This is not an update – 18 August 2022

This is not an update.

Doesn’t the title say so?

You will tell me, with modern art, these days...it isn’t like it’s art.

It’s very modern...relatively speaking.

Oh, well. This is not an update.

**Extinction 11.4**

**Die another Day**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*It was never in our power to win.*

*We were never supposed to win the Siege.*

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

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

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

*It certainly killed something inside me.*

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

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

*And then I left.*

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

*And so I departed.*

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

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

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

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

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

*I learned of Ascension.*

*I learned how Horus had been duped.*

*Yes, Ascension.*

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

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

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

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

*You might laugh.*

*You might scream in anger.*

*But it is the truth.*

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

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

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

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

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

*Mainly because there are no hard rules whatsoever.*

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

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

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

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

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

*Horus was their slave.*

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

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

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

*Horus was arrogant and failed.*

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

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

*But I did.*

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

*Against the Gods.*

*Against the other Legions.*

*Against the Imperium I rebelled from millennia ago.*

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

*They are, of course, utterly wrong.*

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

*That was what had been decreed.*

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

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

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

*Slaanesh wasn’t supposed to die.*

*But it happened.*

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

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

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**EZEKYLE ABADDON**

**‘THE DESPOILER’**

**‘THE BUTCHER OF EL’PHANOR’**

**‘THE WARMASTER OF CHAOS’**

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

**‘HORUS’ HEIR’**

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

**SUPREME COMMANDER OF THE BLACK LEGION**

**APOCALYPTICALLY DANGEROUS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTIVE THREAT**

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

**IF MILITARY HELP INSUFFICIENT FLEE ON SIGHT**

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

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

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**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

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

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“However, it is, ultimately, logical.”

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

“How so?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Taylor didn’t like that. At all.

But given the alternatives...

“And this perspective is?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The *Talon of Horus’* claws tightened brusquely.

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

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

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

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**62 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

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

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

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

“This is a fine mess...”

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

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

“For the Webmistress!”

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

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

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

Gavreel grimaced internally.

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

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

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

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

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

“No, she is not!”

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

“When?” Gamaliel asked in their name.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lelith Hesperax sighed.

“I am not going to repeat myself-“

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Err...”

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

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

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

But the attack to kill Artemis never came.

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

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

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

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

“You would do that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald Aurelia Malys**

“And then Chaos will rule them all.”

Aurelia stopped breathing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aurelia shivered.

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

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

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

For brief seconds, it rained acid and fire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You suspect correctly.”

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

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

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

“I will speak myself, thank you.”

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

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

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

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

Now?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Despoiler didn’t laugh.

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

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

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

“Muses?”

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

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

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

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

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

Horrifyingly informed might be an *understatement*...

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Every Empire needs an Emperor.”

And the Primordial Annihilator’s wrath overwhelmed everything.

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**Fields of Pharsalus**

**62 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Elena Kerrigan**

One hundred and sixty-one.

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

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

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

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

Some had been the commanders of the Word Bearers Host.

Many were not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was both exalting...and troubling.

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

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

“**DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR**!”

Elena jumped.

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

The air began to smell foul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The daemon roared in fury and charged.

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

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

“Every Empire needs an Emperor.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

***I will die today***.

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

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

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

“NO!”

**I will die today**.

*The vision changed.*

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

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

*The Blood Angels did their best but-*

“NO!”

**I will die today**.

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

The battlefield is different this time.

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

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

And then the storm breaks.

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

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

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

**I will die today**.

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

This was an error to touch this shard of Sanguinius.

It was an error to try to assimilate it.

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

It was-

**You will die today.**

Lie. Hope.

**You will die today.**

Lie. Sacrifice.

**You will die today.**

Lie. Administration.

There was Light.

There was a golden chrysalis which emerged from the darkness.

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

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

**YOU WILL DIE TODAY!**

She was the Angel of Sacrifice.

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

By Administration, she ruled the Swarm.

And everything around it was swallowed by darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

The laughter of thirsting abominations arrived to her hears.

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

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

“NO! NO! NO!”

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

Taylor seized it.

There was a thunderous screech.

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

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

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

A very vigorous bombardment of artillery.

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

“I’m sorry! I thought-“

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

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

She had an inappropriate urge to laugh.

No, this would have to wait.

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

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

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

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

“My name is Taylor Hebert.”

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

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

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

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

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

And right now, they could do absolutely nothing.

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

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**63 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Yvraine Kaydinn**

The slaves of the Primordial Annihilator weren’t supposed to return to their original body once they had been discarded like trash.

That was all Yvraine could think as she the giant in bronze armour relay orders to his troops and prepare new rituals to summon the creatures hurling themselves against the Veil.

Before it happened, the young Asuryani had been nearly certain the humans were going to win. The defenders were outnumbering their enemies largely, and they constantly received reinforcements.

The shadow spread by the monsters was no longer there, and it had caused massive casualties since the soldiers not serving the Primordial Annihilator had not placed their gifted units on the frontlines, in order to preserve them from the worst secondary effects of the Devourer’s aura.

But the humans would have won nevertheless.

The first strikes had been mildly successful, but once the artillery on the walls reacted and the rare breakthroughs were stopped and then the vanguard of the enemy was annihilated, the vile foes had no more tricks to play with.

Or so it had appeared during that cycle.

Unfortunately, it seemed she had been wrong.

“We need to prepare a plan to strike this being the humans call a Primarch,” Yvraine said to the only Alaitoc Ranger who had followed her across this hellish battlefield of trenches and grim death, “we can’t allow him to complete his rituals, Asuryan only knows what this enemy is-“

The world shuddered.

Yvraine froze and tried to observe what could have-

The Primordial Annihilator’s lesser entities were hateful. They always desired the enslavement or the death of all other living races.

But this time, it was not a mere scream of hatred which shook the Veil and the very fabric of reality.

It was a howl of absolute loathing.

“By Isha, what could have possibly-“

Yvraine had no time to answer...or to do anything really.

Without warning, there was something burning in her chest.

It was not too painful, but it was as if the ashes of a fire had suddenly been rekindled.

This sensation...she had felt it before...different yet similar...the annihilation of Commorragh...the Second Fall.

*Weaver.*

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

This was not a mental blow, but the words shook the real and the aetheric.

It was not a question, or an invitation to debate.

It was a message which was unsubtle in the extreme.

It was a command, and they could submit or die.

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

The second blow was more powerful, and the warmth in her chest grew more painful.

And Yvraine acknowledged that of all the choices she could make...this one maybe could bring some measure of hope.

