of the Imperium.

“The Black Templars are with you and the Living Saint,” the representative of the Black Templars stated, a Marshal representing the crews of three Strike Cruisers.

One by one the other Space Marines’ captains present echoed them, though in most cases it was a formality as the Salamanders, Howling Griffons, and Silver Skulls were by now solidly integrated into the order of battle.

The only unknown had been the Novamarine Strike Cruiser which had emerged from the Warp ahead of the main fleet, but the blue-ivory Captain commanding it supported Wolfgang without reservation.

Now the question was what von Kisher was going to do, since all the other components of the fleet, including Frateris Templar, Inquisition, and Adeptus Mechanicus, had been unwilling to recognise him as supreme commander for the battle to come.

“Your...defiance against proper Imperial regulations is recorded and will be reported to the highest authorities,” the Admiral didn’t spit the words out, but his poise wasn’t far from breaking. And with those words the communication between the *Enterprise* and the *Invincible* ended.

“That man is going to be a problem in the battle to come,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami pointed out once the council of war ended.

“I know,” Wolfgang confessed. “But it isn’t like I can completely ignore him.” Ignoring the political problems certain venerable Admirals at Kar Duniash and elsewhere were likely to cause no matter what, August von Kisher’s Ultima 70th Battlefleet was no small amount of firepower.

The self-proclaimed ‘Hero of the Heraklion Crusade’ had sailed to Pavia with his full Battlefleet, and this meant no less than *seven* of these ‘Fast Battleships’ were forming the fleet’s core: *Invincible* (flagship), *Inflexible*, *Indomitable*, *Indefatigable*, *Implacable*, *Immortal Emperor*, and *Lion.* There were two Mars-class Battlecruisers, the *Champion of Kar Duniash* and the *Domination’s Pride*. And of course, there were seventeen first-rate cruisers, fourteen lesser cruisers, and over sixty frigates and destroyers, some of which had been gathered from the various naval attachments rushing to Pavia.

“We can only hope the Admiral Bakka sends us is going to be more reasonable,” the First Secretary commented before returning to the immense volume of things he needed to coordinate. The Tempestus 13th Battlefleet was as they spoke accelerating to reach the Eversprings Gate and its first elements should begin to transit within two hours.

They should be the last reinforcements that could possibly reach them in time for the apocalypse. There were only six hours and twenty minutes left until the Dolmen Seal deactivated, and all Astropaths and Navigators regularly sent reports that the Warp was in fury around Pavia.

 “It will be difficult to be less,” Sagami retorted.

Wolfgang grimaced and then turned his gaze to the tunnels leading to the Port of Lost Souls. He wasn’t very religious, but more than ever he prayed the Basileia was going to return as soon as possible. Most of what he was doing was pure improvisation, and Lady Weaver had not shared her thoughts with him on a multitude of issues...

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

**Eight hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

The end of the Abyss of Dreams was not calm or peaceful. Black lightning tried to electrocute and devour everything. The tendrils were tripling in numbers over and over, killing her insects faster than she could take control of them. Demons were massacred by the thousands. The notions of ‘up’ and ‘down’ became difficult to establish.

And then it was finally over. The realm of night expelled them, and immediately Taylor was very happy to have golden wings, otherwise, the speed with which they were ejected from the prison would have ensured she crashed upon what remained of the ground of Zel’harst.

And this landing would have been a death sentence, even assuming the impact didn’t kill her instantly.

The war zone underneath her was covered in demons, and their very presence was so disgusting that, even protected by the Emperor’s golden aura, the insect-controlling parahuman felt the urge to vomit.

Her arrival, needless to say, didn’t go unnoticed.

“**DEATH TO WEAVER! DEATH TO WEAVER! DEATH TO WEAVER!”**

It was an ocean of hatred and loathing, one from which nothing good could come.

It was Excess in all its decadence and its worst appearance. The demons likely knew they couldn’t influence her with glamours and illusions, and so they didn’t even try. The Greater Daemons and the lesser things as a consequence were masses of claws, tentacles, pincers, fangs, eyes, and maws that bore no likeness to any animal or sapient being.

