This is not an update. Ha! Ha! Ha!

**Extinction 11-5**

**Avengers**

*I will arrive too late.*

*I know it.*

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

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

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

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

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

*It should be welcome news.*

*It really isn’t.*

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

*It should not be so.*

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

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

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

*All of them can be lost within a decade if my theoretical about the losses they took at Beta-Garmon before pushing for Terra is true.*

*Horus has lost the war.*

*His actions are madness incarnate.*

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

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

*But the numbers don’t lie.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*I will arrive too late.*

*I hope I’m wrong.*

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

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

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

*I may arrive too late.*

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

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

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

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

*I will avenge you.*

*No matter what it takes.*

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

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

**Lord Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

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

Apparently, this moment would never come.

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

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

Wordlessly, the Lord Vigilator indicated to the three-armed overseer that his mutants and he could remove the mess. There was nothing to save, and the danger was minimal that even one of the wretches he could see trying to hide away from his eyes wouldn’t provoke something disastrous.

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

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

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

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

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

“Honestly, Ezekyle...I would prefer not to have experienced such an *interesting event*.” Iskandar cleared his throat to manifest his disapproval. “We have several bridges which were consumed by the aura of murder of this xenos deity. The clean-up of this mess is going to take a long time, and I’m not speaking of the rivers of blood the bolter-fodder made. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I preferred crystalline statues and angel-themed apparitions. They were a bitter reminder of our failure during the Siege, but at least they didn’t push our slaves and the rest of our servants to go into a frenzy of murder.”

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

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

“Why didn’t you kill her?”

A chuckle escaped the lips of the Warmaster.

“What makes you think that I have this power?”

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

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

“The trap?”

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

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

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

“Brother, the key word is that there’s not a rebirth of the Ninth Legion *yet*.”

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

“There will be more questions, and I will answer them when the Ezekarion will be here to hear my words...but I will answer truthfully and without evasion your first question now.”

“Oh?”

That was certainly going to be good.

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

Iskandar Khayon had excellent self-control, but even he, hearing this, couldn’t hide his stupefaction.

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

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

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

*What is the problem?*

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

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

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

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

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

*Yes, all of them.*

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

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

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

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

*But there was only Khaine who stayed true to its purpose.*

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

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

*Do you know why, my dears?*

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

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

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

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

*But they chose Excess.*

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

*And we forgot everything about our past.*

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

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

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

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

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

*But even that wasn’t enough.*

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

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

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

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

*Yes, yes, your denials, though I can’t see it, are...simply delicious.*

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

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

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

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

*Isha.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Aurelia Malys was gone, in a flash of fuchsia and green.

Taylor was alone.

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

Her fingers touched the crystal.

*She is the High Priestess of Isha*.

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

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

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

*But her efforts are in vain.*

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

*Abandoning at the first try is not a flaw of the Priestesses of Isha, however.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*She will need an army.*

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

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

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

*Though the city is on its way to become a succession of hedonistic nightmares, it is not yet there...and it isn’t the problem.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*It is a vicious cycle.*

*It is one which leads to damnation.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You are hesitating.”

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

And yes, obviously, she was naked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the drawbacks of that method?”

“You will gain...a new Aspect.”

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

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

“That still sounds too simple.”

“If you weren’t Empress and you hadn’t something to assimilate me inside you, it wouldn’t work. For best or worse, I am an Aeldari. You were not. But the rules, thanks to the abnormalities of recent events have proven...surprisingly flexible.”

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

“A last request, actually,” Ynesth bared her teeth.

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

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

And it felt...right.

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

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**Cataclysm of Macragge**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Magna Macragge Theatre**

**Surviving Word Bearers: 4,777**

**Living Primarch: 2**

**Chaos Spawns: 0**

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

**Chaos Knights: 15**

**Surviving Ultramarines and Successors Present: 302**

**Other Loyalist Space Marines: 713**

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

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

**Loyalist Imperial Knights: 90**

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Optio Septimus Gracchus**

“*Not today*.”

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

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

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

The heretical mace and the holy crystalline sword were stalemated.

It was difficult to breathe.

And then they moved.

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

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

Or rather, what his eyes could perceive of it.

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

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

It brutally changed without warning.

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

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

The two enemies had evaluated each other.

And now they escalated.

Septimus believed himself courageous and brave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was both terrible and beautiful.

The clashes were shaking the very foundations of the Fortress of Hera.

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

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Macragge City**

**Battle-brother Marx Fischer**

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

But now the Astartes veteran understood.

It had been a test of his faith.

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

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

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

“STAND TO! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

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

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

“Where are the snipers? I want this heretic’s skull blasted apart!”