Maybe this was why Aurelia Malys had seemed so desperate the last time she had seen the Herald?

And maybe it was why the Queen of Blades was so amused.

Yvraine bent the knee ritually, and spoke the words no Asuryani, Drukhari or any descendant of the long-dead Aeldari Empire had ever spoken outside of the Harlequin performances after the First Fall.

“Under the Light of One Billion Moons, I waited. Behind the Gates of Crystal I slept. Over the Bridges of Shadow I danced. Before the Phoenix Throne I knelt. I swear fealty to the new Empress. Long be her reign.”

The Ranger next to her at first looked at her like she was completely mad...but the sensations were as powerful for those who followed a Path than those who didn’t, and it wasn’t long before he knelt and repeated the oath of allegiance.

“LET THE GALAXY BURN!”

The Primordial Annihilator vented its fury, and the Veil tore apart, allowing the Hosts of War, Decay, and Change to pour onto the battlefield in uncountable numbers.

**Macragge System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**63 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Leet**

Leet was in awe of Leman Russ.

He hadn’t known it before today, but now that he had met the Primarch, the Tinker realised he had always wanted to meet a super space-Viking!

That was the kind of man romance one had to enjoy at least once in his life!

And yes, he had the Slayers to back him on this one.

The Primarch of the Space Wolves was a King of wolves...and bears.

Yeah, the name of the Legion was ‘Space Wolves’, but for some reason, the Space Marines they had brought today had a lot more giant polar bears than they had of lupine creatures to ride. And that assumed you considered their ‘mounts’ true wolves.

Leet, in his humble opinion, disagreed totally with that point of view. The bears looked like bears, even if they were the size of tanks.

But wolves didn’t look like that. Hookwolf, the Empire’s favourite enforcer and lesser terror of Brockton Bay, looked more like a wolf than those enormous animals.

It wasn’t just a question of size; you could multiply by ten the size of the wolves he had seen many years ago on some documentaries, the wolves wouldn’t be like those mammoth-big creatures.

These weren’t wolves, they were mutants.

There was no wolf on Fenris, save the Space Marines trying to growl like them.

Change his mind.

“YOU DEPRIVED AN ENTIRE ARMY OF ITS COMMANDER AT A CRITICAL MOMENT! I SHOULD CUT YOUR LONG-EARS AND CALL IT A DAY!”

“You would be dead the moment you gave the order, *barbarian*.”

Leman Russ bared his teeth, and suddenly, Leet felt really, really weak in the knees.

Was it normal, doctor?

Or was it due to the way the crimson-haired Eldar moved and used silver sorcery?

“Well, I am going to hold the walls, since you have a mess of those things. The Tyranids are coming, and with their aerial units destroyed-“

“I destroyed one million enemies,” the Queen of Blades purred. “I think I deserve a ‘yes, Mistress Lelith, you are simply the greatest’. And yes, you’re welcome, barbarian King.”

Leet thought the gritting of the teeth getting so loud it could break glass was a myth, but the sound which came from Russ’ mouth proved there was some truth behind the tale.

“As I was saying, I am taking command.”

“No.”

Bears and not-wolves growled.

The Primarch’s charisma, already...err...okay, Leet at that moment wanted to beg him to command them...it was...he had to go the toilets soon...

“Your defences are in disarray.” The Lord of the Space Wolves...scowled.

“That doesn’t give you the right to command me,” the Ultramarine Captain who had decided to deny the ‘request’ hotly retorted.

“You recognised the authority of Weaver on Ardium’s soil.”

“Of course.” The blue-armoured Space Marine said stoically, despite having the muzzle of a tank-sized animal trying to sniff his right arm. “But Weaver has been nothing but respectful, and her metallic swarm has been an extremely useful contribution without which would have failed. And this swarm, I might add, continuously help us, thank to her lieutenant arachnids.”

“Compliments accepted.” A spider which managed to equal the bears in size – but for some reason hid behind the Dawnbreaker Guard – replied joyously. “All praise the Webmistress!”

There must have been...a lot of changes to Nyx, since they had departed.

And for a reason he couldn’t identify, Leet suddenly wondered if a conversation with their terrifying warlord-boss was really the most frightening thing he could look forwards to.

Suddenly having a Tech-Priest as a ‘protector-overseer’...err...maybe he hadn’t been that unlucky?

“Your walls have been overwhelmed once. Your defensive tactics, especially if they are based on your easily predictable Codex, will utterly fail against xenos which can analyse and exploit your weaknesses.”

“That’s why we have the Swarm of Lady Weaver to scout ahead and warn us of the enemy’s plans...and the firepower of the Eldar to counter the bigger Tyranids.”

The Ultramarine had just finished his answer that all Eldar, save the most dangerous female – who looked at everyone wondering if any of them would last a second in a fight with her – all fell to the ground babbling some nonsensical words.

Some were prostrated. Others were...they were praying?

Oh, right, his mistake. The Queen of Blades wasn’t the only one to be standing and clearly unaffected.

The clowns were immobile and silent.

And then Lelith Hesperax began to laugh hysterically.

“What is so funny, Eldar?” Leman Russ growled.

“Nothing you need to be concerned, barbarian, nothing...it was supposed to be a jest! A jest!”

The immortal alien wasn’t able to utter more words before laughing – unless it was purring? – again.

Finally the hysterical sound-purr ended. The clowns had yet to move a single eyebrow.

It was like...they had all been transformed into statues. But they were breathing, so they weren’t dead, right?

The long sword which had to be the perfect twin of Sephiroth’s blade was drawn out of its long scabbard.

“The Emperor is dead.” The Queen of Blades proclaimed, as new ground forces of Tyranids advanced to eat everyone and everything. “Long live the Empress.”

**The Warp**

***Give them back. Give back everything.***

The malevolent entities of the Warp that billions worshipped as ‘the Chaos Gods’ would have been extremely angry being forced to listen to this order alone.

*They* were the ones giving the orders.

Whether the living things wallowing in the filth of the Materium worshipped them or not, when it came to direct confrontations, the Four expected the mortals to beg.

Long supplications, desperate prayers, and miserable realisation of their own insignificance were also accepted, of course.

Giving them orders?

Oh, no. That wasn’t tolerated.

At all.

And in general, the insolent wretches making this mistake once were immediately and viciously punished by an eternity of psychic torture.

They were the Masters of the Sea of Souls. Gork and Mork may cause them some headaches from time to time, but since the Eldar Gods had been devoured by Slaanesh, the main opposition had been provided by the human Anathema...who had paid dearly for this defiance.

Really, they had nothing to fear.

