**Extermination 8.4**

**The Queen of Blades**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*She is the Queen of Blades.*

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**LELITH HESPERAX**

**‘THE QUEEN OF KNIVES’**

**ELDAR SUCCUBUS**

**EXTREMIS-LEVEL SWORD MASTER**

**INSANELY DANGEROUS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

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

**IF MILITARY SUPPORT INSUFFICIENT FLEE ON SIGHT**

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

\*\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Eye of Terror**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the Death Guard went to war.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

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

**Epistolary Hendrik**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Zel’harst**

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Go!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Taylor didn’t like it.

“We will see.”

The Queen of Blades laughed.

“Yes I suppose we will.”

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

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

“**WEEEEEEAAAAAAVVVVVEEERRRRR**!”

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

**The Queen of Blades**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No. First Blade. Death’s Dance.”

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

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

“Second Blade. Sapphire Strike.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You are too weak.”

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

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It did not pass unacknowledged.

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dennis chuckled.

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

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

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

But it was also true.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lelith Hesperax snorted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the Queen of Blades genuinely giggled once more.

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

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

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

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

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**URIEN RAKARTH**

**‘THE PROPHET OF FLESH’**

**ELDAR HAEMUNCULUS**

**FLESH-CRAFTER ABOMINATION**

**EXTREMIS- OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**UNKNOWN RESURRECTION AND CLONING ABILITIES**

**EXTERMINATUS WEAPONS AUTHORISED IF PRESENCE CONFIRMED**

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

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

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

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**The Queen of Blades**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still, the question deserved an answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Magnificent Xelian Gate**

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

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“High Farseer, if we do this...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How?”

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

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

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

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

Weaver. Everything was Weaver’s fault.

“There is a solution.”

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

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

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

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

**The Warp**

**The Hunting Grounds**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

Apparently, she did.

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

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

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

Quality had not worked, obviously. Therefore the Ruinous Power of Excess was sending quantity from thereon, along with one or two major snake-like things to lead the hordes and exploit the opportunities.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And where these tentacles which were appearing to swallow the demons?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And why would they do something so stupid?”

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

“It’s...horrible.”

The Queen of Blades frowned.

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

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

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

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

“**They did**.”

Suddenly the Queen of Blades stopped smiling and drew again her sword so fast her eyes didn’t follow.

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

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

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

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

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

Aenaria the Queen of Blades laughed, before stopping fully in control of herself.

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

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

There were too many flashes of silver after that.

The scream of a beast resonated.

“No you weren’t.”

For a second, the abyss was illuminated by a column of silver light.

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

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

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We can only delay them...”

**The Abyss of Dreams**

**Thirty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pink sparkles of corruption fell fast towards the animated tendrils waiting below.

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Souls**

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

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

“But it has never been done before!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One by one the ‘keys’ were placed in matrixes which had stayed inactive for thousands of years and maybe more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And yet, they had achieved it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Even then,” the Skitarii commander stated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“STC status updates?”

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**Colonel Tom Cameron**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“CHARGE! CHARGE FOR HIM ON TERRA!”

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

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

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

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

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

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

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

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

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

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

Since the things which crawled out of this realm of night were attacking everything in sight, it was not difficult to make the hypothesis that whoever had activated this terrible weapon was not a friend of the Warp abominations – at the top of the list of suspects came the Eldar, obviously.

But Lady Weaver lived.

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

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

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

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

But they weren’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**ASDRUBAEL VECT**

**‘THE BLACK HEART’**

**ADMIRAL OF THE BLACK HEART**

**SADIST TORTURER-SCHEMER**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

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

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

**REWARD: 10 TRILLION THRONE GELTS**

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**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Hidden Blade**

**Eighteen hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**Your soul belongs to Slaanesh.**”

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

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

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And causality was not a gentle judge.

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

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

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

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

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

But there was no possible way to deny it now.

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

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

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

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

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

**The Abyss of Dreams**

**Fifteen hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Eight hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**First Naval Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

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

For the moment, though, the Necrons had a rigid hierarchy – if one didn’t count Trazyn the Infinite – and since the assault on Commorragh had begun, they had not played political games with the humans.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

**Eight hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The entire demonic tide shrieked in an unholy scream.

The corruption of the Warp receded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the second?”

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

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

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

“I will...deliver the message. Don’t expect to be thanked for them.”

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

The pressure diminished, and Taylor flew away. The faster she was away from this monster, the better for her health.

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

**The Queen of Blades**

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

But was it really the best decision?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“NO REMORSE! NO FEAR!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gavreel could not help but laugh.

“Lost bet with your Second Naval Secretary?”

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

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Exalted Cathedral of the Mighty Iconoclastic Cult**

**Five hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Sergeant Kraas Theomor**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To his surprise, these were not bullets, shells or even arrows, these looked like fragments of green crystals. And they began to shine with the corruption one often associated with the power of the Warp!

“TO COVER!” He roared. The entire altar room began to slash in green explosions before he was obeying his own command.

And he and the seven other Word Bearers heard the battle-cries and the squeaks.

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

“MALAL BE PRAISED!”

“PRAISE THE ANARCHY!”

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

“GLORY TO THE SKAVENS! GLORY TO MALAL!”

Kraas fired its bolter at the shadows.

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

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

Kraas Theomor nodded. He was unaware that the equivalent of several days later, he would curse agreeing with the Acolyte with all his breath.

The Skavens had arrived to Sicarus, and nothing would ever be the same again.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Three hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

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

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

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

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

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

It was also a crushing victory for the Imperium.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you ready to proceed?”

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

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

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

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

And it was going to collapse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Third Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

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

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

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

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

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

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

This thought quickly died.

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

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

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

Suddenly, the reason why they had to move this thing slowly for most of a day wasn’t exactly surprising in hindsight.

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

And under the small icon, five words appeared.

*Blackstone Fortress* *Will of Eternity*

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**Extermination Countdown**

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

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

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

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

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

The battle and the main plot line of this arc will end next chapter. It will be Extermination 8-5 *The Mark of Commorragh*.