Teaser 24 April 2020

**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**

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*This insult to the Necron dynasties won’t be tolerated. The loss of one fleet and fifteen hundred thousand phalanxes can be rightfully considered insignificant; the loss in prestige can’t. Phaeron Nammakatekh has been extinguished so thoroughly even the Nightbringer is powerless to put 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 human and advanced xenos civilisations, 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 a single new 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.

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.

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 the 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 as the Battle of Commorragh continued. 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 have 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.