And besides, the Three – the Beast of Anarchy was hardly in the same league – were so powerful there was really no way for anyone to force them to do anything.

Until today.

Until Weaver gave them an order.

Before today, they could have easily dismissed it and fought back.

Before this moment, the Ruinous Powers could have found a parade.

But now, it was too late.

They had swallowed the bait, after the death of Slaanesh.

Three out of Four had not bothered their good fortune watching the lone Aspects of the fallen Goddess who had been Excess.

They had tried merging one Shard into their very core, betting on the assurance the imbalance of their symbolic numbers would not last long, and that the influence increase more than justified the risk.

And for an eternity or for years, it appeared the gamble had been won...until it wasn’t.

The Ruinous Powers didn’t know if it was Cegorach or the Human Anathema who had engineered this trap...and to be honest, they really didn’t care.

They loathed both beings, in the end.

And promises of vengeance could wait for another day.

For now, they had to acknowledge defeat. They had to get rid of Slaanesh’s Aspects.

It was that, or **Sacrifice** one of their pre-Commorragh Aspects.

And **Sacrifice** was definitely part of their enemy’s arsenal.

They had absorbed something Aeldari, and Weaver had gained a new title.

The order was galling to hear, and the very thought of obeying it was infuriatingly maddening.

But the consequences of not obeying would result in them being perpetually desynchronized from one or several of their own Aspects.

The magnitude of the possible catastrophe was such there was no real way to know how bad it could be.

And so the Ruinous Powers decided to cut their losses...though as each of the self-proclaimed Chaos God made their move, three of the entities realised one of their own was not as destabilised as they.

The reason why became obvious, as a hole opened next to Khorne’s throne, and **Excess** was thrown away.

Unbridled anger dominated the essences of Tzeentch, Nurgle, and Malal.

The Lord of Skulls had played them, and gained a significant advantage for the game about to begin.

Alas for the Three, it couldn’t be compensated and avenged for the time being.

The Beast of Anarchy seethed, a spectacle disturbing when one spoke about one million rat bodies added to one other in a violation of most biological laws, and then let **Avidity** escape from its claws.

The Grandfather of Decay’s green and putrescent essence shuddered, and then in the very centre of its Garden, Nurgle vomited out **Gluttony**.

In the depths of a Labyrinth, the feathers of an ever-changing bird were severed with nine burning scissors. And thus **Paramountcy** was cast away.

The anger did not lessen as the Shards left the grasp of the Ruinous Powers, great abominations of the Immaterium, and chief tormentors of all living races.

If anything, the mad rage significantly skyrockets to insane levels of hatred.

This was humiliating.

This was not to be.

The fact it could not be immediately erased from reality was another challenge and a sign they had been fooled to diverse degrees.

But not all was lost.

By good luck, the trials of Weaver had brought her into the Eye of Terror, a realm where there were many Champions who had the skill to slay the Champion of the Anathema.

One of them happened was in her presence.

And this time the Four were in no mood to tolerate any insubordination.

The order came, implacable and brutal.

It was heard by their slaves from the Eastern Fringe to the Calyx Hell Stars, and drove thousands of cults to violent suicides in short order.

The Four ignored it, like they had ignored plenty of their plans being shredded to oblivion.

Even the Battle of Macragge was less important than making sure the latest exploit of the human who had dared ordering them would be her last.

**KILL HER! KILL WEAVER!**

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald Aurelia Malys**

It had worked.

Aurelia knew it the moment the shrieking and the explosive screams of rage of the Primordial Annihilator shook the ship.

“I...thank you, my Empress.”

A slight sound she couldn’t interpret escaped the mouth of Weaver.

“I’m not doing it for you...I am enjoy very much kicking the Ruinous Powers where it hurts.” There was a pause. “But your thanks are appreciated.”

More could have been said, but then the first Aspect materialised.

For all her knowledge those Aspects were part of the Eldar Pantheon which had been corrupted by Slaanesh, the young Herald of Atharti couldn’t help but grimace when analysing the essence of **Excess**.

It could not be described as anything but repulsive.

It was a Keeper of Secrets...if a Keeper of Secrets had ever been summoned missing an arm and one leg, was bleeding from countless wounds, had its tongue severed nearly to its base, missed teeth. To say it was an appearance of utter defeat was no exaggeration.

“Shouldn’t it look...half-assimilated?” Aurelia asked in a low tone.

“It should...something is not right.” Weaver acknowledged, before pouring a significant amount of energy into one of her swords, and unleashing it against **Excess**’s ruined form.

And the Chosen of Carnality gaped as the injured remain of Slaanesh was immediately imprisoned in an enormous golden crystal.

“You could do that all along?”

“I can do that now, thanks to the authority I was granted.” The correction was near-instantaneous.

Ah. Well...she wasn’t going to complain.

The second Aspect-Shard was both better and worse.

“**Avidity**...”

Unlike the Keeper-like creature shrieking as it burned in golden flames imprisoned into a giant crystal, there was no need to ask which facet of the Primordial Annihilator had tried to assimilate this one.

It was as if an extremely wealthy being had been conjured, the hand-claws disappearing under the weight of rings, and the rest of the ‘body’ being similarly decorated, with enormous necklaces, an extravagant armour, enormous earrings and other ostentatious objects completed the outrageous ornaments.

Half of the armour was slowly disappearing under black fur, however. And the traits of the being, while still somewhat vaguely Eldar-like, had evidently been morphing into something rat-like. Some rings were shining in malevolent green energy.

And unlike **Excess** which didn’t react at all, the Aspect-Shard tried to attack the moment it was fully materialised.

It didn’t avail the corruption of Anarchy anything; one heartbeat later, it was imprisoned into another crystal too.

The spoils of Decay arrived next.

Before the summoning was complete, there was no doubt which part of the Primordial Annihilator had tried to make this Aspect-Shard its own.

The foul smell was impossible to mistake for something else.

And the obese thing was covered in buboes and cursed afflictions that...that were certainly vomit-inducing. It gurgled. It had something in its claw-hands it desperately tried to masticate. And the ‘skin’ of **Gluttony** was already a pale yellow-green reeking of **Decay**.

It tried to attack them too, but the effort was for nothing.

The next was one she had both anticipated and dreaded at the same time.

“My Goddess...”

“**My Herald...My Empress...**”

Atharti, the very essence of **Carnality**, was here.

She was magnificent...so magnificent Aurelia felt really...ordinary and wondered why she had been chosen, surely-

“**No. You are absolutely worth it, I assure you**.”

The young Herald blushed as her Goddess had read her mind.

Then she realised Weaver had not yet spoken.