These were the legions of evil, and they only answered to a single master: the Ruinous Power of Excess.

The abominations had also grown overconfident. Many of her insects, cut off from her power, had dug tunnels and hidden beneath the ground. Judging by their large numbers, the slaves of Chaos, be they corrupted Eldar or mere demons, had failed to pursue them.

Now the General of the Imperial Guard made them rue this mistake. The Helspiders re-emerged under the captive suns of Zel’harst, followed by a new small army of arthropods and other Commorragh-born insects.

The battle which had ceased upon the activation of the Abyss of Dreams resumed instantly, and the demons shrieked in pain and indignation as hundreds were banished from existence.

“**YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE SLAANESH! YOU WILL SUFFER**!”

“**SUFFER! SUFFER! DEATH TO WEAVER! DEATH TO WEAVER**!

Reality itself seemed to distort as an endless wave of ugly pink gathered on the horizon, engulfing everything. To her stupefaction, Taylor realised the grounds and the air were filled with so many demons it was difficult to know where each individual creature of the Warp begun and where it ended.

It took her less than five seconds to decide staying in the air was nothing but a quick way to commit suicide. The parahuman was going to escape through her insect tunnels. There at least Excess had not sent its armies.

The entire demonic tide shrieked in an unholy cacophony.

The corruption of the Warp receded.

And Taylor fell to her knees, as unimaginable power surged everywhere.

Her whole world became silver. The entire battlefield was bathed in silvery light. It was difficult to think or breathe. The demons were dying in droves like they were bathed in acid.

The sensation was horrifying. It was like she was nothing but a fly before a god-like entity.

“My apologies, my Empress...but this is my true power.” The Queen of Blades was suddenly there. Or had she been always there and her power severed reality to not be seen? A smirk appeared on the ageless face. “But if I fought seriously like this, no one would ever dare challenge me.”

Taylor tried to rise, but her body was too heavy...or was it the heavy psychic pressure which was too great?

“Shush, little Queen, stay on your knees for a few minutes. I have two messages for you to relay to your Anathema-Emperor.”

“I’m listening,” Taylor managed to gasp.

“Good,” Lelith Hesperax smiled. “The first, obviously, is that I’m very satisfied with the skills you provided for one of my spars. It has been thousands of cycles since I was offered such a distraction from boredom.”

Around them, the demonic tide was dying. Millions of demons were attacking relentlessly, but the moment they came into contact with the Eldar’s power, they were collapsing in non-feigned agony.

“And the second?”

“If he dares authorise another invasion of the Webway without my permission, I will personally kill him.”

From any other Eldar, Taylor would have treated this threat as further proof of their monumental arrogance. But from her, the words rang true and with an implacable finality.

The Queen of Blades was not joking at all. She would really go to Terra...and for all the strength of the Custodes, the black-haired parahuman didn’t know if the Watchers of the Throne could stop her.

“I will...deliver the messages. Don’t expect to be thanked for it.”

“No, I suppose not. But there are games I won’t tolerate any repetition of. Now go. I will come to inaugurate my arena when I’m informed it’s ready.”

The pressure diminished, and Taylor took flight. The further she was away from this monster, the better for her health.

Behind her, the winged and non-winged demons screamed in fury, but were unable to do more as silver blades struck everywhere.

**The Queen of Blades**

Aenaria watched the little Queen of the Swarm leave with conflicted feelings. Assuming there had been noble flatterers in the vicinity, these mediocre sires would have proclaimed her decisions were obviously perfect and farsighted.

But was it really the best decision?

This child was *dangerous*. Through her actions, Commorragh had been destroyed, and for all the timing and the disastrous defence of the Dynasts, the Arena-Queen knew that not everything could be blamed on her species’ arrogance and willingness to backstab each other at the worst possible moment.