“They’re coming, Sir! There’s only-“

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

The Black Templar thanked the God-Emperor for this superbly opportune intervention, and attacked harder the red-skinned abominations.

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

“Sir, we were slaughtered the last time we tried to liberate it. It’s an excellent defensive position!”

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

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

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

“I’m sorry, Sir, but the latest tank column was seen rushing eastwards! Command relay their apologies...but they had to deal with heretic super-heavies in priority.”

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

“Artillery?”

“It’s coming within ten minutes. At least a battery of Basilisks, Sir.”

“I would have preferred some thrice-blessed Sphinxes.”

And not just because Her Celestial Highness had participated in the conception of those noble war machines. The Sphinxes were bringing a heavier payload of destruction upon the heretics’ death, which would be incredibly useful to demolish the heretics’ crawling inside the Ceramite Manufactorum.

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

“Sir, may I remind you that-“

“I have no intention to charge again, Lieutenant,” doing it once had been far than enough. Not only without his brand-new power armour Marx would be busy explaining to the God-Emperor why he had failed to fulfil his battle-oath, but the incident had forced him to assess for many minutes the massive differences between fighting with his battle-brothers and fighting with guardsmen. “But as you can see, when we’re not keeping an eye on the heretics, they clearly come up with new ideas. Ideas which result in deadly and abominable surprises for the Faithful.”

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

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

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

“By the Golden Throne!”

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

They had endured the storm.

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

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

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

**Above the Fortress of Hera**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

This was just an afterthought.

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

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

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

She was *complete*.

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

“Why aren’t you fighting for him? He does not care about you! You are just a weapon he will discard as long as he has no use for!”

Taylor evaded the sorcery attack which smelled like carrion and excrements to her senses, and counter-attacked.

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

Strike.

Counter-strike.

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

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

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

“YOU THINK IT IS FUNNY?”

Strike.

Strike.

Avoiding the enormous mace again.

And yes, it was funny.

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

Strike.

Parry.

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

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

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

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

Taylor could see the power corroding his very soul.

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

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

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

This was a petulant child, who had decided that if reality didn’t conform to his ideas, then worshipping eldritch abominations was a perfect sane path to walk upon.

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

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

Lorgar howled in hatred and charged her again.

They clashed above the Fortress of Hera, and the Ruinous Powers’ hisses of hatred arrived to her ears.

**Valley of Laponis**

**General Lorelei Moltke**

“The Webmistress is here! Our victory is assured! All praise the Webmistress!”

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

“Thank you, Adjutant Solaria.” The Mordian female General replied. “We appreciate the good news.”

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

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

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

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

“All Mechanised Brigades are in position, General.”

“Artillery support stands ready to send the heretics to hell!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the third salvo, what she had awaited for was relayed by the extremely excited.

“General! The enemies of the Webmistress are routing! Many are abandoning their trenches!”

“Confirmation, General! Their defences are no more! They’re fleeing towards Macragge City!”

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

“Yes, General! For the Webmistress!”

“For the God-Emperor and His Living Saint!”

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

**Dark Apostle De Haan**

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

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

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

Until it didn’t.

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

A humiliating defeat was staring back.

Vorrjuk Kraal had been right.

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

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

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

“Those aren’t Leman Russ tanks,” his Coryphaus interrupted the worthless Captain. “Those are the new tanks this bitch of Weaver ruined Commorragh with. Those are Jaghatai Khan tanks.”

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

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

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“Nothing, Lord Apostle.” His subordinate repeated with a tone which was filled with resignation. “Lord Lorgar took the last Astartes reserves with him, and judging by what is happening at the Fortress of Hera, we won’t have them back. The Hosts we have here are all engaged inside the city. The Hosts which landed at Pharsalus are not sending any sign of life. And the Volscani...”

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

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

De Haan amended the thought an instant later as several ‘Khan Tanks’ crushed many Volscani infantrymen under their tracks without slowing down.

The *surviving* Volscani Cataphracts were running away.

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

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

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

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

This was a routed force.

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

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

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

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

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.

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

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

“We are going to-“

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

**Above the Fortress of Hera**

**Primarch Lorgar Aurelian**

The Gods weren’t giving him enough power.

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

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

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

“I am not tapping into anything, *Traitor*.”

“Now who’s lying?” He tried to mock her, something easier to do as the cursed xenos blade went for his throat again. The False Saint was no mistress of the sword, she was too young and too inexperienced. But the sheer versatility of her powers and her inhuman strength more than compensated for that. And so he barely managed to parry before it could pierce his armour.

“I am not lying, Lorgar of Colchis. I am not faster than I was at the start of our duel. **You are slowing down**.”