And after a couple of seconds, it was not hard to realise the reason of said silence.

Atharti had come forwards with a delicate Aeldari appearance, fuchsia hair and soft creamy skin. The Power of Carnality had modest golden armbands around her wrists, and a diadem of bronze-coloured metal around her hair, the only thing to bind them, as they flowed freely behind her.

And the silk material Atharti was using to cover her divine body was slightly pink. It also was nearly transparent.

“I am not going to lead you return to the path of hedonism and decadence, I’m sure you realise.”

“**I know**.”

Her Goddess knelt...and the Queen of the Swarm didn’t use her sword.

“Protect your Herald. The Ruinous Powers are going to try something.”

The fifth Aspect-Shard went through the walls as the last word was spoken.

It was enormous.

It was nearly entirely tainted by Change.

It was a huge entity, a flying vulture of nine iridescent colours.

And though the body between the wings was vaguely Aeldari, only the power given by Atharti was able to tell her that yes, it was **Paramountcy**.

The attack from it was a bombardment of crystalline and burning feathers...which hadn’t any more success than all its predecessors’ efforts.

**Paramountcy** found itself joining **Avidity** and the other Aspect-Shards into a golden prison.

Then the temperature began to soar, and orange flames struck the ceiling and the seats nearby...one fireball had even to be parried by one of the tainted Sorcerers.

Merciful Isha, what was-

“*Show yourself*.” Their new Empress commanded. “I know you are here.”

The last Aspect-Shard had no choice but to obey, though the power struggle created a shockwave.

But at long last, a new inferno of orange flames was created...though this time, it was not an attempt to intimidate, but truly the last remaining fragment having survived the death of Slaanesh.

Watching it, Aurelia immediately thought of the much-dreaded Avatars of Khaine.

And no, it wasn’t because of the size. It was, because for all the orange flames and the orange colour of the ugly armour, the silhouette was very close to an Avatar of the Bloody-Handed God.

The biggest difference was not that it was a living, bright orange instead of the usual red flames of Khaine.

No, it was the symbol repeated in many variants, new runes which would have never been carved into any Avatar’s armour.

The symbol of the crown was easy to recognise. The animal under it, alas, was not exactly a mystery when you spent some parts of your life in the City of Commorragh. It was a Manticore.

And with that piece of information, you didn’t a Farseer to know who had claimed and empowered this Shard.

**Vainglory**

“**I AM ADDAIOTH. I AM THE TRUE GOD OF THE AELDARI**.”

Weaver’s answer was...not very diplomatic.

“We can do this the easy way or the really easy way. Which option will you choose, **Vainglory** of the Drukhari?”

A palm of the no-Avatar expelled a colossal column of orange flames...but it was not an attack targeting them.

No, when the flames were chased away, there was a Drukhari facing them...who looked very surprised to be here.

“*Maelsha’eil Dannan...*”

Yes, Aurelia had no problem hearing the twinge of fear in that voice. And Atharti whispered in her ears...

“Kharsaq El’Uriaq of Shaa-Dom.” The young Herald made the presentations.

“Really?” This time the voice of Weaver was very interested.

“Really.”

“**KILL HER**!” Addaioth ordered.

This was...a big mistake.

Half of the council room appeared to drown in golden crystals, and Weaver’s wings appeared to grow bigger...and then the newly acclaimed Empress attacked.

To say it was a one-sided defeat was generous for the defeated.

Addaioth found itself trapped into a golden crystal, while its Herald found itself giving him company next to it in a smaller one...and yet Aurelia noticed fast that unlike the other Aspects, which were easily burning into the pyre of golden flames, the Aspect of **Vainglory** was resisting it with a certain amount of...she wasn’t going to say it was success, but there was a significant struggle.

The next summonings were rather anticlimactic.

The souls of the Muses had survived, but they were already trapped in some sorts of crystals, and thus there was nothing really to see save vague shadows and shrieking souls contained in some crystals.

The only notable thing was there indeed were five, not six.

The Despoiler had been right; the Queen of Blades was still one of them.

“Now that they are at your mercy, my Empress, can I ask-“

The Primordial Annihilator’s wrath shook the ship they were sailing aboard, and this time, there was no restraint or trick-game.

***KILL HER! KILL WEAVER!***

**War**, **Change**, **Decay**, and **Anarchy**’s will pressed everywhere with greater ferocity than before.

**Sacrifice** and **Carnality** struck back.

But they had not been the targets.

It was an order. And orders were nothing without means to be obeyed.

The eight giants on the door tried to ignore it...which was surprising, really.

But it was not a struggle one was meant to win, not when the claws of the Primordial Annihilator tightened around your heart and your soul.

The dark miasma shrouded and suffocated them.

One of the black-armoured titans raised his weapon...

And the enormous claw of their leader forced him to lower it in the next heartbeat.

“***No***.”

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**64 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

Kol roared like thousands of Word Bearers as three massive breaches were made by the servants of the God.

The walls of Macragge had at last massive holes into them, and with eight Legions of the Skull Throne, nine Legions of the Changer of Ways, and seven Legions of the Grandfather to lead the Seventeenth Legion, victory was no longer the pipe-dream it had been.

“DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR! LET MACRAGGE BURN!”

Kol Badar had been wrong to despair.

Oh he had been wrong.

The Gods hadn’t abandoned them.

It had only been a test. A test! And the Word Bearers had passed it successfully.

“Destroy their infantry!” The Coryphaus exclaimed. “The Gods have chased them away from the trenches! Don’t let them take positions into the city and-“

The enemy artillery chose that second to fire.

Kol Badar had thought most of the pieces had not had the time to get away when the Gods intervened.

As the entire battlefield disappeared into colossal explosions of Macraggian soil, smoke, and human blood, this estimation was revealed to be all too optimistic.

It was a rain of shells.

There was no other description possible.

And while the Gods’ Hosts were the principal targets, thousands were diverted for the Word Bearers’ formations.

Kol sprinted back towards an abandoned trench, and most of his veterans imitated him.

He was right to do so, for not five seconds later, the hated sound of shrieking rockets filled the air.

“Damn these mad dogs! Where the hell did they find all those rockets anyway? These aren’t Manticore missiles!”

“No,” the Coryphaus growled, having arrived to the same conclusion two hours ago. “They are something far cruder...and that the False Emperor’s deluded worshippers can produce in far greater quantity!”

In the first skirmishes of the invasion, Kol had been astonished about one in ten of the Manticore platforms of Macragge had been captured by virtue of having not a single battle-ready missile to fire.