The swarm under her control was extremely versatile, and it had taken the activation of one of the most destructive weapons of the Aeldari Empire to force her out of her comfort zone. Millions of degenerate Drukhari had fallen to the swarm, and the aftershocks both in realspace and the aether were going to be immense.

And all of this had been done under the guidance of a young female who was barely a toddler by Aeldari standards.

This was why she hesitated. Yes, Taylor Hebert was an opponent worthy of sparring with her. But what would she be in a cycle or two? The Queen of Blades had seen through the miniature dimension in the human’s brain. She had been very subtle, in order to not allow the golden aura to perceive her intrusion. And what she had seen concerned her. The little Queen had been tethered to a worm-like administrating power, but the light pouring into her was changing this.

To use an insect metaphor, the moment the larva started building its chrysalis would approach soon. Two more battles would be sufficient to amplify the data-psychic stream and her skills, if the battle fought in the Dark City could be used as a gauge.

What would come out once the basic human nature was transcended by golden Anathema energy? That even Aenaria didn’t know. Only one being did, and the exiled Aeldari Princess didn’t think the question would be answered assuming she made the trip to voice it.

The veteran of the War in Heaven readjusted the ribbon holding her crimson hair with her left hand, while with Ala’ra in her right she made sure more and more of the Yr’xar were sent right to She-Who-Thirsts’ palace. Their servility and vileness deserved nothing else anyway.

A million cycles ago, she would have killed the little Queen once she’d had her moment of fun, that much Aenaria could be honest with herself about. The human was too dangerous. Too wild. Improperly educated. In possession of one of the most dangerous ancient blades. *Elsar’bryn* was not the most dangerous of the Swords of Vaul, but it was not an inoffensive child’s toy either.

And Taylor Hebert, Queen of the Swarm, had allied herself with Phaerakh Neferten and Trazyn the Arch-Thief.

On the list of ‘things which are never supposed to happen’, this was a high-ranked one.

In memory of her oaths to the Aeldari Empire, Aenaria should have killed her.

The Empire, however, had rejected her and destroyed itself. It had destroyed itself so badly that the same human could claim the broken crown of the Phoenix Throne.

In this age, she was Lelith Hesperax. And in the end, the Queen of Blades knew she had already made her choice before their duel began.

“It will be the Age of Weaver. And the Primordial Annihilator and the descendants of our folly will pay the price.”

And she would get a far grander and more beautiful arena. It was a fruitful day of negotiations, no?

The baleful energies of the Empyrean pulsed, and she felt the attention of She-Who-Thirsts, a loathsome gaze trying in vain to pierce her blade-domain.

“Which reminds me. I have one last appointment before leaving the Dark City.”

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

To describe the situation as desperate wouldn’t have been totally accurate with the last two undamaged Warlords standing guard over the last line of defence, but the situation was getting worse and worse. Even Space Marines tired after hours and hours of uninterrupted fighting, and half of the Astartes present had held the line for over a dozen hours, never faltering, defending each line like it was the last one before the tunnels linking Zel’harst and the Port of Lost Souls.

Except this time, it truly was the last wall. And ammunition levels were low.

The Black Templars barely noticed. Sometimes, Gavreel really envied their fanaticism. The crusaders of Sigismund didn’t bother assessing if charging to stop enemy breakthroughs was the tactically sound thing to do; they went in nonetheless, to the great despair of some Mechanicus artillerists who saw their grand plans completely smashed apart.

The end of the battle came, as it usually did, without warning.

The hordes of Chaos shrieked and launched diatribes filled with insults and lies that no one bothered listening to anyway. And then the enormous army tried to turn away.

It was a most grievous error, as in the next seconds Ancient Pierre led a sally with two Dreadnoughts of the Blood, and the Salamanders punished the daemons with a terrible Volkite volley.

In most circumstances, this would have convinced any enemy to turn back and face the wrath of the Space Marines. Today, it didn’t.

Gavreel and the rest of the Astartes rearguard had only ten seconds to wonder why. Then the army of Helspiders and the insect clouds reappeared on the auspexes and the forces of the Imperium roared in triumph.