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

Lorgar *saw*.

The Gods had not been giving anything to him.

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

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

He was *Faith*.

He was the Priest of the Gods.

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

This was-

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

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

They struck at each other.

And with every blow, his strength faded.

With every parry, doubts assailed his thoughts.

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

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

His enemy could fly without relying on anyone.

He couldn’t.

Still, he was a Primarch.

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

He could-

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

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

It wasn’t enough.

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

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

The movements of Weaver became blurry.

Fast!

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

“They will find a way to-“

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

His body convulsed in pain.

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

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

“It is time to fall, *Traitor*.”

In that last moment, he prayed to the Gods.

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

And for sole answer, he heard their laughter.

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

**Fortress of Hera**

**Optio Septimus Gracchus**

They all watched when the Arch-Heretic fell.

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

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

But they all saw the end of the duel.

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

For many seconds, there was just staring and the fighting ceased. The light of the God-Emperor flared brilliantly.

The darkness seemed to falter, but then increased again.

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

And the Arch-Heretic fell.

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

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

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

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

The impacts against the roof and the ceiling clearly slowed down the descent from the skies.

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

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

The monster was alive.

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

Interrupting his thought, a guttural scream came into existence.

“WEEEAAAAVVVEEERR!”

**Primarch Lorgar Aurelian**

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

“WEEEAAAAVVVEEERR!”

And then reality reminded him how badly wounded he was.

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

It hurt. It hurt terribly.

It was agony.

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

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

Everything was pain.

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

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

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

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

*Illuminarum* was still in his right hand.

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

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

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

But they didn’t.

Perhaps they waited for Weaver.

No, he hadn’t the time to waste on some useless theoretical. He had to-

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

And from this arch made into the golden fire, an armoured figure Lorgar knew all too well slowly walked out.

The power armour itself, Lorgar had never seen before.

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Lorgar gives the signal and utter the final words of the last surprise many Ultramarines will ever be able to experience in their unfaithful lives.*

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

\*\*\*\*

**Primarch Lorgar Aurelian**

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

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

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

But times had changed.

He was no longer immortal.

He was severely injured.

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

Because in his state, even a small group of average Astartes could finish him for good.

“I swear-“

“Silence, *Traitor*.” Weaver, always her, interrupted him. “You are fundamentally incapable to say something that is not a lie or an attempt to incite treachery on a grand scale.”

“I was not speaking to you!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Roboute, please-“

But the Lord of Ultramar was already attacking him.

**Fortress of Hera**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

It wasn’t a fair fight.

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

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

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

Something that couldn’t be said about his opponent.

It was a very, very unfair fight.

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

And within seconds, this was exactly what happened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I...I made...a mistake...Roboute. Forgive me...”

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a shriek and then...nothing.

Lorgar was dead.

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

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

**The Warp**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No. The battle was lost.

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

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

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

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

One planet stood in the way of those plans.

Calth.

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

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

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

And that...that wouldn’t do at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was no victory, of course.

This was just saving something from the ashes of catastrophe.

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

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

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

**Macragge System**

**Laphis**

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

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

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

This was a dangerous combination.

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

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

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

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

“**Gemkltvlrbtgkjbnr**!”

Reality...felt wrong.

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

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

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

The other daemon-worshippers were still there...somewhat.

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

And no, it was not a figure of speech.

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

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

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

But it was the last Legionnaires’ reactions which was the more interesting.

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

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

“LORGAR IS DEAD!”

The three words made him freeze.

That was-

“LORGAR IS DEAD!”

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

When Legionnaires had lost their gene-side.

“Lorgar is dead. Lorgar is dead. Lorgar Aurelian is dead...”

“Without the Urizen, all is lost...”

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

“All is dust. The Thousand Sons were right...”

“WE WILL NOT HIDE ANYMORE! THE GALAXY WILL BURN!”

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

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**Ruins of the Pharsalus Line**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

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

But as they had reached the defensive lines the Lords of Ultramar had once called the ‘Pharsalus Line’, their counter-offensive had began to drastically slow down.

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

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

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

“Yes,” Dragon agreed. “Not that if we wouldn’t have hammered their drop pods and ground-to-orbit vehicles the situation would have been far better for them. Their sorcery is fading, and I have two Mechanicus Cruisers ready to deliver orbital strikes and atmospheric interdiction if they are so stupid to believe their fleet is waiting in orbit.”

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

“Much as I don’t want to leave them time to regroup,” the Tinker analysed the data and winced, “all our forces need to make a pause before launching the final assault on what is left of the Pharsalus Line.”

“It is not that much of a defensive obstacle.” Rokossovsky argued.

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the sound defeat they had been given on the Fields of Pharsalus and the long pursuit, the cultists and their Traitor Astartes’ masters had no more Titans to oppose them, and in effectives, they were certainly outnumbered by more than ten-to-one.

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

But the Word Bearers didn’t slow down.

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

“It looks like we won’t need that much of a pause, in the end.”

“No,” Dragon recognised. “I call the Titans, you call the artillery. And the Salamanders finish the job?”

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

**The Warp**

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

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

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

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

The death of Lorgar changed that.

Tzeentch’s intervention changed that.

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

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

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

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

For the Ultramarines, it was the Word Bearers.

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

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

But maybe it wouldn’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge District**

**Macragge City**

**68 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

*The Primarch is dead*.

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

“RAAAARRGGGH!” Vadukar, one of the coldest-blooded warrior under his command, exploded in mad fury, and ignoring his counter-command, charged like a World Eater Berserker the lines of the False Emperor’s slaves.

There was roughly five hundred metres to cross.

With or without support, it was just death.

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

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

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

“We have to retreat, Coryphaus!”

“Retreat to where?” Kol Badar asked in a dead voice. “The breaches we made in the walls are assaulted by the enemy’s reinforcements. We are completely encircled.”

*The Primarch is dead*.

“BURN! THEY WILL ALL BURN!”

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

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

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

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

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

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

Maybe it was what happened to him.

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

But he couldn’t.

There was nothing left to give.

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

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

No wonder the Sons of Horus had faltered and fled.

They had followed Lupercal and Lupercal died at Terra.

“CORYPHAUS! THE LINES ARE COLLASING ON EVERY SECTION!”

“No need to scream, I hear you perfectly.” Kol Badar admonished the other warrior. “The Architect’s latest trick has cost us dearly.”

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

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

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

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

Not with their aircraft and artillery singing their requiem when the Legion’s bolters were running short of ammunition.

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

“WITH ME! FOR LORGAR! FOR THE PRIMARCH!”

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

He had them here, to this disaster.

He had been unable to avenge Jarulek.

Over their heads, the sky was taken a golden hue, and the power of the Gods was relentlessly grinded down.

“FOR THE SEVENTEENTH! LET THE GALAXY BURN!”

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

*The Primarch is dead*.

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

The world dissolved around him.

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

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

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

“Who are you?”

“I am like you, Kol Badar.”

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

“I am not like you.”

The other Space Marine shook his head.

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

“And yet here you stand. Alive.”

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

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

But all of that was now denied to him.

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

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

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

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

**Magna Macragge Military District**

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

**‘Prince’ Yriel of Iyanden**

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

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

The Mon-keigh brutes had won the battle.

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

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

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

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

Since the Primordial Annihilator and the Mon-keigh had not destroyed each other, imagining the planets without the primates was fantasy.

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

Wind caressed his armour, and it was pleasant enough to make him forget the humiliation every Asuryani had been on the receiving end of.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Maelsha’eil Dannan* was there.

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

An Aeldari taste of flames and death.

It was a humiliation.

It was an insult.

It was something he had no choice but to accept.

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

And it would not come to a duel.

The Helspiders guarding the Empress would make sure of that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yriel sighed.

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

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

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

“My Prince,” Thrandael, wiser and older of all his friends bowed. “Thank you for joining us.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was seductive.

It was attractive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They don’t have Alaitoc and Saim-Hann.”

“They don’t,” Yriel agreed, “but I think we must be see clearly the challenge ahead of us: even their Asuryani may succumb to the temptation in large numbers.”

“Surely not Saim-Hann,” one of his friends muttered, “they are wild and free, they don’t need...” many grimaced forced him to interrupt this hesitating tirade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes!”

“We are with you my Prince!”

“YRIEL! YRIEL!”

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**Shrine of the Primarch**

**Primarch Roboute Guilliman**

He was alive.

This was...very much a relief.

He was alive.

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

Roboute Guilliman watched everywhere but the decapitated head of the Traitor, wondering what had been in his head to attempt such a gamble.

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

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

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

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

“How long?”

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

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

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

More than four thousand years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I am grateful, really...your Celestial Highness.”

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

And they were wasting too much time as it was.

“I have nine hours, then. I must be practical, then. The war?”

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

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

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

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

“We only did our best, Webmistress.”

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

“Your spiders...speak.”

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

“The military situation is resolved, then?”

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

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

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

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

One by one, they knelt.

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

“ALL HAIL THE FIRST LORD OF ULTRAMAR!”

“ALL HAIL LORD ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN!”

“IMPERIAM VICTORIAM!”

“WE MARCH FOR MACRAGGE!”