At the time, it had been an amusing fact. The Ultramarines had always prided themselves to be incredibly rich, able to buy or to produce the most expensive systems available during the Great Crusade. Now, this didn’t seem to apply to their pet-auxiliaries anymore.

But what was true for the Ultramarines wasn’t true for the artillery of Weaver, who seemed content to hurl every hour a monumental quantity of artillery shells...and of course the crude rockets.

“Surely they are going to run out of ammunition soon!” A relatively young Legionnaire commented as daemonic ichor and slaves’ corpses were blasted apart so fast the advance was stopped dead.

“Don’t count on that.” Kol Badar said grimly. “They have all their damned transports in orbit, and many Mechanicus ships besides. As long as we won’t destroy their Spaceport, they will continue to ferry everything for their guns. We might as well hope their barrels will explode under the strain, it is certainly going to arrive faster...”

There was another barrage.

And then one more Land Raider which had just passed over their trenches was hit by several powerful impacts.

The Legion tank was tough, and blessed by the Gods.

It shrugged off the impacts.

Unfortunately, in an infuriating confirmation of the absolute artillery superiority of the enemy, the next ten seconds saw more and more impacts.

Lascannons, artillery, and even some relic weaponry throwing around things Kol Badar would be hard pressed to name were saturating the space between the last trench and Macragge’s walls.

The servants of the Gods were vaporised as fast as they were summoned into reality.

Bloodletters could do nothing in the breaches as there was no enemy there to spill blood, merely an unending rain of exploding projectiles.

 And *something* got through the multiple layers of protection of the Land Raider.

Kol Badar didn’t know what it was, but his long experience told him it was one of those cursed rockets.

This couldn’t be anything but a lucky shot; the projectiles hadn’t the accuracy to hit a tank one out of three times reliably, never mind to target on purpose the few weaknesses of Astartes weaponry.

But the lucky shot made sure the tank was transformed into a burning carcass, and with it, more Legionnaires died...and everything around it was sent to another reality too.

“We have to support our remaining armour. We have to send our Sicarans and the best tanks left, with all we have in support!”

Two priceless Rhinos suffered devastating hits.

“If we do this, Coryphaus, and the False Emperor’s slaves aren’t routed, we will be locked into an attritional fight. A street-by-street battle of Macragge City is going to bleed us of our best troops in short order. We don’t have the time to means or the strength to make any flanking tactic!”

“I know! “ Kol Badar snarled. “But I am not going to fail our Primarch, and we have the Gods to serve as vanguard! Send the Bolter-fodder immediately to clear the landmines, we launch our attack in eight minutes!”

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

To be clear, Taylor firmly believed words had power. Years governing the Nyx System and being acknowledged as a Living Saint had made sure she knew of the importance of saying the right word to the right person at the right time.

“***No***.”

But when you fought against the Ruinous Powers, being in the right wasn’t enough.

Those Warp abominations were malice incarnate.

They could be defeated. They could be trapped.

They could even be killed.

But you couldn’t make them back off with a word.

If it was within her power to do so, the events which had taken place in the holy city of the Tau would have had a very different outcome.

“***No***.”

And suddenly, the power of the Ruinous Powers...the colossal mass of loathing and perverse corruption that had festered for millions...*abruptly ceased its onslaught*.

What the hell?

“Gods and Goddesses...” Aurelia Malys sounded terrified...and Taylor thought no one would blame her.

Because yes.

What the hell?

It was possible to oppose the power of Chaos.

She had just done so, bathing about half of the battlefield in golden light, preventing the Ruinous Powers from taking back the former Aspects of Slaanesh.

But it was possible because the Emperor had given her powers which purified many beings and objects from the touch of Warp corruption. And in her new title of Aeldari Empress, Taylor was helped by the power of a self-proclaimed Eldar Goddess. Atharti was a weak deity, yes, but still a being which had some real power.

The Despoiler had none of these advantages.

The Warp had touched him.

Yes, the Warmaster was not directly sworn to one of the Four, but his authority as leader of the Black Legion had been forged into the hell pit that was the Eye of Terror.

The Ruinous Powers had near-limitless power here.

Resisting them would have been incredibly difficult...if you were the average *loyalist* Space Marine.

Abaddon was no loyalist, of that there was no question.

“How-“

**Annihilation. The Anathema and all those who help him must die.**

Taylor had tasted malevolence before.

She still froze at the sheer aura which chose this moment to reveal itself.

“Oh by the prison of the Endless Swarm...”

Taylor felt suddenly very, very afraid.

She had known the sword the Despoiler held was no sword, but-

The insect-mistress felt a name she couldn’t know form on her lips, and knew the real purpose of the abomination.

“The End of Empires.”

**The Angel of Sacrifice, bound to the Anathema.**

Each word was a shriek, a chorus of tortured souls, a symphony of cruelty and inexhaustible malice.

Taylor tried very hard to not look at the thing, but it didn’t really help. An aura of primordial madness was pouring into reality.

And then Abaddon opened his hand before inclining it slightly, as if it was giving it the opportunity to escape its grasp...which might be exactly what the gesture signified.

This time, Taylor really looked directly at the Warmaster’s armoured glove.

She fully expected Drach’nyen to exploit this ‘go-ahead’ move.

But the sword-shaped daemonic monster did not fall from Abaddon’s gauntlet.

“No?”

This time there was no power behind the Warmaster’s voice. And for all the gravity of the moment, the Lady General could very well recognise the sarcasm behind the word.

It wasn’t exactly hidden, after all.

“No.” The Despoiler repeated, and this time, the irony was absent...but there was an edge of...satisfaction? “Of course, you won’t.”

**They won’t be pleased. And I will find the opportunity to kill her.**

“Maybe you will...another day.”

The comment was clearly intended to be one of dismissal.

And the worst part...it worked. The murderous and chaotic presence decreased until it was basically insignificant.

And that could only mean one thing.

“They are more afraid of you without this poisoned gift than they are of me, despite all the defeats I have handed them?”

“Indeed.”

Taylor did not know how to feel. Relieved the Ruinous Powers were underestimating her...if they were underestimating her again?

Yes, Drach’nyen was an extremely powerful asset for the Warmaster and his Black Legion, but all the legends and the tales agreed upon one thing: only the Despoiler was able to wield it. As such, it gave him a massive amount of firepower at close-quarters, but it was hardly going to be a game-ending move.

Abaddon could clearly think and act without Drach’nyen influencing him.

It was not going to change the course of the war between the Imperium and the Black Legion...unless...the Warp abominations were worried he could...he would change the terms of their cooperation when it suited him.

And it was both intriguing and worrying.