The crippling losses and the exhaustion of this never-ending battle were not forgotten, but they in this moment became lighter and lighter in their hearts.

“SOLDIERS OF THE GOD-EMPEROR!” the Emperor’s Champion of the Black Templars roared. “TERRA STANDS! NO PITY!”

“NO REMORSE! NO FEAR!”

One hundred and fifty tanks of the reserve, led by the *Obsidian Chariot*, charged to join the slaughter of abominations.

And it would be a one-sided carnage, Gavreel knew it in his bones and his two hearts.

Caught in a disintegrating volcanic plain and with nowhere to hide, the monsters and their Eldar pets were trapped between the small anvil of the Space Marines and the hammer of the insect swarm.

What happened next was vengeance pure and simple. Volkite and plasma cannons tore apart the daemonic formations, and the two Warlord Titans poured unbridled fury into their Volcano bombardments.

The Space Marines knew victory was at hand. The xenos and their Ruinous patrons weren’t so sure. And as the lies choked their heretical throats, a figure of light descended from the smoke-filled sky. The shrieks doubled in intensity, and Gavreel laughed, scything the horrors of the Empyrean by twos and threes with his trusty old sword.

The battle after that did not take more than a few minutes. More daemonic hosts were coming far to the east, but for all their celerity the enemy was going to arrive too late.

Gavreel went on one knee as his Lady landed in front of him. Her golden armour was not in a pleasant state to behold. There were plenty of battle-scars, the personal shield was obviously fried, and most of the paint and the decorations were only still visible because the golden aura seemed to have a sort of cleaning effect against the dust, slime and blood which had dirtied it.

“Sorry, I’m late.” Taylor Hebert said neutrally. “I’m afraid I got lost on the road of life.”

Gavreel could not help but laugh.

“Lost bet with your Second Naval Secretary?”

“No, I won this one. Dennis said I wouldn’t ever be able to use it in the middle of a battle...”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Exalted Cathedral of the Mighty Iconoclastic Cult**

**Five hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Sergeant Kraas Theomor**

The Exalted Cathedral, contrary to what its name might suggest, was not particularly exalted. Then again, the Mighty Iconoclastic Cult was not particularly ‘Mighty’ either.

The Iconoclastic Brotherhood had been a rather unimpressive Host enforcing the orders of the Dark Council before the Third Black Crusade. The heart of its force had been four hundred and forty-four Astartes, until the fateful day when the Dark Apostle leading them was commanded to throw his faithful chosen against the defences of the Cadian Gate. To this day, the Dark Council was advocating everything had proceeded according to the plan of the Long War, and trying to voice an opposing opinion was treason and would be treated as such by the Apostles.

The Iconoclasts survivors, unfortunately for the Dark Council, had had a very different view of the debacle, and had never returned to Sicarus, becoming an independent warband in their own right.

The ‘Exalted Cathedral’ had thus suffered the same fate as every location which had the misfortune of attracting the enmity of the Dark Council: its slaves had been seized and redistributed to more favoured Hosts, the few Legionnaires who had stayed were tortured for the sins of their departed brothers, and the infrastructure was abandoned to the whims of the True Gods until the time would be right to build something new atop its ruins.

There was no shortage of projects for cathedrals, and the few which collapsed were always replaced by more. Thus it had always been on the holy soil of Sicarus, if you drank the words of the Dark Council like the slaves out in realspace drank the lies of the False-Emperor’s agents.

Kraas Theomor had lost all care for such things long ago. Time had no meaning in the Eye of Terror, but he remembered participating in no less than forty major campaigns against other Legionnaires, and likely ten times that number of skirmishes and small engagements. Before that, he had fought on Terran soil, and before that the Shadow Crusade which had devastated Ultramar. He was old enough to have known the Legion when their ranks had worshipped the God-Emperor. He had retained his memories, and they were accurate enough to be disgusted at what the Vile One and the Lying Cardinal had transformed the Seventeenth Legion into.