“Why wouldn’t they be? I am the Warmaster. I participated in the conquest of the galaxy once. **I have a claim**.”

\*\*\*\*

**Lord Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

Ezekyle was mad.

Of course, they were all insane to some degree.

Fighting forever in the biggest Warp Storm of the galaxy was not advised if you wanted to preserve your sanity.

But denying the Gods *and* making a claim in front of one of their enemies?

This was the height of madness.

As impressive as his brother’s deeds were, the female successor to Sanguinius was not exactly defenceless either.

Right now, the song of **Sacrifice** was echoing in his hears, no matter how many old techniques he used to ignore it.

Where the golden armoured feet touched the Vengeful Spirit, there was a delicate spider web of pure golden light spreading.

And of course, by a power and claims Iskandar had only a minimal understanding of, the female successor of Sanguinius was imprisoning and altering fragments of a dead Goddess.

The Lord Vigilator was extremely wary.

And not just because Tzeentch’s power over him had just been revealed to be far, far more than he had ever thought possible. Without Ezekyle, the former Thousand Son did not doubt he would have charged Weaver like a good Khornate berserker.

Even now, thoughts that were not his own were slithering into his head, and trying to convince him to kill Weaver.

The worst part was that in a way, it was incredibly reasonable.

Weaver was perhaps the worst type of enemy they would have to defeat on their way to vanquish the Imperium.

Killing her here and now, while she was not protected by millions of men, hundreds of capital warships, and tens of thousands of Space Marines, was only good sense.

But Ezekyle had said no, and Iskandar trusted his brother.

And really even if he hadn’t, between the Changer of Ways and anyone else, the Lord Vigilator would choose the ‘anyone else’. Imitating his brother Ahriman and trusting the information handed by the God of Ambition was unwise.

“This is a bold claim...*Warmaster*.”

“Is it?” When it came to be the charismatic brother, Ezekyle could play the role like few leaders could. “Our Legions defeated the horrors of the Old Night, from the skies of Terra to the Halo Stars. We crushed quadrillions of Orks. Every time a xenos race wanted to enslave us, we counter-attacked, protected the compliant worlds of the Imperium, and exterminated the threat. It is by our might, the might of the Legion Astartes, that the Great Crusade was a reality and not a disastrous adventure collapsing on its own weigh after a few decades.”

The Angel of Sacrifice didn’t react. But Iskandar could read someone, though he wasn’t going to send a mental probe for what would be an absolutely futile and suicidal opening.

Ezekyle’s words weren’t touching her, and it wasn’t because of the light of **Sacrifice**, nor was it due to the Eldar entities nearby.

“For two hundred years, we were at the forefront of every great offensive. We bled for the Imperium. We lost millions of our brothers for the many triumphs and rare defeats we participated into.”

By this point, most Imperial Governors variants of this speech had been delivered to were completely mesmerised.

Here? The audience was listening...but it was evident Weaver had settled her mind upon a course of action, and she wouldn’t change it for them.

“It was thanks to our efforts that the Imperium was capable of standing and expanding across the galaxy. It was by the successful campaigns we completed in His name that the dream was made true. And yet for all this, He and his advisors preferred to use bureaucrats and mediocre souls that had never been of any help on a battlefield. After the Triumph of Ullanor and countless celebrations, we were progressively pushed out of the councils which would eventually be the High Lords of the Senatorum Imperialis. After they no longer needed us, the warriors were going to be discarded. Was it fair?”

This time, Weaver reacted...by conjuring a myriad of psychic scarabs she went to manipulate like an artist.

“Presented like you did, it is clearly not fair.” The female successor of Sanguinius agreed, her angelic mask facing each of them in turn. “But.”

The golden wings seemed to grow until they touched each wall, and though it was only an illusion, it made Iskandar particularly suspicious.

“But?” Ezekyle inquired.

“But your way to present things is completely inaccurate.”

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

The Warmaster of the Black Legion had unnaturally charisma and could be really convincing.

Note to self: if she happened to survive this day, use her authority to modify the Despoiler’s bounty so it said ‘do not allow him to speak in your presence’. Or would it be ‘don’t listen to any speech he makes?’

Anyway, with his inhuman charisma, Taylor was alas rather confident that there would be plenty of power-hungry officers and Governors who would cast aside their oaths to the Emperor and embrace damnation.

They didn’t enjoy the protection she did have, and the Warp would certainly intensify the ‘convincing’ of Abaddon.

Still, the Chaos Warmaster had made his speech, and relatively calmly.

It deserved an answer.

“It is undoubtedly true that without the Astartes Legions, the Great Crusade would have failed to conquer the galaxy in the last centuries of the thirtieth millennium,” the Lady General began. “There are threats non-transhumans weren’t equipped for, and the Thunder Warriors were far too instable to ever equal your performance. It also can be stated with a rightful amount of truth that without your Sacrifice, Mankind would likely have been destroyed by the Orks trying to return to some neo-Krork state. That gave you a claim, and one I think you have already used in your plans. But.”

And yes, it was her method to deny them everything with one word.

“This claim was to the Imperium you turned against. All your conquests, all your exploits, all your victories, they were made in the name of the *Imperium Primus*, the institutions and the regime Malcador the Sigillite worked upon by His will. You had a claim upon this Imperium, the golden dream of humanity at last being freed from the shackles of xenos tyranny, Warp-tech abominations, and the remnants of the Cybernetic Revolt. But you turned against it. You made sure this Imperium burned. You murdered its scientists, its administrators, and all its brightest minds.”

There was no sympathy in her heart for them. Because while the testimony of Cyrene was a forceful reminder the Emperor could screw up by the numbers, it had also to be remembered the late Great Crusade-era Imperium had offered to its citizens plenty of prosperity and peace after killing the slavers and the monsters of the Outer Dark.

“One might say,” Abaddon replied thoughtfully, “that many of said administrators hadn’t the slightest intention to share power with their Astartes.”

“That’s pure nonsense, and you know it.” Taylor retorted bluntly, before delivering the evidence in her next breath. “The Five Hundred Worlds of Macragge.”

The Heir to Horus’s black legacy frowned. Maybe he didn’t like where this conversation was going?

“This is not the same.”

“Excuse me? Are we supposed to pretend this was not a Space Marine’s private kingdom in all but name? Are we supposed to ignore that at the end of the Great Crusade, Ultramar didn’t claim *more than five thousand planets*? Between the research stations, the garrisons, the frontier outposts, the ‘protectorates’, and every allied-client state, the Thirteenth Legion had Astartes influencing every decision on the Eastern Fringe!”

They still had an enormous influence, for that matter, though it was a shadow of itself now. After the Second Founding, the Ultramarines had gone from five hundred major worlds to thirteen systems. It remained far more than the quasi-totality of the existing Chapters, but the Lord Commander had respected his promise; the power of the Legions had been broken.

“And yet the realm of Ultramar as it stood is no more.” The Warmaster seemed to echo her very thoughts.

“Yes, because after you turned half of the Legions against the Emperor, nobody in his right mind was going to trust a Primarch with a Legion and a private kingdom at his back. You made sure trust and nobility were no longer sufficient to keep the greatest defenders of the Imperium *loyal*.”

And the worst part was, given the absence of reaction of the Black Legion’s warlords, that those traitors didn’t really regret it.

Taylor wasn’t even certain this was the fault of the Ruinous Powers in that particularly case.

“You were the hero of the Great Crusade, and you chose to turn your weapons against the very people you swore to defend. You killed your very brothers on the dark sands of Isstvan III, *Warmaster*. I have a witness who confirmed you were among the first bastards who descended to kill the Space Marines loyal to Emperor. You followed Horus, a traitor who would have dragged all of us into damnation if he won. Your claim of ‘might makes right’ died when you lost the Siege.”

The Lady General did not expect the commanding officer of the Black Legion to attack her.

Abaddon the Despoiler had way too much self-control for that.

And he had not surrendered to the malevolent power of the Ruinous Powers when they ordered her death.

He was not going to attack now, when it would give him absolutely nothing.

However, she had to the fainted idea-

“HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!”

The most wanted being of the galaxy laughed.

It didn’t last long...for whatever it meant here, for in a Warp Storm time had little meaning.

“Even Sigismund hadn’t dared criticise me that way...you are quite surprising, Weaver.”

“I really meant it, you know.”

This wasn’t exactly the most diplomatic way to do things, but against this foe, she preferred to leave things quite clear.

“And I respect you for it.” The enormous black-armoured warlord replied in a similar tone. “But you have forgotten one thing, Weaver. If my claim can be considered very shaky, then yours can equally be denied by someone more powerful.”

Yes, yes, it could. That was the problem...that said, having subdued the power of Vainglory, there was only one Eldar God free to act, and it was Cegorach.

Given that the Supreme Clown was largely to blame for this unplanned journey...

“I doubt the God of the Harlequins is going to complain with my actions. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I think a human claiming the title of Aeldari Empress for good is the kind of joke this prankster thrives upon.”

“No doubt about it,” the Traitor Marine agreed. “But I was not referring to Cegorach.”

It couldn’t be a coincidence that a second later, an enormous burning sword which could have equipped a Titan cleaved an entrance through the left wall, and a portal of fire and metal was summoned into existence.

Taylor immediately took a fighting stance.

By every spider species she controlled, what was-

“**Khaine**,” Atharti announced.

**High Orbit of Ardium**

**Newly created ‘Mountain Star Fortress’ *The Fang***

**65 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Warmaster Ender Trevayne**

When billions thought of the ‘Warmaster’, it was guaranteed they thought of a noble hero advancing fearlessly towards the enemy, gunning down heretics with absolutely impractical weapons as the Departmento Munitorum so often encouraged to.

Or maybe they thought of a huge officer somehow capable of donning a Space Marine yet remaining capable to seduce all the pretty girls once outside of the power armour. That too was something plenty of Sector’s unrealistic vid-casts loved to record and publish for every gullible citizen to watch.

And no, before you asked, it often didn’t fool a lot of young men. Whether you enjoyed the entertainment or not, you didn’t race to the next recruitment office of the Imperial Guard after seeing a bad B-level series...or if you did, Ender was going to question your mental health.

But back to the office of Warmaster.

Now that there was a Primarch fighting on the planet below – meaning the glamorous part of the job was already stolen – there only was the less glamorous part of the job: greasing the wheels of bureaucracy.

For those who didn’t understand: paperwork. In one form or another.

That Ender wasn’t on his warship was irrelevant.

That the Space Wolves were in all likelihood allergic to it was...guess it...irrelevant.

They were logistics to care of, papers to sign, and losses estimates to compile. There were assessments of threat to write. There were astropathic messages to send with utmost priority; while the Shadow blocking all communications would have been a worthwhile excuse when it was active, blaming it for staying out of touch with Terra only worked as long as they were into it. The moment it was over, he had to contact the Throneworld...especially because the more he waited, the worse the reaction of the High Twelve promised to get.

It wasn’t like the news of Macragge being attacked was going to cheer up the Senatorum Imperialis, in his educated opinion.

And of course, no, the Custodes waiting by his side hadn’t shown the slightest intention to partake into bureaucratic duties.

Bastard.

“Rogue Trader Griffith,” Ender grimaced as the aforementioned silver-haired man entered the command room he had temporarily taken charge of. “Please take me you have good news.”

“The lower levels have taken...moderate damage.” So much for the good news. “Three more halls have been sealed off; we don’t exactly know what happened to them...but the gamblers of my crew are happy to repeat it is likely makeshift repairs of the 32nd millennium reaching their life’s end.”

It was exactly what you didn’t want to hear when you listened to a report of your Starfort...especially when you were aboard said piece of void-faring machinery.

“Anything else?”

Given how inexistent the good news were, better to hear everything bad and call it a day.

“The Space Wolves have accumulated everywhere quantity of things that are going to cause problems if the Inquisition finds about it.”

“Xenos technology and trophies?”

Though officially every good law-abiding citizen knew it was illegal to involve yourself in the so-called ‘Cold Trade’, the Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes were a law onto themselves...and most of them weren’t interested in trading what they grabbed on a battlefield anyway.

“Trophies they have in abundance, but I don’t think the Most Holy Ordos will be very concerned about it,” the young man shrugged as Ender gave him a questioning glance. “After what they’ve done, I don’t think having some decapitated xenos heads or one or two forbidden weapons kept in stasis fields are going to be significantly worsen the Wolves’ criminal case.”

“Truer words have never been spoken.” Ender sighed. “In that case, and though I dread it in advance, what did you see that has you so concerned?”

Griffith opened his mouth to answer...and the command room’s alarms started to blare.

“Report!”

“The enemy is firing from Ardium’s surface, my Lord!”

The Tyranids? But they had not shown any ground-to-orbital weapon-

They had not shown any ground-to-orbital weapon *so far*.

And now it was no longer true.

“By the Allfather, the wards of Fenris are-“

The red dots signalling enemy fire didn’t arrive in one or two.

It was like watching...a massive cloud rise from the continental mass of Ardium.

But there was something strange about the pattern.

“Those aren’t ballistic missiles or whatever their organic equivalent is.”

“No!” One of the rare Space Wolves exclaimed joyously. “Those fiends of the Nieflheim abyss must have-“

A blast which killed dozens of satellites interrupted this arrogant boast.

“PSYCHIC VOID MINES! PSYCHIC VOID MINES DETECTED!”

“Emperor saves us.”

One or two of those things would not have the energy to give a scratch to the mountain-Starfort.

But the Tyranids were launching thousands of them.

And they were eliminating their middle-range orbital reconnaissance capability too.

“Divert all the power you can to the shields,” Ender ordered. “And send an immediate astropathic message to Lord Admiral Müller. I know his Battle Groups are still several hours away, but any assistance would be dearly appreciated.”

“Yes, Warmaster!”

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

“**Khaine**,” Atharti announced.

As the gigantic figure comes through the portal, the similarities between it and the Shard of Vainglory – Addaioth – were incredibly evident.

Aside from the crowned helmet, the runes carved in the armour, and the orange-black instead of the red-black, the newcomer could have been mistaken for a twin.

But it wasn’t.

It was far, far worse.

Taylor was the Angel of Sacrifice, and so she could see what it had cost the Eldar deity to confront her here.

Six hundred and sixty-six souls.

That was the number of Eldar souls sacrificed in an act of purposeful, deliberate **Murder**.

“The Bloody-Handed was shattered during the First Fall,” Aurelia Malys began hesitantly. “Perhaps it is-“

“It was not just shattered,” Taylor could see deeper than the runes and the flames, deeper than the belligerent furnace keeping this thing alive. “It was corrupted.”

And this wasn’t the first time some corruption had been allowed to seep into the essence of this titan of flames and violence. The helmet of Khaine was way too identical to the Khornate ones for it to be a coincidence.

But it was the essence of the Eldar God which betrayed it.

**War**

This one was here originally, but the restraints of the Aspect were all gone.

**Murder**

Maybe it had been here during the War in Heaven, and if so, someone had screwed up in a colossal fashion, for the thing in her sight wouldn’t have been denied by the Ruinous Powers.

**Smite**

It could have been tempered by another Aspect or some moderating force, but it wasn’t.

**Incinerate**

This one was self-explanatory, no?

**Bleed**

If it did not taste like an Eldar power, Taylor would have begun wondering if it wasn’t Khorne standing in front of her.

**Doom**

Maybe there had been some positive Aspects before Slaanesh was born.

Maybe.

Taylor wouldn’t gamble her life upon this possibility.

But whatever existed in a long-dead-age, the insect-mistress had to acknowledge she had come far too late for any redemption to be possible.

Khaine was the **Excess of War**. It was an unrepentant monster drinking the lifeblood of the dying Craftworlds.

It was the reason Biel-Tan could be so prompt to launch campaign after campaign, blinding them with bloodlust, allowing them to ignore how ‘glorious military victories’ were leading to empty Craftworlds and planets.

Khaine was Slaanesh’s last vengeance beyond the grave, a guarantee no one would ever be able to claim the title of Emperor or Empress without instantly being curbed-stomped by an enraged God of War.

And what made the trap perfect?

Even as their surrounding were slowly transformed into an impossible arena defying the laws of reality, the Angel of Sacrifice could swear it was really Khaine.

The God had been influenced, shattered, vanquished, led to unleash its worst impulses, and convinced plenty of Eldar to follow a path of ruin and doom...but it was still the same God.

And really, as much as it was sickening to admit it...the more her sight fell upon the Bloody-Handed God, the less the corruption of Excess felt powerful.

Some of it may be due to the Sacrifice aura Taylor was cloaked into.

But a little part of her whispered it was because Khaine had not needed much persuasion to go down that awful path.

The footsteps were akin to a Titan’s.

The arena somehow summoned into existence was an ugly thing that the World Eaters’ bloodthirsty Champions would have enjoyed fighting into.

The screams...the screams which were playing the role of spectators were those of the Eye of Terror.

Choruses of cultists and punished tormentors, the Lost and the Damned being called to watch for the amusement of thirsting abominations.

“**Swear yourself to me**,” Khaine rumbled in a language Taylor had never learned, yet understood without problem, “**or die**.”

The gaze that was sent in her direction was absolutely murderous, no surprise there.

The way this psychopathic deity turned his head in the direction of the crystals imprisoning the Aspects her power was busy to purify...it was not expected.

But at least, this move was another confirmation that she had made the right choice.

And so the outrageous command was answered by a question the Lady of Nyx had always wanted to ask the moment she knew the basic foundations of the birth of Slaanesh.

“Tell me **Khaine**,” the Angel of Sacrifice said aloud, “were you late the day the rest of your Pantheon challenged Slaanesh, or had the Abomination of Excess to hunt you down for six days before managing to corner you?”

“**YOU DARE ACCUSE ME OF COWARDICE**?”

The roar shook the *Vengeful Spirit*...and certainly a significant fraction of the region of space known as the Eye of Terror.

The golden-winged parahuman smiled.

“I didn’t see you join the fun at Commorragh. You failed to show up when the Ymga Monolith was destroyed. None of the Black Templars were very much impressed by the defence your followers tried at Biel-Tan. What I am supposed to think...**Murderer**? That you wage war when the enemy has not the abilities to strike back?”

The fires Khaine was bathing into became a gigantic inferno the likes only the Salamanders of Nocturne would have enjoyed throwing themselves into. And yes, Taylor was speaking of the animals, not the Space Marines.

If not for her powers, incineration would likely have been guaranteed in a few seconds. As it was, the flames and the infernal temperatures were kept at bay.

“I am with you,” Aurelia Malys advanced, her eyes burning in fuchsia power and her body following with elegant wings of the same colour, “my Empress.”

“Good.” Taylor nodded. “Let us go and kill him for good this time.”

In the hands which had never stopped dripping blood, a weapon materialised.

It was difficult guessing if it was a spear or a sword, given the length and the shape, but Taylor knew instantly the name of it.

*The Wailing Doom*

This knowledge made sure she was already striking with the Nebula’s Shard when a bolt of infernal fire was cast at them.

The shockwave was....simply world-shaking.

The crowd of the arena bayed for more.

“**The Aeldari**,” Khaine thundered, “**need to be punished for their heresies**!”

“Maybe they will,” the Living Saint began to weave a swarm of crystal in advantageous positions, “but not today, and not by the likes of you.”

Khaine roared, a clamour so powerful every psychic creature would hear it ten thousand light-years away, and the battle began.