Kraas Theomor was a soldier, not a dark monk of the Gods. Alas, in the period following the Siege, the Legion had begun to be taken over by priests and monks. Prayers were more important than the bolters. Saying the right words at the right time was considered more advantageous than three or four battles won.

This was why, when he had been demoted from Coryphaus to mere battle-brother, Kraas had not protested. What good would it have done? The old Dark Apostle and himself had a working relationship. He had none with the arrogant killer who had murdered his former superior in a monstrous display of treachery and sorcery. Kraas could have tried to climb back up the ranks, impale eight hundred eighty-eight slaves on top of a cathedral, swear vengeance, ritually summon the Neverborn, and sacrifice plenty of souls. But for what?

The more time passed in the Eye, the more the leadership of the Word Bearers became something to stay away from. The old Legionnaire had been willing to fight to return to a rank of Sergeant and garrison ‘holy sites’ which were as far away as he could stay from the Dark Council and the important players of Sicarus. He had not been willing to do more than that.

“Welcome to the Exalted Cathedral, Great Master” growled a prostrated thing which must have been a mortal at some point but now sprouted five tentacles on its back and ten eyes all over its body. “We were awaiting your coming with great impatience!”

As the mutant opened its mouth to reveal many, many fangs and blades, Kraas drew his bolter and began to fire. A couple of seconds later, the creatures which had not received a bolter shell to the head were fleeing.

“Was that really necessary, Sergeant?” taunted the sickening Acolyte one Dark Apostle had attached to him for the duration of this mission. “Surely you’re not afraid of a few wretches of its kind!”

Kraas didn’t respond to the mockery. There was no use wasting his saliva for this imbecile. Since Sicarus had become the new homeworld of the Seventeenth Legion, the ancient veteran had seen thousands of this type, all convinced that, because they had been elevated into the ranks of the Sons of Lorgar, the keys of the galaxy were handed to them. From vast personal experience, Kraas knew this wasn’t the case. These sad imitations of true Legionnaires lasted exactly the time the Gods were amused by their atrocities and behaviour, and then died, generally in a horrible manner.

“I have a mission,” he grunted back. “These wretches are minor obstacles on my way to accomplishing it. Nothing more, nothing less.”

The progression after this was particularly tense. Despite the helmet, Kraas could tell the Acolyte was still glaring at him, and obviously, he wasn’t stupid enough to leave his back be exposed to this assassin-in-waiting.

It was also a slow progression. The mutants after a few demonstrations of force knew better than to oppose their march, but the cathedral had been twisted and re-twisted by the power of the Warp, and eight Space Marines was too small a number to really investigate a monument this large.

Maybe it took hours, or maybe it took seconds, but by the time they reached the badly maintained Webway Gate whose activation had attracted plenty of sorcerous attention, the decrepit circle of xenos technology was long cold.

“Too bad,” said the Dark Acolyte. “I’d have loved to invade the place whose masters dared activating a Gate to Holy Sicarus.”

Kraas didn’t reply to him. The Gate was close to a black altar and a sculpted scene representing a Dark Apostle being blessed with the knowledge of Iconoclast purity – the books being thrown into the pyres and the feathered emissaries of Tzeentch made this self-evident. But there was something wrong here. It was like...

There was a glint of metal, and only his transhuman reflexes allowed him to parry the projectiles with his Legion-issued power sword.

To his surprise, these were not bullets, shells, or even arrows. No, these looked like fragments of green crystal. And they began to shine with the corruption one often associated with the power of the Warp!

“TAKE COVER!” He roared. The entire altar room began to erupt in green explosions before he could obey his own command.

And then he and the seven other Word Bearers heard the battlecries and the squeaks.

Sounds the Eye of Terror and the Seventeenth Legion would learn to hate and loathe utterly until their very last breath.

“MALAL BE PRAISED!”

“PRAISE THE ANARCHY!”

“KILL THE MAN-THINGS! MALAL WILL KNOW ITS OWN!”

“GLORY TO THE SKAVEN! GLORY TO MALAL!”

Kraas fired his bolter at the shadows.

But when he and the other Word Bearers left cover, there was no one left and not even a single corpse to show for the spent ammunition.

“What an abject cowardice!” the Acolyte laughed. “Let’s return to our transport. I see no point in descending into the catacombs to hunt such insignificant creatures. There is nothing left to investigate.”

Kraas Theomor nodded. He was unaware that the equivalent of several days later, he would curse his decision to agree with the Acolyte with his every breath.

The Skaven had arrived on Sicarus, and nothing would ever be the same again.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Three hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

If Anubis wasn’t a Custodes, it was absolutely certain he wouldn’t have been able to get close to Taylor Hebert within ten minutes, or within twenty hours for that matter.

The Captain-General had no great love for the Space Marines in general, but he had to acknowledge they were fiercely protective at the moment. Furthermore, there were two Knights and over a thousand Tech-Priests armed with heavy weaponry to support them.

Any assassin who tried his luck against this sort of firepower was likely not going to get the chance to understand his mistake before he was blasted apart into ten thousand fragments of flesh and bone.

“The withdrawal from Zel’harst is complete and the main tunnel-Gates have been ‘closed’ to the Arch-Enemy,” the representative of the Emperor informed the General. “The losses in materials and men are below the averages estimated by the plan. Your Marshals are organising the last retreat echelons. In twenty minutes, Army Group Caribbean and the survivors of the Desaderian Field Army will all be aboard the military transports and depart for Pavia.”

There were a few exceptions to this rule like the Fay 20th and other formations which were helping the Mechanicus with the tanks and other macro-machines, but that was it. Basically, the ground part of the invasion of Commorragh was at an end.

It was also an overwhelming victory for the Imperium.

He received a tired nod in return, before the golden-winged woman returned to drinking water and eating rations.

“Archmagos Hediatrix sends his compliments and assures you all your forces will be back on the warships and the transports in less than forty-five minutes. The fleets are preparing for battle, though Admiral von Kisher is causing problems.”

The expression of fury stayed on her face for less than two seconds before it was restrained and disappeared, but Anubis had seen enough to know the commander of the Ultima 70th naval force would be particularly lucky if he didn’t survive the battle, for the General had looked ready to give an execution order on the spot.

“I do not have the time to discipline him. As long as he fights and does not cause a disaster, we will care about his arrogance once this battle is over. Plan J?”

“J-1 is on its way via the J-Gate. We can’t send scouts obviously, but the Logis have reaffirmed their certainty it will emerge before the Dolmen Seal deactivates. J-2 is obviously in your hands. As for J-3, I am confident the Arch-Enemy will take the bait.”

It was the last great gamble of the entire invasion of the Webway. Reasonably, the parasite the Eldar race had created must be wary by now. Most of the major and minor objectives had been reported as complete – at a grievous cost in plenty of cases. In four days, the forces of the Imperium had caused terrible damage to the plans of the Arch-Enemy and deprived it of assets which were now totally unrecoverable. Commorragh was a corrupted ruin, and contrary to the lies the parasites told their servants, they could not build splendour from burning wreckage. Chaos was disorderly, inefficient, and unable to rebuild coherently.

The daemons had no reason to rush into the Port of Lost Souls in strength, especially as most of the armies which had fought and bled were going to be out of their reach. True, there were Eldar fleets at the Gates which were going to attack as soon as the Necron machinery ceased operating, but the parasite would eventually devour their souls without lifting a finger.

No, Excess had to be baited into attacking. And the surest means was to reveal J-2 and convince the Arch-Enemy it was the trap when in reality it was only a lesser part of it.

“Are you ready to proceed?”

The young General finished emptying another water container before answering positively.

“I am. Gamaliel, please tell the Magi Biologis to take their machines and the bacta-dispersers away from the cocoon.”

The Dawnbreaker surrounding them closely, the walk was a matter of a couple of minutes until they were in the insect-controller’s range of the tall biological structure the Tech-Priests had watched over and made grow for the better part of three days.

The advance went no further. The Space Marines had a lot of trust in their Lady’s capabilities, but if the structure collapsed without warning, fleeing would be the only salvation.

And it was going to collapse.

It was a cocoon. A wide and tall one. The displays in his helmet indicated a height of approximately twenty metres and a width of three, maybe four metres. And every part of it was moving as a sort of muffled whistle echoed in the distance.

As plenty of the substance called ‘golden bacta’ had been injected and dispersed into it, the cocoon was bright gold now. It was also radiating psychic energy, though there had been no daemonic materialisation to profit from this opportunity. The Warp-anathema property of the Emperor’s power had been absorbed, and now the occupant of the cocoon couldn’t be possessed or influenced by Excess and the other predators of the Empyrean.

One leg was the first thing to pierce the membrane of the cocoon. Then came another. The head emerged, followed by the other legs, the wings and at last the abdomen.

Soon most of its body was free, enough to reveal a lot of details about this huge moth displaying a brilliant gold and green colour. Between the very large abdomen and the disproportionately small head, it had to be twelve metres tall.

“Behold,” the parahuman calling himself ‘Leet’ proclaimed, “the Titanicus Sancta Weaverian Mosura.”

The wings opened a second later, and it was like a new sun had begun to shine in the Port of Lost Souls, the great wings glowing in golden light and projecting it like the beacon of the Astronomican in miniature.

“I will call you Lisa.” Anubis Excelsor had no doubts the words were more for their benefits than the moth’s; hearing the melodious trills made by the moth, its name had been given mind-to-mind, and it approved. “Now fly and show the world how beautiful you are.”

The moth obeyed, to everyone’s relief, and its two hundred metres-long wingspan allowed it to quickly ascend fast over the last Mechanicus bases not fully evacuated.

Being underneath it was like watching a rain of emerald and gold descend from the skies.

Anubis had seen many elegant things in his life, but this gigantic insect was besting a lot of them without effort.

Still, he had a duty, no matter how many people were applauding the successful ‘birth’.

“This is C-1. Finish the evacuation and prepare for the deactivation of the Dolmen Seal.”

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

Had it been in a better mood, Slaanesh would have laughed once the bluff of the puny humans was revealed.

Alas for the Dark Prince, the situation it found itself plunged into wasn’t exactly one where you celebrated the failed gambits of your enemies.

The outer defences of its Palace had been breached. Bloodthirsters and their lesser warriors fought the Daemonettes and Keepers of Secrets in the Circle of Avidity, and so far, the former were massacring the latter.

The Scintillating Legions were rampaging across its realm, pillaging soul-anchors and ruining tens of thousands of plans which should have assured Slaanesh’s dominance in the Great Game.

The Great Unclean Ones of Nurgle were busy bathing in the formerly pink waters of the Gardens of Desires, and their armies spread plagues and pestilence wherever they conquered.

Attacked on all fronts, the forces of She-Who-Thirsts tried to delay the inevitable as long as possible, but unless something radical changed, the defeat was going to be total. The Legions of Excess were weak and dispersed, and as the Imperium’s forces had massacred the Drukhari population so thoroughly the decrease in vigour and lethality was likely to be permanent.

In every Warp Storm worthy of being mentioned, bastions of the Lord of Dark Desires were under attack, and if in a few theatres the Noise Marines and Slaaneshi cultists managed to repel the invaders, they were the exception, not the rule.

The Three had recognised the weakness of Slaanesh, and, like a pack of vicious animals, they were throwing a lot of their Legions at its realm to ensure the Mistress of Excess was never going to be a threat to their supremacy again.

Slaanesh raged and did a lot of unspeakable things to the nearest souls which had the bad timing to be close to its divine presence. In the Materium, hundreds of planets were plagued by nightmares...at the cost of more energy expended.

The Doom of the Aeldari turned its attention back to the Port of Lost Souls and to the tiny light hiding in it.

Weaver. Taylor Hebert. Basileia of Nyx. General of the Imperial Guard. Golden Saint of the Anathema.

Slaanesh wished it could have cursed the line of this upstart primate to an eternity of torment, but the protections of the Anathema held true.

This avenue of vengeance was closed to the Dark Prince, but the mortals had been unable to completely close the entrance to the Port of Lost Souls.

The Legions of Excess had lost a lot of their strength, but there were still over six hundred sixty-six which could be considered near full-strength.

And the Saint was exhausted. This mongrel had fought against the Queen of Blades and many of its own Daemon Princes. It had no superweapons left to alter the fate of the battle with. The naval assets had been strengthened, but there were plenty of Aeldari fools to bleed them. And for all their bluster, it was clear the massive Gate the red robes kept open was bringing no reinforcements. There were zero psychic signatures, and no warship of any tonnage would require such a long time to travel to Commorragh.

The humans had bluffed and bluffed, but their hands were empty.

Tzeentch would have hesitated. Nurgle would have refused to invade on such a short timetable. Khorne would have already sent some disposable vanguard to test the waters.

But Slaanesh was Excess. And at this very moment, the only thing the Aeldari-worshipped entity felt was an excessive desire for vengeance.

“**ENTER THE PORT OF LOST SOULS. KILL WEAVER! KILL THEM ALL!**”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Third Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

A few minutes ago, the hangar bays had been full of tension and prayers as the time to kill the xenos was near. And then they were granted the light in the form of a gigantic flying insect. And it was singing.

Everyone aboard *The Great Quest*, Peregrine Fleet Carrier of His Most Holy Majesty, was watching the luminescent being. Golden Throne, all the fleets were watching. Every move of wings was a cascade of golden scales and every thrill of the song they were allowed to hear seemed to have a soothing effect.

“All right, pilots,” the Commissar in charge of discipline aboard this warship’s section announced. “I’m very glad you appreciate the beauty of the General’s new pet, but there are more important things to do. Return to your flying seats. The long-ears are going to come right for us, and for some reason High Command think they aren’t going to be happy about the redecoration we gave to Commorragh.”

Chuckles and smiles welcomed this long and polite command to return to their military duties, and four minutes later the carrier’s catapult allowed her Thunderbolt to return to the frontlines. There was no enemy in sight for the moment, but given how many hundreds of squadrons were launched by the various Navy and Mechanicus contingents, the Nyx noblewoman knew this wasn’t going to be a problem for much longer.

And then all vox communication died as the gigantic Gate which had stayed active for close to a day let something through its mirror-like surface.

In the first seconds, Freya almost thought it was a Starfort of a type she hadn’t seen before.

This thought quickly died.

The Nyx System had a Ramilies Starfort and it didn’t look like this at all. Nor did any defensive installation look like this. And the size! This thing was bigger than a Ramilies!

It was built to be perfectly symmetrical, with a sort of pyramid on top and a pyramid at the bottom. It was of a dark obsidian colour, which seemed to absorb every source of light.

It was covered in turrets and had some of the biggest and meanest cannons she had ever seen on hololith or with her own eyes.

Suddenly, the reason why they had to move this thing slowly for most of a day became rather obvious in hindsight.

The dot on the tactical display suddenly shifted in a flash, passing from orange to green, denoting this monstrous newcomer was indeed a friend.

And under the small icon, five words appeared.

*Blackstone Fortress* *Will of Eternity*

\*\*\*\*

**Extermination Countdown**

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Uncorrupted Drukhari population in the Webway: approximately 51.6 billion**

**Corrupted Drukhari population in the Webway: approximately 32.1 billion**

**Asuryani killed during the Battle of Commorragh: approximately 1.8 billion**

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**Author’s note**: I promise this was the last cliffhanger for this arc. Yes, really.

The battle and the main plot line of this arc will end next chapter. It will be Extermination 8-5 *The Mark of Commorragh*. There will be two Interludes to show some of the...ahem...explosive consequences of the battle just after that.

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption