**Extinction 11.4**

**Die another Day**

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

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

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

*But let's begin with a proper introduction.*

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

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

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

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

*It was never in our power to win.*

*We were never supposed to win the Siege.*

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

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

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

*It certainly killed something inside me.*

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

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

*And then I left.*

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

*And so I departed.*

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

*Let's just say I went on a journey of discovery and understanding.*

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

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

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

*I learned of Ascension.*

*I learned how Horus had been duped.*

*Yes, Ascension.*

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

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

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

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

*You might laugh.*

*You might scream in anger.*

*But it is the truth.*

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

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

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

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

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

*Mainly because there are no hard rules whatsoever.*

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

*In fact, the lore of that long-eared race was deeply flawed; only the foundations of it were proven correct.*

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

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

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

*Horus was their slave.*

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

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

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

*Horus was arrogant and failed.*

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

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

*But I did.*

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

*Against the Gods.*

*Against the other Legions.*

*Against the Imperium I rebelled against millennia ago.*

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

*They are, of course, utterly wrong.*

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

*That was what had been decreed.*

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

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

*Commorragh wasn't supposed to be destroyed like it was.*

*Slaanesh wasn't supposed to die.*

*But it happened.*

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

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

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

**DEAD ONLY**

**EZEKYLE ABADDON**

'**THE DESPOILER'**

'**THE BUTCHER OF EL'PHANOR'**

'**THE WARMASTER OF CHAOS'**

'**THE ARCHITECT OF THE BLACK CRUSADES'**

'**HORUS' HEIR'**

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

**SUPREME COMMANDER OF THE BLACK LEGION**

**APOCALYPTICALLY DANGEROUS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTIVE THREAT**

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

**IF MILITARY HELP INSUFFICIENT FLEE ON SIGHT**

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

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

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**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

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

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

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

And since the most wanted being of the Imperium was in a good mood, why not ask a question about the decoration she'd been wondering about.

"Out of pure curiosity...why the throne, if you never sit on it?"

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

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

"It is impossible to remove it." The tone was conversational, but the defensive stance remained near-perfect. There was no weakness to be found, and this more than anything else gave Taylor the strength not to rush in and initiate a fight.

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

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

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

That was...interesting...and a bit intriguing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"However, it is, ultimately, logical."

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

"How so?"

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

"Every action," the Traitor Marine began like he was a teacher and she his student, "causes a reaction in the fabric of the universe. Every destiny broken in the great tapestry the Architect tries to manipulate must create another destiny. Every cause is tied to an effect, no move is made without consequence."

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

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

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

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

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

"But I doubt this is what you want to talk about, Warmaster Abaddon."

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

Taylor didn't like that. At all.

But given the alternatives...

"And this perspective is?"

"You killed the Supreme Deity of the Eldar Pantheon, Weaver."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One of said...Aspect-Shards has been recovered by the irritating long-ear next to me. And it will evolve into a proper Goddess...eventually."

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

The *Talon of Horus'* claws tightened brusquely.

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

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

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

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**62 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Sergeant** **Gavreel Forcas**

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

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

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

"This is a fine mess..."

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

And though the blade the long-eared xenos had not moved from its initial position, this part of the battlefield was now bathed in a sea of silver psychic power.

"For the Webmistress!"

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

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

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

Gavreel grimaced internally.

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

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

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

"Your mistress is fine, little spider." The Queen of Blades announced in a bored tone, not bothering to look in the direction of the 'Adjutant-General'.

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

"No, she is not!"

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

"When?" Gamaliel asked in their name.

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

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

"This is...unacceptable! The Webmistress must return at once!"

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

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

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

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

Lelith Hesperax sighed.

"I am not going to repeat myself-"

"I really hope you enjoy cold showers, then!"

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

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

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

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

"I'm really sorry," the veteran of the War in Heaven purred, "are you threatening me?"

"Err..."

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

"I am! No warm showers, no warm baths! Not until the Webmistress is back to lead us!"

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

But the attack to kill Artemis never came.

"You love her, don't you?" The ancient monster asked.

"Of course we do! She is the Webmistress! And don't try to change the subject!"

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

Despite the fact the golden arachnid was way taller than the Queen of Blades and towered over her, it failed to be impressive.

"You would do that?" The hopeful tone betrayed Artemis' feelings.

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

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

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

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

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

"Sigenandus, shut up!" How in the name of the Golden Throne the enemy had managed to rebuilt its strength so quickly he didn't know, but they were going to need a lot of firepower to deal with that! "Adjutant, I...suggest we strike a bargain...we are really, really going to need it..."

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald** **Aurelia Malys**

"And then Chaos will rule them all."

Aurelia stopped breathing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aurelia shivered.

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

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

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

For brief seconds, it rained acid and fire.

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

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

There was a terrible shrieking, one which forced her to invoke a sound-dampening incantation, and even then she was forced to place her hands over her ears.

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

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

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

"You suspect correctly."

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

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

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

"I will speak myself, thank you."

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

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

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

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

Now?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Despoiler didn't laugh.

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

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

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

"Muses?"

The sum of information the Space Marine they called 'Abaddon the Despoiler' was aware of was...frightening and horrifying.

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

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

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

"Partially incorrect," their 'host' corrected. "There is a right of trial by combat if the Muse felt the accusations were unfair. According to the writings of some long-dead chronicler, the Queen of Blades challenged the other Muses. After one lost her head in front of Emperor Malekith, the survivors promptly lost their nerve and withdrew their accusations."

Horrifyingly informed might be an *understatement*...

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

"And was that because you failed...or because you didn't try?"

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

"What are you implying, *Warmaster Abaddon*?"

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

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

"Every Empire needs an Emperor."

And the Primordial Annihilator's wrath overwhelmed everything.

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**Fields of Pharsalus**

**62 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Elena** **Kerrigan**

One hundred and sixty-one.

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

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

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

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

Some had been the commanders of the Word Bearers Host.

Many were not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was both exalting...and troubling.

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

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

"**DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR**!"

Elena jumped.

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

The air began to smell foul.

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

"**That was your last assassination, spawn of the False Emperor**."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Should we do the introductions?" Taunting her opponent might give her an opportunity. "I am-"

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

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

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

No, the thing wore some parts of a Seventeenth Legion's power armour, but no one would ever mistake it for an Astartes.

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

The daemonic wings were never graceful or free of scars, but these had more holes than most cheeses she could name.

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

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

The daemon roared in fury and charged.

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

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

"Every Empire needs an Emperor."

If Taylor had before now held any doubt that Abaddon the Despoiler intended to return to Terra and besiege the Imperial Palace a second time, those words made sure said doubts were laid to rest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**I will die today**.

*She saw. She saw the Blood Angel Legion break on a world of red dust covered in bones, the souls of the sacrificed surrounding them through an evil ritual which stank from the Word Bearers' foul machinations.*

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

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

"NO!"

**I will die today**.

*The vision changed.*

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

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

*The Blood Angels did their best but-*

"NO!"

**I will die today**.

"NO! THIS WON'T HAPPEN! STOP THESE LIES!"

*The battlefield is different this time.*

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

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

*And then the storm breaks.*

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

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

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

**I will die today**.

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

It was an error to touch this shard of Sanguinius.

It was an error to try to assimilate it.

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

It was-

**You will die today.**

*Lie. Hope.*

**You will die today.**

*Lie. Sacrifice.*

**You will die today.**

*Lie. Administration.*

There was Light.

There was a golden chrysalis which emerged from the darkness.

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

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

**YOU WILL DIE TODAY!**

She was the Angel of Sacrifice.

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

By Administration, she ruled the Swarm.

And everything around it was swallowed by darkness.

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

**You will be forgotten. There are always more skulls to be claimed for the Skull Throne.**

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

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

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

The laughter of thirsting abominations arrived at her ears.

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

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

"NO! NO! NO!"

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

Taylor seized it.

There was a thunderous screech.

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

She was back before the throne, in the Strategium of the *Vengeful Spirit*. Though her surroundings, the seat and everything looked like they had been the target of an artillery bombardment.

A very vigorous artillery bombardment.

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

"I'm sorry! I thought-"

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

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

She felt an inappropriate urge to laugh.

No, this would have to wait.

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

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

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

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

"My name is Taylor Hebert."

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

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

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

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

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

And right now, they could do absolutely nothing.

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

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**63 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Yvraine** **Kaydinn**

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

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

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

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

But the humans would have won nevertheless.

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

Or so it had appeared during that cycle.

Unfortunately, it seemed she had been wrong.

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

The world shuddered.

Yvraine froze and tried to observe what could have-

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

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

It was a howl of absolute loathing.

"By Isha, what could have possibly-"

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

Without warning, there was something burning in her chest.

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

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

*Weaver.*

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

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

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

It was a message which was unsubtle in the extreme.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Ranger next to her at first looked at her like she was completely mad...but the sensations were no less powerful for those who followed a Path than for those who didn't, and it wasn't long before he knelt and repeated the oath of allegiance.

"**LET THE GALAXY BURN**!"

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

**Macragge** **System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**63 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Leet**

Leet was in awe of Leman Russ.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These weren't wolves, they were mutants.

There was not a single wolf on Fenris, save the Space Marines trying to growl like them.

Change his mind.

"YOU DEPRIVED AN ENTIRE ARMY OF ITS COMMANDER AT A CRITICAL MOMENT! I SHOULD CUT OFF YOUR POINTY EARS AND CALL IT A DAY!"

"You would die the moment you tried it, *barbarian*."

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

Was that normal, doctor?

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

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

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

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

"As I was saying, I am taking command."

"No."

Bears and not-wolves growled.

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

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

"That doesn't give you the right to command me," the Ultramarine Captain who had decided to deny the 'request' hotly retorted.

"You recognised the authority of Weaver on Ardium's soil."

"Of course." The blue-armoured Space Marine confirmed stoically, despite having the muzzle of a tank-sized animal sniffing his right arm. "But Weaver has been nothing but respectful, and her metallic swarm has been an extremely useful contribution without which we would have been overrun. And this swarm, I might add, continues to help us, thanks to her lieutenant arachnids."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The clowns were immobile and silent.

And then Lelith Hesperax began to laugh hysterically.

"What is so funny, Eldar?" Leman Russ growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The** **Warp**

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

The malevolent entities of the Warp that hundreds of trillions worshipped as 'the Chaos Gods' would have been extremely angry being forced to merely having to hear this order.

*They* were the ones giving the orders.

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

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

Giving them orders?

Oh, no. That wasn't tolerated.

At all.

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

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

Really, they had nothing to fear.

Slaanesh had perished because she had been so stupid as to present a massive opening to the Anathema. Trying to do the same with *Them* would not work.

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

Until today.

Until Weaver gave them an order.

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

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

But now, it was too late.

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

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

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

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

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

They loathed both beings, in the end.

And promises of vengeance could wait for another day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was humiliating.

This would not stand.

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

But all was not lost.

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

One of them happened to be in her presence.

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

The order came, implacable and brutal.

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

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

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

**KILL HER! KILL WEAVER!**

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald** **Aurelia Malys**

It had worked.

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

"I...thank you, my Empress."

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

"I'm not doing it for you...I simply happen to very much enjoy kicking the Ruinous Powers where it hurts." There was a pause. "But your thanks are appreciated."

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

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

It could not be described as anything but repulsive.

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

"Shouldn't it look...half-assimilated?" Aurelia asked in a low tone.

"It should...something is wrong." Weaver acknowledged, before pouring a significant amount of energy into one of her swords, and unleashing it against **Excess**'s ruined form.

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

"You could do that all along?"

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

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

The second Aspect-Shard was both better and worse.

"**Avidity**..."

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

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

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

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

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

The spoils of Decay arrived next.

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

The foul smell was impossible to mistake for anything else.

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

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

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

"My Goddess..."

"**My Herald...My Empress...**"

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

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

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

The young Herald blushed as her Goddess read her mind.

Then she realised Weaver had not yet spoken.

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

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

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

"I am not going to allow you to return to the path of hedonism and decadence, I'm sure you realise."

"**I know**."

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

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

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

It was enormous.

It was nearly entirely tainted by Change.

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

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

The attack from it was a bombardment of crystalline and burning feathers...which had no more success than all its predecessors' efforts.

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

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

Merciful Isha, what was-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vainglory

"**I AM ADDAIOTH. I AM THE TRUE GOD OF THE AELDARI**."

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

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

A palm of the not-Avatar expelled a colossal column of orange flames...but it was not an attack targeting them.

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

"*Maelsha'eil Dannan...*"

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

"Kharsaq El'Uriaq of Shaa-Dom." The young Herald made the introductions.

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

"Really."

"**KILL HER**!" Addaioth ordered.

That was...a big mistake.

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

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

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

The next summonings were rather anticlimactic.

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

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

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

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

The Primordial Annihilator's wrath shook the ship they were sailing aboard, and this time, there was no restraint or games of wit.

**KILL HER! KILL WEAVER!**

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

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

But they had not been the targets.

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

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

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

The dark miasma shrouded and suffocated them.

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

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

"***No****.*"

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**64 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Coryphaus** **Kol Badar**

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

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

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR! LET MACRAGGE BURN!"

Kol Badar had been wrong to despair.

Oh he had been wrong.

The Gods hadn't abandoned them.

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

"Destroy their infantry!" The Coryphaus exclaimed. "The Gods have chased them away from the trenches! Don't let them take positions inside the city and-"

The enemy artillery chose that second to fire.

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

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

It was a rain of shells.

There was no other description possible.

And while the Gods' Hosts were the primary targets, thousands were diverted for the Word Bearers' formations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't count on it." Kol Badar replied grimly. "They have all their damned transports in orbit, and many Mechanicus ships besides. As long as we don't destroy their Spaceport, they will continue to ferry everything for their guns. We might as well hope their barrels explode under the strain, that is certainly going to happen sooner..."

There was another barrage.

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

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

It shrugged off the impacts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

This couldn't be anything but a lucky shot; the projectiles didn't have the accuracy to reliably hit a tank one out of three times, never mind purposefully target the few weaknesses of Astartes weaponry.

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

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

Two priceless Rhinos suffered devastating hits.

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

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

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

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

"***No***."

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

Those Warp abominations were malice incarnate.

They could be defeated. They could be trapped.

They could even be killed.

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

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

"***No***."

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

What the hell?

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

Because yes.

What the hell?

It was possible to oppose the power of Chaos.

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

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

The Despoiler had none of these advantages.

The Warp had touched him.

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

The Ruinous Powers had near-limitless power here.

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

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

"How-"

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

Taylor had tasted malevolence before.

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

"Oh by the prison of the Endless Swarm..."

Taylor felt suddenly very, very afraid.

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

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

"The End of Empires."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No?"

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

It wasn't exactly hidden, after all.

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

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

"Maybe you will...another day."

The comment was clearly intended to be one of dismissal.

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

And that could only mean one thing.

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

"Indeed."

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

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

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

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

And it was both intriguing and worrying.

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

**Lord** **Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

Ezekyle was mad.

Of course, they were all insane to some degree.

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

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

This was the height of madness.

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

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

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

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

The Lord Vigilator was extremely wary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That is a bold claim...*Warmaster*."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Presented like you have, it was clearly not fair." The female successor of Sanguinius conceded, her angelic mask facing each of them in turn. "But."

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

"But?" Ezekyle inquired.

"But your way of presenting things is completely inaccurate."

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

They didn't enjoy the protection she had, and the Warp would certainly intensify the 'convincing' of Abaddon.

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

It deserved an answer.

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

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

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

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

"One might argue," Abaddon replied thoughtfully, "that many of said administrators didn't have the slightest intention to share power with their Astartes."

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

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

"That is not the same."

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

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

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

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

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

Taylor wasn't even sure it was the fault of the Ruinous Powers in this particularly case.

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

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

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

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

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

However, she had not the fainted idea-

"HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!"

The most wanted being of the galaxy laughed.

It didn't last long...for whatever that meant here, as in a Warp Storm time had little meaning.

"Even Sigismund didn't dare criticise me in this way...you are quite surprising, Weaver."

"I really meant it, you know."

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

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

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

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

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

"No doubt about it," the Traitor Marine agreed. "But I was not speaking about Cegorach."

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

Taylor immediately took a fighting stance.

By every spider species she controlled, what was-

"**Khaine**," Atharti announced.

**High Orbit of Ardium**

**Newly created 'Mountain Star Fortress' *The Fang***

**65 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Warmaster** **Ender Trevayne**

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

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

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

But back to the office of Warmaster.

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

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

That Ender wasn't on his warship was irrelevant.

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

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

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

And of course, no, the Custodes waiting by his side hadn't shown the slightest intention of partaking in bureaucratic duties.

Bastard.

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

"The lower levels have taken...moderate damage." So much for the good news. "Three more halls have been sealed off; we don't exactly know what happened to them...but the gamblers of my crew are happy to repeat it is likely makeshift repairs of the 32nd millennium finally failing."

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

"Anything else?"

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

"The Space Wolves have accumulated large quantities of things that are going to cause problems if the Inquisition finds about them."

"Xenos technology and trophies?"

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

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

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

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

"Report!"

"The enemy is firing from Ardium's surface, my Lord!"

The Tyranids? But they had not shown any ground-to-orbit weaponry-

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

And now it was no longer true.

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

The red dots signalling enemy fire didn't arrive in groups of one or two.

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

But there was something strange about the pattern.

"Those aren't ballistic missiles or whatever their organic equivalent is."

"No!" One of the rare Space Wolves exclaimed joyously. "Those fiends of the Niflheim abyss must have-"

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

"PSYCHIC VOID MINES! PSYCHIC VOID MINES DETECTED!"

"Emperor save us."

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

But the Tyranids were launching thousands of them.

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

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

"Yes, Warmaster!"

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

"**Khaine**," Atharti announced.

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

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

But it wasn't.

It was far, far worse.

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

Six hundred and sixty-six souls.

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

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

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

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

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

**War**

This one was there from the very beginning, but the restraints of the Aspect were all gone.

**Murder**

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

**Smite**

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

**Incinerate**

This one was self-explanatory, no?

**Bleed**

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

**Doom**

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

Maybe.

Taylor wouldn't gamble her life on this possibility.

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

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

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

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

And what made the trap so perfect?

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

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

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

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

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

The footsteps were akin to a Titan's.

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

The screams...the screams of those who were playing the role of spectators were coming from the Eye of Terror’s denizens.

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

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

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

The way this psychopathic deity turned his head in the direction of the crystals imprisoning the Aspects her power was busy purifying...it was unexpected.

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

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

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

"**YOU DARE ACCUSE ME OF COWARDICE**?"

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

The golden-winged parahuman smiled.

"I didn't see you join the fun at Commorragh. You failed to show up when the Ymga Monolith was destroyed. None of the Black Templars were particularly impressed by the defence your followers put up at Biel-Tan. What I am supposed to think...**Murderer**? That you wage war only when the enemy does not have the ability to retaliate?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The Wailing Doom*

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

The shockwave was...simply world-shaking.

The crowd of the arena bayed for more.

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

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

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

**Macragge System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**66 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Captain** **Falco Tullius**

The Tyranids had not used their most devastating units before Behemoth crashed into Ardium.

It was not very good for his pride, but as the Codex stated, if you underestimated the enemy, then you couldn't complain if you found yourself buried during the next practical.

And besides, it would take a very stubborn and stupid Space Marine to fail to acknowledge how the enemy had 'converted' all its heavy units into psychic weapons of mass destruction.

"So they have psychic Carnifexes," the Ultramarine Captain commented before grimacing. "In addition to everything else they have just shown us."

"Yes," the Salamander Forgefather didn't pause a single second in his task of setting the tens of thousands of corpses which had managed to get through the breach aflame. "In addition to those. The psychic spores they sent into the industrial zones are just murder, according to Gamaliel."

"They need reinforcements?" Falco didn't have any strategic reserve at his disposal – a major failure on his part, according to the Codex Astartes – and conjuring troops was more akin to saving Venus by robbing Mercury these days, but at some point, hard choices had to be made.

"They need all the Auxilia and the workers in advanced carapace armour," the son of Vulkan corrected, trampling the small 'Gaunt' corpses and pulverising some twitching xenos with generous fist strikes. "And power armours would be better. The enemy seems to have millions of varieties of poisons with which to kill the baseline man or woman."

"If I had more power armours stored somewhere," Falco paused as his Bolter needed to take care of several winged Tyranids ...some of them seemed to have gained the ability to vomit a psychic acid. Wonderful. "They would already be on the battlefield, believe me cousin."

"I don't want to criticise," the Salamander and he continued the inglorious but necessary task of verifying that everything that had come through the breaches of the Outer Wall was dead or dying, "but it looks to me like your numbers of advanced carapace armours were already insufficient."

"I don't know the details," Chapter Master Valens had not judged it necessary to reveal this particular information to him, "only the practical."

A decapitated head of some variant of a Carnifex nearly collided with them, but it missed and went to impact the ground next to them.

A xenos clown jumped over their heads, laughing something about war, love, and escalation...assuming he understood correctly, his knowledge of the Eldar language was very rudimentary. And then the acrobatics and the outrageous miming went from the disturbing to the outright obscene.

"The Queens of Perversion are defeated by the Empress! The Lord of War is not getting the joke! It does not get the joke! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And then the xenos disappeared like it had never existed.

In common agreement, the two Space Marines decided to erase the last seconds from their eidetic memory.

"Theoretical: there have been internal purges in the Forges of Konor, and the deliveries of power armour and several other types of advanced weaponry have decreased to an unacceptable point. Practical: to fulfil oaths and obligations, our Chapter has been forced to divert a large percentage of the current production to the regiments and other units deployed in war zones outside Ultramar."

It shouldn't have mattered, because there were accords that if the sovereign worlds of Macragge and other systems under Ultramarine rule were under threat, the Regent could order his forces to return home.

But the current campaign had come out of the blue, without any warning.

They had been no time to recall anyone.

As to echo his thoughts, another part of the Hive's walls was disintegrated.

"Vulkan's fire..."

"Consul's law..."

The smoke created by the phenomenon dissipated quickly, but it had not prevented them from spotting more Carnifexes...more psychic Carnifexes, their maws now built to deliver sonic attacks, and their pincers and talons shrouded in red energies which tore through some of the strongest materials available to the architects of Ultramar with ease.

These were the type of enemies which could kill an Astartes one-on-one.

And they were slaughtered.

By the dozens.

Viscera flew everywhere. Heads were severed.

It was like seeing an invisible storm precisely and methodically mutilating the apex predators of a Death World.

Except the Tyranids were way more dangerous than any mega-predator of an extreme Death World.

Their killer, however, was in a league which was several levels above them.

One strike of her blade, and at least five super-heavy Tyranids died.

When the long-eared xenos landed after several minutes, finally paying attention to something called gravity, it was not to kneel in exhaustion.

"Come on, old barbarian." The Queen of Blades mocked Leman Russ. "Where is that lesson you were supposed to teach me?"

"I am just warming up!" The outraged howl of Leman Russ was not missed, one kilometre away or not.

"You'd better improve." The red-haired 'most wanted' smirked. "Maybe I will give you a nice bone to gnaw on once I reach ten billion kills?"

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald** **Aurelia Malys**

If this fight had happened before the First Fall, they would have been incinerated before being able to strike a serious blow.

Aurelia would admit that much shamelessly.

Weaver was almost a Goddess in her own right now.

Aurelia was empowered by one.

Khaine the Bloody-Handed as he was during the Age of Glory of the Empire would have been an unstoppable foe.

If the greatest Aeldari hero of the Eldanesh line, wielding the most powerful of the Swords of Vaul, and empowered by several Gods, had not been able to do anything against Khaine, then two far less experienced fighters had no chance at all.

Fortunately, they weren't fighting *that* Khaine.

They just had to fight the post-Fall murderous thing the Bloody-Handed had degenerated into.

It was still largely powerful enough to be considered a God, of that there was no doubt.

But as Weaver lacerated its cuirass and easily avoided each attack, it was obvious power was all the Khaine of this era had.

And it wasn't even his power.

With Atharti helping her, it was almost too easy to see through the divine armour and the flames.

And what she saw was something she wouldn't have believed an Aeldari God to be capable of.

Six hundred and sixty-six Avatars had merged.

But since no one had thought it would be necessary to rouse an Avatar of the Bloody-Handed, the Young Kings of six hundred and sixty-six Craftworlds and Khaine enclaves had been compelled by the dark will of Khaine to enter their own doom.

There had been no threat to their homes.

There had been no bargain, no promise, nothing but a soul consumed by a murderous God.

It was something *Slaanesh* would have done to save her life...in fact, it was exactly what Excess had done at Commorragh, in a far larger act of mass murder.

Khaine had been cursed to have his hands perpetually stained with blood.

In Aurelia's humble opinion, if the curse had been proportional, the God of Murder would have blood dripping from his chest, arms, and legs.

"**You are an unworthy pretender**," the never-satiated Murder God thunderously exclaimed as the *Wailing Doom* deflected her attacks. "**ARGH**!"

The exclamation of pain was caused by Weaver stabbing him in the knee with her Sword of Vaul.

"And you," the newly acclaimed Empress of the Aeldari propelled herself on her golden wings to avoid the counterattack, "you deserve only extermination for what you've done. As far as I am concerned, you are no better than the Ruinous Power of War sitting on the Throne of Skulls."

Naturally, that only enraged Khaine...or it enraged it further, since the Bloody-Handed was already very angry.

"**I AM THE TRUE LORD OF WAR! DO NOT COMPARE ME WITH THAT FOUL CREATURE**!"

"Why?" Weaver asked politely while conjuring tens of thousands of scarabs and spreading them so that they attacked from every direction. "I wasn't able to check his Aspects like I did yours, but I'm certain they aren't very different."

"**YOUR INSOLENCE WILL PERISH IN MY FLAMES**!"

"No, I don't think so. Oh, and by the way? Regicide."

There was a bright flash of golden light...and the source was Khaine's knee, the one that Weaver had recently struck.

Aurelia saw that despite them fighting in the domain of War, the Angel of Death had been able to make her artificial insects dig under the arena's surface and wait until the time was right.

The ants and other tiny crystalline auxiliaries did not last long, not with the fires of Khaine burning so fiercely.

But as they died, the inferno of the Bloody-Handed seemed to dim, and where the black cuirass was pierced, there was a tiny injury bleeding gold like one would bleed from a Warp poison.

It did not escape the attention of Khaine.

"**What are you doing? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE**?"

Aurelia observed...and smiled. The Aspect of **Incinerate** had been partially drained.

"We are," the young Herald of Atharti spoke for the two of them, "about to rectify the greatest mistake Asuryan ever made."

And yes, if you wondered, the mistake was letting Khaine live after he proved an unrepentant butcher.

**Macragge**

**Macragge Civitas District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**66 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Chapter** **Master Cato Valens**

The moment the auspexes had warned them of the eight Stormbirds suddenly rising from the heretics' rearlines, the Regent of Macragge had known what was going to happen.

The eight Thunderhawks following the ancient corrupted aircraft were only further confirmation he didn't really need.

As was the fact that the fighting raging in Macragge City itself had knocked out two of the defence lasers which would have blasted apart any assault aircraft well before they could accomplish anything of importance.

"They are coming for us, Gaius."

The cogitators were unable to predict the final destination of those aircraft; yet more evidence that when it came to instinct, nothing could beat good old battle-experience.

The Traitors simply couldn't win an urban battle in the streets of their capital.

They just didn't have the numbers to achieve a victory there. Not when Weaver's mechanised and artillery brigades had refused to break.

The lines of the regiments of Nyx were not panicking at the sight of the Archenemy, and though they lost ground, they were reaping a prodigious toll from their foes. While any daemon which fell was insignificant, the sorcerers whose heads were blown apart by snipers were not. And there was an unrelenting bombardment of artillery, which disintegrated the cohesion and the numbers of the surviving Word Bearers.

No, there couldn't be any victory for the Traitors. Not with the civilians evacuated hours ago – the Word Bearers would not butcher the innocent upon their eternally-damned altars. Not with the heretics behind unable to open a second offensive from the south. The Traitor Titans were all dead near Pharsalus or soon would be, unable to support their fell masters.

And that left only one 'victory' the Traitor Seventeenth could claim.

But for that they had to attack the Fortress of Hera directly.

"The defence lasers?" The Captain of the 1st Company inquired, clearly having anticipated his will.

"Wait until the last five seconds," it was completely outside the Codex's tenets, and thus may be able to surprise even a Primarch's mind, "and combine it with the rapid fire of all the Hydras you recalled. The theoretical is about to begin an effective practical."

"I would have preferred to be wrong," Gaius Pompeius admitted. "The 31st Anti-Air is an Auxilia regiment with a proud and distinguished history," a history which, they both knew, had for centuries been associated mainly with the Battle of Calth, "but the current generation has never faced any Chaos Astartes in the flesh."

Cato Valens understood. The majority of said troopers were likely to die if...no, *when* the enemy landed.

The Stormbirds were nothing but ramming tools, kamikaze planes whose sole goal was to knock out the shield generators long enough for the Thunderhawks behind to disgorge the true assault force.

"I am going to take command of all Space Marines in the fortress. Should I leave our Genesis brothers to-"

"No," the Regent of Macragge shook his head as explosions filled the skies, and Macragge City and the entire Laponis Valley burned. "Take everyone with you. Captain Decius will coordinate the battle with the Scouts from the underground Strategium. As for me...the moment they land, I will go to the Shrine."

"Lord Regent?"

"I hope you will be able to stop them dead, but we all know who is coming."

There were about ten thousand vid-casts that had recorded the Arch-Traitor of the Seventeenth Legion transforming back from its Chaos Spawn appearance.

"I am going to activate all the surprises we kept for such a day. And direct the evacuation of the pilgrims and personnel we have here."

"By your will." Gaius saluted and ran out of the room.

Cato Valens wondered if he should have said something more, anything to his battle-brother...because he very well knew, deep in his two hearts, that the odds of the two of them being reunited again were infinitesimal.

The sound of more explosions led him to refocus on the aerial battle.

The Stormbirds had at last stopped pretending they were after something else and threw everything they had into their turbo-reactors and shields.

"Authorisation Alpha-Vermillion-Alpha. Kill them." Cato ordered, and the Defence Lasers activated.

The Stormbirds were old machinery. The Chapter Master of the Ultramarines remembered reading that the original armour plating was a triumph of engineering originally designed by the scientists of the PanPacific Empire. With first-rate compartmentalisation, superior shields, and of course the mutations of the Warp the heretics spread whenever they could, the Stormbirds of the Seventeenth Legion were all but invulnerable to the Hydras' ammunition.

Or that was the theoretical, anyway.

The practical was when five Defence Lasers and over three hundred Hydras revealed themselves in a lethal opening salvo, the Stormbirds died.

One. Two. Three. Four. The entire first wave fell from the skies without achieving anything but their own death; the aircraft were clearly uncontrollable and would shatter against the mountain range doing no damage to the Fortress of Hera.

But the second wave survived.

Not entirely unscathed; one Stormbird was clearly dying.

But that left three more.

More anti-aircraft defence which had been hidden unleashed its fury. Over fifty more Hydras added their fire.

One more Traitor Word Bearer hull died.

And then another.

But the last one, despite being a carcass of burning metal, managed to ram the primary shield generator.

Energy output would be rapidly diverted, of course.

But for three point two seconds, there was a massive breach in the shield.

For non-Astartes, it would be a suicidal enterprise.

For Astartes, it was a large gap...though the Hydras and half of the Defence Lasers were able to fire a second volley, destroying three Thunderhawks.

But the rest touched down...or more accurately, they crashed hard on the landing platforms of the Fortress of Hera.

And the first being which charged out of the Thunderhawks was eminently recognisable.

"Lorgar..." The Regent of Macragge hissed before controlling himself. "With me, brothers. It seems we need to activate some contingencies to kill the bastard."

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lord** **Vortigern of the Black Lions**

This clash was reminiscent of the battles against the Great Beasts of Caliban.

On one side you had a near unbelievably powerful opponent.

For this fight, it was the Eldar God Khaine.

Much like a Great Beast, it had powerful skills which should have made it nearly unbeatable.

The deity's flames, used as both a shield and an area-denial weapon, were an incredible defence. Khaine also had a terrible weapon which had three forms: the first was a bastardized form of spear-sword, the second was an axe, and the third was a Titan-sized pike. Said psychic weapon could indifferently be used for close-quarters attack or at long-range.

Vortigern wasn't going to list every type of offense the Titan-sized deity had. It would take far too long.

And Khaine didn't have that many seconds to live, anyway.

Yes, Khaine was losing.

Much like the Great Beasts of his long-gone homeworld, Vortigern recognised in Khaine plenty of ferocity, ruthlessness, and cruelty. The Bloody-Handed God had good predatory instincts and the sheer cruelty to push forwards despite being wounded time and time again.

Khaine was stubborn and no matter how it had been able to reach the *Vengeful Spirit*, their uninvited 'guest' was filled with inhuman endurance.

But the advantages stopped there.

For all its cunning and superlative power, Slaanesh's rival had clearly not planned anything before challenging his enemies.

Even Weaver's basic attacks had come as true surprises the moment the battle began.

This was a colossal act of raw stupidity, it needed to be said.

After the death of Excess, the Black Legion had done its utmost to gather enormous volumes of information about the Destroyer of Commorragh.

Yes, they had not intended to fight a campaign against her, but only a fool – something no one of the Ezekarion could be accused of being – would not study someone who had accomplished the impossible.

Khaine had evidently not shared their point of view.

Or maybe the Bloody-Handed God believed Weaver was so far beneath him it wouldn't matter.

But as the battle continued, this belief was revealed to be untrue.

And the arena symbolising the challenge was cracking under Weaver and her Eldar ally's attack.

"Weaver could have won alone," he told Iskandar. "Her enemy fails to adapt to her attacks."

"It's worse than that," the Third of the Ezekarion answered with a distracted tone of voice. "They are draining its Aspects and damaging the multitude of Avatars that were combined to rebuild the Lord of Eldar Murder to its former glory."

"And in practical terms, like the Ultramarines would say, that means?" Vortigern asked with genuine curiosity.

"Each time Weaver is able to strike a true blow, his strength diminishes, possibly forever. Each time the Champion of Carnality harms the Bloody-Handed, a small part of the connection between the Eldar and their God of War is stolen."

Iskandar watched silently before resuming his professional judgement.

"It is a rare opportunity that has been given to us today, brother." When spoken by one of the most dangerous sorcerers and assassins to ever live, those words were not empty bragging. "We are going to be privileged to see the death of a God."

Khaine roared in fury, as if to deny the affirmation, but in reality it was because his black ichor was pouring over the sand arena he had chosen as his battlefield.

Many parts of the burning red-black armour had been broken, and golden flames burned where the divine protection had failed.

Crystalline skin appeared where unnatural vitality had been siphoned away,to the point the enormous weapon of Khaine was only wielded with one hand.

And Weaver and her ally never stopped moving, jumping, and flying at speeds which were beyond anything mortals would ever be able to achieve.

It was a battle only veterans like the Ezekarion could truly appreciate the beauty of.

It was a dance of death.

"*It is over*." Ezekyle spoke.

Three heartbeats later, no more, no less, the sword of Weaver shone like a star and slid through the neck of the xenos primordial murderer.

The fires immediately vanished, and then the Eldar bathed in pink power used her own sword to impale it in the torso.

But the head didn't touch the arena's destroyed floor.

The severed head of Khaine levitated, surrounded by a corona of black and red psychic power.

"**YOU MAY HAVE DEFEATED ME, BUT I WILL HAVE MY REVENGE! CURSE**-"

Weaver's second sword went through its maw – with the teeth it had, there was no way to call it a mouth – and whatever shreds of power were used, they at last failed.

The head fell and when it crashed, it rang like the end of a world.

Dark ichor spread everywhere, just as the arena began to disintegrate and the 'normal' appearance of the *Vengeful Spirit* returned.

Yet Vortigern saw the black marks where Khaine stopped moving, and had the disagreeable suspicion that they had abandoned the crystal statues of Sanguinius for something far nastier.

"*A God is dead*."

As the words were uttered, Khaine's fresh corpse began to bleed out, and with every second, more parts of the corpse vanished into oblivion. The feet were the first to go, then the neck, and soon it was the turn of the arms.

The hands – which despite the death, had never stopped bleeding, were almost the last to disappear from this realm of existence.

Rapidly, there were only three things remaining: the severed head – the sword through the maw was certainly playing a role keeping it here – was the first. The sword-spear was the second. And the third...was the Heart of Khaine.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"If you think it is the Heart of **Khaine**, the greatest divine artefact in existence right now," Ezekyle interjected, "yes, yes it is. Of course..."

"Of course *what*?" Lheorvine asked angrily.

The Eldar descended on brilliant violet-pink wings, and one of her hands went to touch the God's heart, as if she couldn't believe it was real.

To be honest, Vortigern had difficulties believing it was real too. A God dying before you was not exactly what had been on his schedule when they met earlier...

"Of course," the Gods screeched in fury, and the clamours of war returned higher and more powerful. A dark sky was summoned, and the red plains covered in skulls where the Hosts of War fought for all eternity became visible. "It is a trap too."

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

This time Taylor wasn't going to blame the Eldar. Just this once, though.

Aurelia Malys had touched the heart of Khaine because she was the closest to it, but she would have done the same and likely tried to pour her powers into it so that the taint of Excess could be purged.

The Herald of Atharti wasn't to blame.

Alas, it didn't change the fact that they had just fallen into someone's trap.

And the insect-mistress had a good idea of the Ruinous Power behind said manipulation.

The Aspect of Excess.

It all came back to it.

Why had it been a crippled form of Slaanesh?

The answer was now all too obvious in its sinister glory.

"My Empress, I am sorry, I-"

"You are not at fault. Behind me. Now."

The *Vengeful Spirit* disappeared once more as a monster altered it so it looked like its Domain.

The ceiling became dark clouds of apocalypse. The floor was soon covered in skulls and freshly flayed corpses.

Blood ran from enormous statues of brass.

The tumult of **War** grew and grew until it became nearly unbearable to her ears.

The mental compulsions were muted for her, but the Lady General was absolutely sure that if you were not a mortal granted a boon from the Emperor or another Power, you wouldn't last long before behaving like a crazy warmonger and joining the cohorts of daemons fighting on these corrupted plains.

It was the end of all Peace and Sanity.

It was the realm of Khorne.

And it was his trap which had been sprung.

The irony. The Ruinous Power that all cultists of the other factions considered brutish, unable to do anything subtle, and straightforward to the point it was comical...this very abomination had engineered a trap giving it an advantage over Tzeentch, Slaanesh, and Malal.

Khorne was – in part – the **Excess of War**, and had been for millions of years. It didn't need Slaanesh.

It didn't need to claim an Aspect for itself, and so it hadn't.

But by letting the other parasites weaken themselves, by giving them the rope they would hang themselves with...it had triggered Slaanesh's own trap and thrown a tantrum to convince the others it was not part of the plan.

And so one of the most dangerous entities to ever be created in the Warp...well, there was no use denying it.

*It had a claim*.

Khaine was **War**, bloody murder incarnate.

Unfortunately, so was Khorne.

And now that the 'Aeldari God' was dead and gone, its last moments spent behaving like a glorious imbecile...

It could have been avoided.

If Khaine had been willing to stop the carnage, to consider the interests of his worshippers ahead of his own...

But if Khaine had done that, Taylor supposed he wouldn't have been Khaine.

He wouldn't have been a Lord of Murder, and an unrepentant abomination.

In the end, the defunct Aeldari God of War had proven her right; there was truly nothing separating him from the Ruinous Powers.

No wonder Biel-Tan had been unable to see beyond their wars, with a patron like that.

"What do we do?"

Aurelia, for all her flaws, really had a gift for asking the right questions...

"We wait." The Angel of Sacrifice replied, refraining from voicing a sigh, though she desperately wanted to. "Unless I am gravely mistaken...an emissary will come soon."

And behind the emissary there would be a Champion. Just in case they wanted to fight against the claim.

And as much she wanted to...one had to be realistic.

They would, for all intents and purposes, be fighting in the Domain of Khorne.

Corruption's risk would be very low for the two of them, but that couldn't compensate for the enormous power boost granted to the Bloodthirsters and the others of their kind.

They didn't have to wait for long.

The ground shuddered, and a daemon advanced to meet them.

While at first nothing could be discerned of its appearance, the seven Bloodthirsters behind it were visible, and that if anything proved the Ruinous Power of War hadn't sent them a lightweight.

Something confirmed in the next heartbeats as the smoke of war was banished.

It looked vaguely humanoid.

But its face was not human. It was that of a beast, and the horns and red skin did nothing to decrease this impression.

And no one would mistake it for a human, although it had donned a black armour and tied a cloak to its broad shoulders, the former had a metal surface where screaming faces contorted in agony, and the latter had been woven from the flayed skin of loyalist Space Marines. Their helmets were tied to it, so as to remove any doubt you could have.

It could have been a new variant of a Bloodletter...but the small daemons did not possess the evil power this one had.

In raw violence and murderous intent, this abomination was certainly on par with Ka'Bandha.

"Weaver. Be known to *Doombreed*," Abaddon the Despoiler made the introductions.

Ah, hell.

This was not an Exalted Bloodthirster. This was one of the most dangerous Daemon Princes of Khorne.

Save the Traitor Primarch Angron, there were no other former mortals more dangerous than this Champion of Ruinous War.

And as if the name had granted it strength, the daemon began to grow bigger. The skin turned a very dark red, and more smoke poured out from the dark armour.

When the process finally stopped, the daemon was the size of a medium Knight.

This could have been reassuring. It really wasn't.

"**I am His Voice**." The sound was the clamour of war and the murder of innocents. "**And my Lord has the better claim**."

"I listen." She replied. It wasn't like she had a choice...or rather, yes, she had one, but the alternative would be far worse.

"**My Lord could claim the Heart of Khaine**." Doombreed proclaimed. "**But Khaine was weak. He was easily defeated. His only worthiness is to be one more skull for the Skull Throne**."

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!"

One of the Bloodthirsters behind screamed, raising a banner of bloody flesh bearing the mark of Ruinous War.

"**SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!"

"I see. Assuming you are willing to let me keep the Heart," which would likely mean the salvation of the Craftworld Eldar, given that pretty much essentially all their people had followed the Paths of the Warrior at one point or another, "I suppose your Lord wants compensation."

The Daemon Prince bared its fangs.

"**A claim for a claim, nemesis of the Angel's Bane. You keep the Heart of Khaine, to do with as you wish. I return to the Skull Throne with the soul of the Dark Muse Hekatii**."

Taylor frowned, wondering why the hell Khorne would waste his time with the essence-soul of one ancient Aeldari, no matter how powerful...and then some knowledge that wasn't hers flashed in her mind, accompanied by scenes of battle and Chaos.

*She is the last Apprentice of the Queen of Blades before the Fall*.

*In ages past, the Phoenix Court would have been debating endlessly about this for cycles.*

*But those Ages are gone. Decadence is ascendant and the majority of the Aeldari are swimming in an ocean of horrifying hedonism.*

*And being the Apprentice of Aenaria Eldanesh is no longer acknowledged as an honour. You are taught by a redoubtable relic of ages past, but a relic nonetheless.*

*The teacher warns her student to ignore the depravity and the hedonism perverting what was once a noble Empire.*

*For a long time, the advice is followed.*

*But nothing is eternal, and after the Apprentice is allowed to glimpse a fraction of the Mistress' immense power, bitterness grows.*

*She is however clever enough to hide it until the Apprenticeship is declared complete.*

*And then the one who is no longer innocent is unleashed.*

*It is a path of mayhem and murder.*

*It is a life of carnage and rivers of blood.*

*A monster is born.*

*They call her Hekatii, and no one is able to stop her.*

*The appearance is slightly altered with each victory. Unlike many cultists of the unborn Goddess, it is not done on hundreds of whims. It does not change with every rotation of the captive suns.*

*It is nonetheless terrible to behold.*

*The skin becomes ivory white.*

*The hair is red, the shade being synchronised with the power of the Warp to be a crimson which will be attuned to the essence of blood.*

*After more victories, the eyes are changed to irisless red.*

*The prodigy's ascension can't be stopped, and she rises as the High Priestess of Khaine.*

*Her body reflects this; it is a vision of beauty and murder.*

*Her bladework is said to only be rivalled by her former teacher...who left long ago, and has yet to reappear. And her Haemokinesis, her ability to manipulate blood from her own body and the red nectar from others on a macro-scale, is unparalleled.*

*There is no true challenge to her anymore.*

*In the arenas, her opponents are lucky to last sixty of her heartbeats before being defeated...and then dragged to the altars where they will be slowly exsanguinated via countless tortures.*

*So when Emperor Malekith desires to cast aside the only being she has never beaten, Hekatii seizes her chance.*

*One is given the privilege to fight and die before her, but it does not matter.*

*She is Hekatii.*

*She is the Queen of the Arenas in a realm where Excess is breaking the laws of reality, where the Aeldari Empire is beginning its final fall into murderous extinction.*

*She has killed millions on sands turned dark by sorceries so vile that every sane Aeldari has long since fled this region of space.*

*She is the Champion of Champions, the Chief Murderess of an Empire of Treachery and Murder.*

*She is still too weak when the Queen of Blades decides to fight seriously.*

*It is only by Morathi's intervention – an intervention which dooms a small army – that the vanquished High Priestess lives.*

*But as her Haemokinesis fails her and she is forced to bathe in a Cauldron of Resurrection for the first time, the arrogant blade-mistress seals her damnation.*

*It was not Khaine who was whispering in her ear during the cycles where she fell deeper and deeper into madness and depravity.*

*It was never Khaine.*

*It was Slaanesh.*

*And the soon-to-be-born Goddess is no gentle mistress.*

*The beauty of Hekatii is restored. The terrible scars left by the Queen of Blades are erased.*

*For a short amount of time.*

*She bathes again in the blood of her victims, and the scars disappear.*

*But each time she does so, it is for ever shorter amounts of time.*

*And the young and perfect appearance she craves to return to requires her to shed greater and greater volumes of blood to preserve her beauty.*

*It is, ultimately, a task humans would describe as Sisyphean. She never stops using the Cauldron of Blood, of course.*

*But the scars and the ravaged body remain.*

*Excess has won.*

*The soul was monstrous, and now the appearance matches it.*

*The Dark Muse is born.*

*And she will be known as the Red Crone before the Empire's end.*

The information flow ended.

Taylor hesitated.

Of all the Muses' essences that were awaiting her decision, this...Hekatii was certainly the most dangerous when it came to battlefield issues.

Releasing it to one of the Ruinous Powers was not what she would describe as a good idea.

But, and the thought was not new...the alternatives were all worse.

"**Have you made your choice**?"

"Take her. A claim for a claim." It tasted horrible on her tongue...as did all defeats.

"Let the pact be witnessed," Abaddon the Despoiler spoke loudly.

"**And let the Blood remember**." Doombreed added. The crystal containing the essence of the Red Crone was teleported by his side. "**If I meet you again, Weaver, I will kill you**."

And then the Daemon Prince was gone.

Taylor immediately turned to face Aurelia, and placed her hands upon the Heart of Khaine.

**Macragge System**

**Laphis**

**Ravenna – west of the Polenta River**

**Encircled positions of the Traitor forces**

**66 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Captain** **Cel 'Jackal' Kolerion**

The good news was that the situation was longer bad.

The bad news, unfortunately, was that they had exchanged the bad for the catastrophic and the absolutely desperate.

The enemy artillery worked with their air support to guarantee that block by block, the resistance of the surviving Legionnaires and all half-motivated slave units was being decisively crushed.

And when a Word Bearer daemon-dabbler was stupid enough to begin calling the Neverborn, thousands of cannons and tens of thousands of guardsmen immediately focused on him.

No one survived that kind of 'attention' for long.

The Jackal chuckled, though there was nothing funny.

"We are completely screwed." Though he didn't know why he used the 'we', to be honest. Cel was alone, and since abandoning the building with the painting of Guilliman, they had lost about four hundred metres of frontline. "Fuck Erebus."

The words had become some sort of stress-relief for all survivors of the pocket.

They were all going to die, but at least, the Vile One wasn't going to dance upon their graves.

It was not a very big consolation, but it was something positive...and as he had noted moments ago, the good news was going to be thin on the ground.

The artillery thundered again, and Lasguns fired by the thousands at the other end of the street.

Cel rushed to a new position, one which was several metres behind the crumbling wall he had used for a good ten minutes.

His new refuge was a church. One which, surprisingly, looked like it had been mostly avoided by the Word Bearers' so-called illumination efforts. The fanatics generally began by crucifying the Priests. Afterwards, they either destroyed the Imperial symbols or desecrated everything.

There was none of that here, though of course the church was hardly in good condition. The roof was in ruins, and whatever seats and objects had been gathered before their invasion, they were nothing but a pile of debris anymore.

The big marble statue of the Emperor was nearly intact, however. A big surprise, for...well, everything nearby was rubble or some vast amount of debris.

Yet by random luck, the statue had survived.

Cel examined his surroundings, and wasn't able to perceive anyone.

It was dark, but for an Astartes with the gifts of the defunct Eighth Legion, this was not a problem.

And so, Cel allowed himself a small joke.

He looked at the severe face of the Emperor, and nodded.

"Forgive me, grandfather, for I have mightily sinned."

He really didn't expect any laughter to answer, but some coughing rasp which could be mistaken for it echoed a second later.

"Show yourself!" Cel swore, as the rumble of the artillery resumed and more dust fell from the church's ruined roof.

"**As you wish**."

The daemon – for it could only be a daemon – slowly emerged from the shadows.

Or maybe it had always been part of the shadows, and was just allowing him to see it now.

After plenty of time spent fighting near the Word Bearers, the appearance of the being was...unimpressive seemed the most respectful word the Jackal could think of.

It was the size of a relatively small Astartes, and looked like a hunched figure hiding most of its body under a grey cloak.

"**Greetings, Cel Kolerion. I have long waited to meet you**."

"I wish I could say the same, but I have long been told I'm a poor liar," the elite Night Lord pilot retorted sarcastically. "What do you want, servant of the Dark Gods?"

"**I do not serve them. I serve only the Eighth Legion**."

This time Cel chuckled with genuine amusement.

"That's a lie, and we both know it. First, because all of them pretend they have broken their chains, but ultimately, it is all revealed to be delusion. And then, what makes your statement ridiculous...the Eighth Legion is no more. It is long dead. Whoever pretends the contrary is a fool."

The grey cloak of the Neverborn fell, revealing...Night Lord armour, partially covered in a sort of black fur.

The daemon also had large membranous bat wings, and a mouth with crooked, needle-like teeth. The eyes were glowing a sickly red. There were talons instead of feet, and claws where humans and Astartes had hands. As for its head, it was a vaguely bat-shaped head trying to adopt some human traits without success.

"**The Legion is crippled and dispersed**." The daemon acknowledged. "**But it can be reunited. And the future is in flux. Weaver and the Anathema's radiance have plunged the Empyrean into the greatest turmoil since the Birth of Slaanesh. They have woken up many things they don't understand. They have broken the chains of my prison**."

"We will never be the slaves of a creature like you. Pirates, many of our enemies and allies call us, but we have more sense than the Word Bearers. We will never kneel to a Raptor daemon."

"**But you will kneel before the Prince of Crows**."

The news took him completely by surprise.

"He's still alive?"

"**He is**." The daemon tried to smile...at least Cel thought it was a smile. "**Even as we speak, he's sailing towards his destiny in the Somnium Stars. Warbands have been summoned. The Eighth Legion, long divided, will reunite**."

Past the surprise, the Jackal didn't think it was going to be that simple. The Night Lords had ceased to be a Legion several years before Horus died at the end of the Siege, and that had been millennia ago. Moreover, Sevatarion was a terrifying enforcer and one of the most lethal fighters of the Legions, but he had never showed he was able to lead campaigns like the Despoiler did...and that would be the kind of leadership required to reunite the Eighth.

But there was an immediate and more urgent problem.

"That is all good and well for him, but the First Captain is out of the trap and I am not."

"**There is a xenos relic long forgotten in the basement of this church**." The daemon agitated its large black wings. "**It will transport you to the Somnium Stars...**."

No bargain, no demand for his soul? That was...very unusual behaviour for a Warp creature, to put it mildly.

"Who are you?"

"**I am Cama-Zotz**." The bat-like daemon proclaimed. "**And it is finally time for the sons to cast off the shadow of their father**."

"And embrace the fact we are pirates?"

"**No**." The strange being of shadows corrected. "**Not Pirates. Not anymore.** **You will become Corsairs**."

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

The moment her fingers touched it, the sensation was one of intense heat.

It was...not a surprise, really.

Khaine had been surrounded by flames as long as he was alive.

His heart containing the last flames was somehow fitting.

The heart was still beating.

It was beating with one word. It sang only one tune, one both terrible and unrelenting.

It was one Taylor knew very well and was no stranger to.

**War**

The temptation to curse the Bloody-Handed God was strong.

But the ruthless monster was dead.

No matter how many crimes he had committed, Khaine was no more.

Wasting her time cursing him would provide nothing but fleeting seconds of satisfaction.

Her fingers became intertwined with Aurelia Malys'.

They were both touching the heart, though only her power was strong enough to go through the black-red artefact which was all that remained of a God. Well, no, there was the scary helmet and the *Wailing Doom*, but those were rather useless compared to the Heart.

"You can't destroy it." The Herald pleaded. "Without it..."

"All your warrior caste will be essentially damned. I know."

The Angel of Sacrifice moderated the flow of light coming out of her hands. It wouldn't do to destabilise it and create conditions which would result in the Heart of Khaine blowing up in their faces.

"On the one hand, it is vital for your the survival of your species. On the other hand, I have seen what it did to Biel-Tan and the Drukhari of Commorragh who worshipped him. His influence was as ruinous as Slaanesh's, in the end. It was just a slow-acting poison, transforming the most vulnerable part of your society into psychopathic monsters. If I leave things as they are, we might as well organise a war against all Craftworlds now, because having a God or a Goddess burning with the power of War tainted by murder will result in countless other Imperial Crusades against Eldar depredations."

"The influence of the Bloody-Handed is something I am horrified by now that I have seen what it led us to," the former denizen of Commorragh admitted, "but without it, my Empress, what will we become? As much as I hate acknowledging it, we need warriors and the means to wage war. This galaxy is anything but peaceful, and whether we want to hide within the Craftworlds or not, there are enemies who desire our annihilation."

**Truth** rang in her words...not that Taylor really needed the confirmation, thank you very much.

After Commorragh, the Lady General she was wouldn't have much cared.

Now?

They had helped her, if only for their own self-interest and desire to survive.

They had pushed her to become their ruler, and the claim cut both ways.

And suddenly, Taylor understood what she had to do.

"Make sure no one interferes." She ordered...and then the insect-mistress called on the power of **Administration** within her.

It felt right.

It sang, pleased she accepted everything there was to offer.

They sang together, and by the power flowing everywhere and nowhere, the Light began to **Administer** the Heart of Khaine.

Calculations which should have been beyond her were solved in milliseconds.

Matrixes that no normal human could have understood without the biggest cogitator banks of the Imperium were prepared and conceived.

The Heart of Khaine, slowly but surely, began to be modified in depth and surface.

Outwardly, the harsh red-black theme was fading, and a light fuchsia colour manifested here and there.

It wasn't an attempt to convert the Heart into an Aspect of **Peace**.

That was not within her power.

The Heart had been forever dedicated to **War**; trying to alter it into its complete opposite would guarantee it exploding within a few seconds.

And even if it worked, this would just mean that at the end of the road, the legacy would be a race utterly defenceless, where the cuddly Rashans would be mad warmongers by comparison.

**Peace**, as much as she hated to think about it in these terms, would be the doom of the Craftworlds and the long-ears who desired to worship Atharti.

No, what the Eldar needed...what the Aeldari needed, if they were to survive for another millennium was moderation.

They needed to understand there was a course to be charted between total war and complete peace.

They needed *moderation*.

Was it playing Goddess over a race she had spent a lot of time killing every time she met them?

Absolutely.

And as the calculations became ever and ever more complex, Taylor was very well aware that what she was going to unleash was going to change the ancient species forever.

Yes, in a way, the potential of what she was going to trigger had always been there.

The Aeldari were, all bad puns ignored, a magical race.

They could be...what they wanted. What they desired. They were so powerful psychically that at the height of their power, they truly could remodel their surroundings.

And this had led them to create Slaanesh.

Thus the absolute, terribly necessity to give them true limits...otherwise it was not a question of *if*, it would be a question of *when* the newly 'free' xenos would do something incredibly stupid and yet again unleash a new abomination upon this poor galaxy.

Atharti could be the enforcer of that limit...except Carnality was not exactly known for its moderation.

It needed another core principle.

It had to gain an Aspect, and it couldn't be something utterly dominating or too aggressive, otherwise Atharti would reject it, much like the Heart of Khaine would have rejected **Peace**.

It needed...it needed **Symbiosis**.

**Administration** sang. She was **Administration**.

And then the work was done.

When she opened her eyes again, the Heart of Khaine was no more.

Oh, there was an extremely powerful Heart within her hands and those of Aurelia, but it wasn't Khaine's anymore.

This was no symbol of brutality, beating and inciting them to draw weapons and bathe the ship in blood and entrails.

This was a vital organ of soft fuchsia, and the veins were the healthy green of life.

Aurelia's expression blossomed into a radiant smile...and maybe hers imitated it.

"It...it is..."

"It is a new heart...for a new Goddess."

Somehow, whispering seemed appropriate.

The Ruinous Powers were still there, but without any God being involved in this heart-forging, their intervention was impossible...unless they wanted to give the Emperor an opening.

And so they didn't.

"How do you want us to proceed, my Empress?"

"The heart is the most important part, but we need-"

Years of training against Astartes too sneaky for their own good and the myriad of crystal insects she had not allowed to disperse gave her an advance warning where the average veteran would have been granted none.

One hand was kept holding the Heart of Symbiosis, but the other went to *Eraser*, and the Adrathic Pistol Cawl had forged fired, it was just in time.

These were not lasers which were fired in her direction, but deep in her guts, the Destroyer of Commorragh knew they would do something extremely unfriendly should they hit.

The exact nature would remain unknown for now, as Adrathic weapons molecularly disintegrated everything, and thus there was no trace of the projectiles when she stopped firing.

There was no trace of the attacker either, but Taylor knew better than assuming she had seriously inconvenienced whoever was behind this ambush.

Her eyes turned to Abaddon the Despoiler, but the Chaos Warmaster seemed as surprised as she was...and extremely angry to boot.

"Reveal yourself!"

The Heir to Horus stared at several parts of the strategium...and then with an impressive speed, Drach'nyen was unleashed.

Reality **screamed**.

The *Vengeful Spirit*...roared in fury.

For something like three or four seconds, nothing happened.

And then it changed.

The very air shivered, and a sort of...a sort of road seemed to materialise before every spectator's eyes.

Which was impossible.

The birth scream of Slaanesh had broken most of the Webway Gates and tunnels when it created the Eye of Terror.

But even if it hadn't, Taylor knew enough about the Webway to know you didn't create unprotected roads in the Sea of Souls!

The abominations dwelling there would eat you before the first minuscule section was declared complete.

But it was a road...of sorts.

And then Taylor realised it hadn't been stones or some ordinary material which had been used.

It was bones.

What little she could see from her viewpoint was an assemblage of every possible bone you could find in a human body...and some which were not.

It was a road of bones. How crazy did someone have to be to even consider-

"*Reveal yourself*," the tone clearly implied the most wanted being of the galaxy didn't enjoy repeating the command.

This time the mysterious attacker had no choice but to obey the Warmaster.

It abandoned the obscurity of the road it had used for its purposes and finally set foot on the *Vengeful Spirit*.

It was a Space Marine.

The Terminator Armour was eminently recognisable, despite the sheer damage which had been inflicted on it and the total absence of Legion colours.

The pattern, however...it wasn't one Taylor had seen before. The fundamental characteristics were right, but the specific details were not.

To begin with, the Lady General had been pretty sure before today that no Legion save the Thousand Sons used *pharaoh-themed helmets.*

And this Space Marine was not a Thousand Son. While it was possible that after years of errant travels or some other disaster a power armour would lose its colours...the rank insignia, the markings, and some other signs should be there to be observed.

There were none.

Moreover, Taylor didn't feel the corruption of Tzeentch emanating from him.

There was something foul...something challenging the very principles, as tenuous and flexible as they were, of the Materium and the Immaterium.

Her analysis was very much in a preliminary stage...but it was deeply unnerving to look at this newcomer who had just tried to kill her.

It was...if she didn't swear it was impossible, the robotic and emotionless way the Astartes moved would indicate it was a machine.

Except a machine would have zero chance to survive uncorrupted in the Warp. This was a realm where Abominable Intelligences and similar genocidal engines were unable to fight the Ruinous Powers.

"You...I remember you."

Every pair of eyes turned towards the Despoiler, if they were not already watching him.

"You have lost your colours, but I recognise the helmet. I can't say your name, it was obliterated with the rest...but I remember. First Captain...of the Eleventh Legion."

The Warp was absolutely silent.

Everything went still.

This, if anything else, was completely and utterly *bloody terrifying*.

Because no one, not the Ruinous Powers, not the Emperor, not Cegorach...no one had seen it coming.

The Space Marine unlocked the magnetic locks of the Terminator helmet. After long, interminable seconds, he removed it.

To reveal a skull where a human face should be.

The Space Marine was dead!

"*I am*," the bone jaws of the dead Astartes moved, and the sinister sound was giving her the violent urge to scream, "*the Ambassador of the King in Yellow*."

**The** **Warp**

To say the majority of the Four had not enjoyed the latest revelations which were made aboard the *Vengeful Spirit* was an understatement.

Abaddon was still refusing to strike down Weaver, and by now even Tzeentch, the most hopeful of the Four, had more or less written it off as a doomed effort.

New plans were implemented to counter the advantage Khorne had gained in the Great Game, and the self-proclaimed Lord of Skulls countered them by starting new battles.

Millions of vicious and ruthless plots started as the Four braced for the oncoming storm the creation of a new Aeldari Goddess would be accompanied by.

This new development, however, was completely unanticipated.

And there was no Shadowpoint to blame this time.

The Anathema had not been a nuisance this time by springing an unpleasant surprise on them.

The multitude of possible futures was not hidden from their sight.

Yet now it appeared an aspirant player had been hidden from their Oracles and Prophets.

If one tried to be optimistic, the Four would confirm that it was anything but a new friend of Weaver and the Anathema.

If one tried to be pessimistic...well, the revealed player had hidden from their sight everything there was to know about his faction.

This could be perilous, if not handled correctly.

The great and most pressing issue was *information*.

*Everyone* had assumed the Eleventh Legion to be utterly destroyed.

*Everyone*.

Three of the current Ruinous Powers had felt the death of the Anathema's son.

They had watched when the Master of Mankind had obliterated the very name of the Eleventh Primarch and his highest lieutenants.

It was not a mere administrative order to forget like it had been for the Second Legion – though that had been done as well, as the Anathema was very thorough in his fury.

No, the Eleventh Legion and its Master had been on the receiving end of a psychic scouring.

It was **Damnatio Memoriae** in body, soul, memory, and all aspects mortals and immortals could possibly think of.

And yet *something* had quite clearly survived.

A dead Space Marine was in the Eye of Terror, and *they had no power over him*.

The self-proclaimed Chaos Gods didn't like this revelation at all.

And the symbolism, now that they had it slammed into their essence, was irony incarnate.

The Second Primarch was alive, yet dead inside, as a Star Usurper possessed his body.

Having the Eleventh dead, yet alive made perfect sense...symbolically.

Any other day, the Four might have rejoiced.

The Eleventh was no loyalist Legion, and this meant the possibility of corrupting them.

*But they had no power over this dead Astartes*.

Caution demanded the immediate disintegration of this interloper.

But this skeleton was a piece the 'King in Yellow' was ready to sacrifice if necessity demanded it.

And if the puppet was destroyed, there would be no clue where to begin the hunt for the master.

The Ruinous Powers watched the dangerous spectacle keenly, as many certainties of the old order collapsed around them.

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

"*I am the Ambassador of the King in Yellow*." The dead Space Marine paused. "*And by the laws governing parley, I may not be assailed*."

Past the moment of surprise and after listening to the sinister sound of bones moving without flesh on them, Taylor was the one to answer...and since the assassin had begun with this nonsense, she might as well throw him a good literature retort in his dead face.

"Where such law holds," the Angel of Sacrifice pointed out, glaring at the skull which had once been a warrior of Mankind and was now an enemy, "it is also the custom for ambassadors to use less insolence."

For a brief moment, there was a dark light shining in the dead holes where the eyes had been located.

But it was so fast there wasn't anything Taylor could sense from it...save the confirmation that the true mastermind behind this whole affair was watching them from a safe distance.

"Weaver is right." The Chaos Warmaster affirmed. "You tried to assassinate someone on MY ship, without my permission, and your perfidy had to be revealed for your Ambassador status to be mentioned."

The abominable power of Drach'nyen grew by leaps and bounds.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't execute you for your trespassing."

"*Your pathetic campaigns will fail, son of Horus*. *Eternity belongs to my master. In time, he will claim all souls*."

Sometimes, it was easy to acknowledge that a few humans – or beings that had been born human at any rate – could easily be as arrogant as the average Eldar of destroyed Biel-Tan.

And as always, arrogance led you to forget several obvious facts.

"Should we," the new Empress of the Aeldari smiled wolfishly, though behind her helmet, the skeleton would not be able to see it anyway, "consider those two sentences *to be a claim*?"

The Ruinous Powers' attention, already...considerable...intensified.

It was not like their previous attacks...this time it was more the calm before the storm...though it was more akin to a tsunami of violence in that case.

The dead Space Marine's jaws were slightly open, but not a sound escaped.

Suddenly, the King in Yellow's agent realized the peril he had so recklessly provoked.

Even the Emperor had never dared challenge the most dangerous abominations of the Sea of Souls for the control of the Champions of the Lost and the Damned in the middle of a region of space where they could freely alter reality at their mad whims.

To say it on a world safe from Warp depredations would already have been extremely dangerous.

Here?

It was a death sentence in all but name.

The safest thing to do was to immediately deny everything.

Yes, it would demolish any possibility of making the claim again.

But it was, in her humble opinion, far better to lose a claim than having all Ruinous Powers interested in pursuing you across time, space, and dimensions until they captured you and tortured you for all eternity.

There was, in theory, nothing that could unite the Four, not with Anarchy being the Fourth.

But whether the Eleventh Primarch was indeed the 'King in Yellow' or not, he had indeed found the exception to the rule.

He was going to have to bite something unpleasant and bow down to the inevitable.

The Warp was waiting, and would not allow him to flee before there was an answer.

"Well?" Abaddon asked coldly, his weapons ready to strike. Clearly the Warmaster had not appreciated the 'son of Horus' part...that or perhaps it was the 'pathetic campaigns' accusation.

The light returned to the dead caverns which once upon a time had been eyes, and this time when the jaws moved, the voice was very different from before.

"*Eternity will be mine, or there will be no eternity at all*."

Holy-

For a single second, it was as if everything came to a halt as no one, not Abaddon, not Aurelia Malys, not any of the Black Legion warlords, not the shard of Vainglory still struggling in its crystal-jail, not she...not even the Ruinous Powers themselves could believe someone would do something so arrogant, so reckless...and so unbelievably suicidal.

But the moment of surprise passed.

For one second, time seemed to freeze, but it did not last a second more.

The *claim* shook the Eye of Terror.

And the Ruinous Powers summoned their Champions.

Before she could breathe, a daemonic Skaven with black fur stabbed the 'Ambassador' in the back.

There was a red flash, and an enormous Bloodthirster appeared, brandishing an axe which could have been used against Titans.

Tzeentch and Nurgle each summoned one of their Greater Daemons too.

The dead Space Marine was dismembered in less time than it took to say it, then sorcery and raw strength crushed the bones to dust.

It was methodical.

It was a one-sided execution.

It felt...*wrong*.

And it was proven beyond doubt as in front of the still-existing 'bone road', the thing which had been an Astartes reformed from nothing, looked exactly the same as before.

Behind it, ranks of dead skeletons, those ones in armours reminding her of the propaganda images of the Solar Auxilia during the Great Crusade, appeared to wage war against the Ruinous Powers.

Naturally, the abominations couldn't let such audacity go unpunished and sent their own servants into the fray.

The laws of reality were altered once more, and the council room divided itself in two: one where the prison-shards were relatively safe, and one section where...nothing was.

It was...sheer madness. It was a cacophony of slime and blood, of bones and unnatural powers.

But it also meant there was an opportunity for what she wanted to do after creating the Heart of Symbiosis...and no time to lose.

"Aurelia. Are you ready?"

"Yes...yes I am."

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Macragge Civitas District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**66 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Captain** **Gaius Pompeius**

The *Codex Astartes* was the greatest work of their gene-sire.

Gaius knew it.

All the Ultramarines knew it.

Yet there was something that was never mentioned in the pages of this book the battle-brothers were told to recite faithfully well before the moment they received their first implant.

How to kill a Primarch.

That wasn't to say the Ultramarines weren't capable of doing it.

Long ago, according to their own records, they were the Legion which terminated the Primarch of the Alpha Legion.

Unfortunately, the method of saturating a war zone with Phosphex, while undoubtedly cost-effective, was not an option when the battlefield was Macragge itself.

And Gaius had cursed himself many times for not paying far more attention to the reports of Weaver fighting the Naga. It was true the presence of Rogal Dorn was not something they could easily find a substitute for, nor could they fight like an insect-controller.

But every little thing helped when the odds were stacked against them.

And the odds were stacked against them, let there be no mistake.

Entire regiments of artillery had bombarded Lorgar for hours before this point, and the Traitor Primarch was still here.

Yes, it had been when the heretic was in Chaos Spawn form, but so far, there was no indication his regenerative powers had decreased.

No, as far as the First Captain was concerned, there was nothing to rejoice about Lorgar being turned back to what had to be his original body.

The restored appearance of the bastard was capable of summoning daemons, more intelligent than any Spawn would ever be, and therefore prompt to restore discipline and fanaticism inside his Legion's ranks when they were about to die achieving nothing of importance.

There was no good news, and the bad news had plunged into new abysses of darkness.

But they were Ultramarines.

They were defending the Fortress of Hera.

They had to stop him, everything else would be a complete disgrace of everything the Chapter had ever stood for.

And there was a plan.

"COURAGE AND HONOUR! OPEN FIRE!"

The plan could be summarized in two words: overwhelming firepower.

And so everything was unleashed as he gave the command.

The Genesis battle-brothers began with Plasma Guns and Sniper Rifles. The Iron Hounds screamed their battle-cries as their Grenade Launchers fired as fast as possible to kill every Traitor soiling the sacred grounds of the Fortress of Hera by their very presence.

Melta Guns. Enormous Autocannons placed in fixed turrets and manned by the Auxilia. Missiles. Relic grav-weapons.

Gaius had even gone against the Codex and repurposed several Hydra tanks to be placed in ground-attack positions, completely against all the Ultramarine doctrine, so as to increase the lethality of the kill-zone.

The result was devastating.

The daemonic wave of Khornate Bloodletters was vaporised before it could reach close-quarters. The Word Bearers who had followed behind them hoping the abominations would play the role of Bolter-fodder realised too late their calculus was completely wrong.

There was no escape from the Emperor's Judgement, and as the courtyard and the rest of the outer fortress disappeared in smoke, debris, and fantastic explosions, Gaius snarled, as the Chaos Legion they had sworn to exterminate was completely shredded.

"CONTINUE FIRING! DO NOT STOP UNTIL YOU SEE HIS CORPSE! COURAGE AND-"

The smoke vanished.

It was not natural, and for a single heartbeat, Gaius froze in fear.

Lorgar was here.

His armour had several large holes and was likely good only as scrap-metal...yet if Primarch blood had at some point been shed, the wounds were already healed.

At least two-thirds of the Space Marines who had been in the Thunderhawks were lying dead at his feet, proof the ambush had at least served to kill the lesser heretics.

But daemons were already gathering behind the Traitor, and this time they were Pink and Blue Horrors, not the abominations of Khorne.

But it was the eyes of the Primarch which made him afraid.

For the helmet Lorgar wore had been ruined beyond any hope of salvaging, and now the face they could see was not one filled with joy or hatred.

It was the expression of a being who was in utter despair, and which would stop at nothing, *nothing*, to save himself.

"**LET THE GALAXY BURN! DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR**!"

"FOR GUILLIMAN! KILL HIM!"

His battle-brothers had not stopped firing.

But most of the projectiles were intercepted by sorcery or some relic-shields they had nothing to penetrate with, and-

FAST!

Gaius saw the heretical weapon coming.

He saw two of his best friends die as the skull-themed Power Maul slammed into them.

There was a fraction of second to decide.

Evade or strike?

What a question...Calth. It was always about Calth.

Gaius threw himself forwards, and his Power Sword stabbed the bastard.

The following second his body screamed as unbelievably powerful pain became his whole world.

*But I did it. Will it be enough? Please, Emperor, let it be enough...*

And then darkness claimed him.

**Primarch** **Lorgar Aurelian**

The official designation of the weapon was 'Secutor-pattern Bellator Power Sword'. It had been a favourite of the Thirteenth Legion's officers during the Great Crusade, and it looked like the sons of Guilliman today continued the tradition.

Lorgar Aurelian, really, really didn't enjoy having to remove one from his flesh.

The worst part was that he had to do it very, very slowly.

The Ultramarine who had stabbed him had missed his primary heart by half a centimetre. Had he not...the loss of one heart may not have killed him, but in the middle of a chaotic melee, nothing was certain.

Everything could die. A Goddess could, apparently. Why not a Primarch?

Once it was removed, the Power Sword and the blood which had poured out were banished with a word of the Gods.

With Neverborn at his back, the last thing he could afford was to leave blackmail free for everyone to claim.

And as he observed the battlefield, Lorgar internally despaired.

The sons of Guilliman were withdrawing, abandoning the killzone, but by the Gods, what a butchery!

Most of his sons were dead. There were only a handful of Word Bearers remaining, trying to protect his back from all potential threats.

The Ultramarines had surprised him.

This was a sobering admission.

But he couldn't close his eyes to the truth.

Based upon the recent conduct his sons had reported to him, the Ultramarines of this millennium were religiously following the *Codex Astartes* of his brother. That made them predictable, easy to counter.

The furious, devastating punch that had been this killzone had not been predictable at all.

The scions of the defunct Thirteenth Legion had fought like Angron's own sons, though they employed a bit more long-range weapons than the Twelfth.

They had paid a heavy price for it; the ruined bodies of many Astartes, bearing insignia of four different Chapters, were proof enough of that.

But he couldn't afford another trap of this nature.

Because while luck had been on his side, if a second successful battle of this magnitude happened, it might as well be his death the next time.

He couldn't afford one more defeat, not when time was running out.

He had known it before; his sons could not fight against all the armies of Ultramar and Weaver, and hope to prevail for long.

There were too few of them left, and the enemy was constantly reinforced.

But now, the deadline appeared to be even closer than he had calculated.

Lorgar felt something incredibly wrong in the air, and it wasn't coming from the Gods.

Time was running out.

For good or ill, everything would soon be over, and with it, the last chance of the Seventeenth Legion to evolve and gain some victory from this disastrous Black Crusade.

And that began by killing *the* Ultramarine two Astartes were dragging away, hoping he wouldn't notice.

Lorgar ran to kill them.

He would say it wasn't revenge...but it would be a lie. The Ultramarine had hurt him, and he would pay for that. But with other Astartes returning to the fight when they should by all rights be dead, it was also critical to cripple the warriors of Macragge forever.

The two Astartes – one Praetor of Orpheus, one Genesis – that were carrying their fellow brother reacted too slowly. One of the last Ultramarines to stay standing died when his blessed Power Maul *Illuminarum* exploded his head in a shower of gore and splintered blue ceramite.

With another sorcery shield, he stopped the Melta attack of a black-armoured Space Marine.

*Illuminarum* struck again.

But before his weapon could reach his target, there was an enormous counterblow, and his strike failed in an explosion of shadows.

For a brief moment, Lorgar feared Corax was back to kill him...but as the shadows coalesced into a single figure, the Seventeenth Primarch saw it was not his brother.

Yet the power tasted like him.

Some part of him was deeply curious how such a thing was possible.

The other part of him, the faithful part of him, raged, for this was no time for a powerful opponent to reveal himself.

Time was a resource he was desperately short of...and the next words of the Callidus-clothed woman who had just saved the sons of Guilliman were not at all reassuring.

"Go, warriors of Ultramar. I am going to delay him."

Lorgar let the power of the Gods flow through him and summoned a violent invocation of ruin and annihilation.

"You should not have opposed me." The Seventeenth Primarch declared.

The thousands of chaotic lightning bolts raged...and then vanished without a trace in the shadows.

"And you, you should not have come here."

Lorgar watched. He prayed, and the Gods provided the answer.

**The Angel of Shadows. She killed your son. She killed Argel Tal.**

Hatred filled his two hearts, and it was almost too much...but he managed to control his fury.

"Your suffering will be long and excruciatingly painful...if you step aside."

The anomaly which took the shape of a green blade was drawn in response.

"I kill the enemies of the Emperor. Cheer up, because you really look like a first-grade traitor."

There was no more time to waste with words.

It was a time to do what he had been called back for.

Lorgar attacked.

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Herald** **Aurelia Malys**

"Yes...yes I am."

The Emperor-Seer of the humans had chosen his Champion well.

There was more power around them than anyone could dream of, and still Aurelia was sure the temptation to become a Goddess had not even crossed the mind of *Maelsha'eil Dannan*.

Was Aurelia ready for the greatest and most important work she might ever do in her life?

Not really.

Determined, yes, she was.

But the magnitude of what they were attempting scared her.

If there was any other path...but there wasn't.

Khaine was dead, and they could try to correct the consequences of his demise now, or they would all suffer as the old era – which wasn't that old, as it was born in the ashes of Commorragh – perished.

There wouldn't be a second chance.

The slaves of the Primordial Annihilator fighting each other and the repulsive skeletons could not intervene for now, but at the first sign of weakness, they would jump into the fray, and they couldn't survive that tide of horrors for long.

Whatever else could be said about the shocking events they had just been witness to, one thing would have to be remembered: claims were very dangerous things, and had to be lengthily considered before challenging the Primordial Annihilator.

"*They are not worthy*!" Always this horrible sound which hurt her ears.

"Ignore it."

"Yes...yes, my Empress."

"**Not worthy**!" Some daemons snarled, before being violently banished as they were burned by golden feathers being thrown out from the informal domain which had been created.

Right outside it, darkness reigned.

The daemons fought each other by the millions, and the primal scream of the Primordial Annihilator resonated, urging its slaves to destroy and corrupt everything, including the unnatural opponent which wanted to claim Eternity as his own.

But she had to trust they were suitably distracted.

Focus.

Breathe.

**Symbiosis**

**Symbiosis**

**Query?**

Something beautiful came forwards.

It was akin to the Giant Moth they had all heard of...and yet it was not.

It was akin to the Great Spiders guarding and relaying Weaver's will...and yet it was not.

It was very similar to each species that had ever been part of Weaver's Swarm...and somehow, it was more than that.

**Query? We are Queen Administrator. We are Hope. We are Sacrifice. Query?**

This was a proof of trust...and Aurelia felt almost ashamed to plead her cause, for yes, the Asuryani had proved unworthy many, many times in the past.

*We need a Goddess for Eternity. We need Symbiosis. We need to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.*

**Query understood**.

The Light...there was so much Light.

Light healed.

Light hurt.

Light healed.

Light...answered.

**It will not be painless for your species.**

The voice was Weaver.

*I know*.

**Atharti will be more than a mere enforcer and it won't be a tyrant. Yet limits will exist for a reason**.

*No limits are exactly why we had two Falls in the first place*.

**True. We are in agreement**.

*We are*.

Power swallowed them, and for long heartbeats, her entire world became white.

They were alone, in a place no had ever seen and remembered.

There was Weaver, *Maelsha'eil Dannan*, the human female naming herself Taylor Hebert.

There was she, Aurelia Malys, Herald of a deity that in plenty of aspects, she didn't fully understand.

And there was the heart of Symbiosis, imbued and ready to be used.

Webs of gold were carved under their feet.

Atharti appeared.

There was no word.

None were needed.

**Carnality**'s garments fell, and the nascent Goddess presented her vulnerable chest to the Empress.

A sword of Crystal was summoned, and in a second, the Goddess was impaled upon it.

**Administration. One Aspect for each Aeldari Aspect. Administration**.

**Limited, yet free**.

**Unable to return, yet hopeful**.

The Heart of Symbiosis was placed in the terrible wound which had just been opened, and the golden flames caressed the skin of the Goddess.

**Administration. Query? Yes**.

**Symbiosis. Superior. Symbiosis First Aspect. Carnality Second Aspect**.

The divine eyes which opened anew were fuchsia...with sparkles of green.

In it the Herald saw many Exodites dance joyously around trees and giant flowers.

Under moons and stars, Asuryani celebrated births and the end of lives well-lived.

In shadowy and long-forgotten tunnels of the Webway, Drukhari in chains jolted awake with hope in their hearts.

The sheer amount of tiny insects which appeared was astonishing...it was uncountable.

Aurelia could only discern a fraction of what they did.

But she knew it was good. It was the Empress fulfilling her part of the deal.

*Maelsha'eil Dannan* was both killing their race and saving them in a single act of Ascension.

They would no longer be Asuryani, for no God of the old Pantheon was to be ever included in that powerful genesis.

They would be...powerful, but limited, as it had been said.

**Excess** was summoned.

It didn't look like a Keeper of Secrets at all.

It looked...Aeldari.

Except no Aeldari, as far as she remembered, had the pale blue skin this one had.

The Shard was no longer Excess. It had been purified. It was-

**Administration. Query?**

**Moderation. *Really?***

**Administration.**

**Yes.**

**Merge.**

**Symbiosis**

**Moderation Third Aspect.**

**Symbiosis**

**Administration successful**.

Atharti changed into the Aeldari with blue skin that had been Moderation. But this was not an exact copy. The face and the body were more seductive. The dark blue lips were irresistibly beautiful.

Weaver had not lied. She was going to change them forever. Already she could see glimpses of their new race. They would be eternally long-lived, and strive for reason. But their psychic powers would be in tune with the water they would live next to. And if they had to change...it would be as-

The power surged once more, stopping her from seeing more.

One thought did not break, however. Atharti still had the same eyes.

The next shard of what had been She-Who-Thirsts materialised into a dimension which was now near an immense waterfall.

The whiteness began to cede ground as grass grew, including under her feet.

Like the essence of what had been Excess, this Aspect had been transformed into something unrecognisable.

The new essence was truly Aeldari...but with light red skin.

It wasn't a shade of blood or sheer hot-blooded rage, but rather the colour of a fire controlled yet impetuous.

Atharti opened her arms, and the crystalline prison became a wave of golden bliss, which was instantly absorbed by her skin.

**Administration. Query?**

**Passion.**

**Administration.**

**Yes.**

**Merge.**

**Symbiosis**

**Passion Fourth Aspect.**

**Symbiosis**

**Administration successful**.

Her Goddess's appearance changed to reflect the Aspect she had just absorbed. Her red skin was impossibly attractive, and her white hair was unprecedented, but somehow *right*. The sculpted body was muscled yet had the same grace the Succubi of the arena could boast of.

Aurelia's thoughts that many ex-Drukhari were simply going to love worshipping this Aspect-

The Domain around them changed.

And it was a Domain, the young follower of Atharti had no more doubts about it.

A volcano, an immense tower of obsidian and magma, towered in the distance, and his thunderous growl was more than a little disquieting.

Yet around them life blossomed too. Little animals which were the favourite of Craftworld children and adults alike were multiplying.

Aurelia turned her head...to see Weaver was incredibly exhausted by the efforts just accomplished.

Her hands went to touch her...and immediately a terrible sensation of power draining from her.

"This...this is not...normal..."

"Vainglory," the Aspect's name was spat like a curse, and it was likely one. "It's fighting me...and something is empowering the resistance to my will..."

The King in Yellow...again.

Damn it, what had they done to that fiend before that it tried to kill their race now?

"Can you...finish?"

"I..." Weaver grimaced in pain. "I...I have only one more Aspect...I can..."

Aurelia could very well believe it. The exhaustion she was feeling was...nearly unbelievable.

"One. Five Aspects...five Aspects will work. Salvation and different from what Slaanesh intended. We will **sacrifice** this for you."

The last Aspect was summoned, and Aurelia screamed in pain.

But a breath later, the drain pressing against her mind and wasting so much physical strength decreased sharply.

The Shard which had been Gluttony had succumbed to the power of the Emperor-Seer, and while the former appearances were red or blue of skin, this one was a sleeping Aeldari of the colour of spring leaves, brilliant yet healthy green skin.

**Administration. Query?**

**Harmony.**

**Administration.**

**Yes.**

**Merge.**

**Symbiosis**

**Harmony Fifth Aspect.**

**Symbiosis**

**Administration successful**.

They both fell to their knees, gasping for air and succour.

Five heartbeats later, the sensation of lust and contentment was extraordinary.

**The** **Warp**

The flash, when it materialised, was quite restrained, all things considered.

After all, the last time a being which could be defined as 'Aeldari deity' was born, the Eye of Terror was created, and one could easily say that the aftershocks were still being dealt with in the Warp when the Horus Heresy began many centuries later.

But Slaanesh had been a force of Cosmic Ruin.

Atharti was not.

Yet it had been a long, long time since there was any God or Power of that level to stand against the maleficent will of Chaos. As much as Asuryan, Isha, Vaul, and the rest of the Aeldari Pantheon had decided to stop answering their worshippers' prayers and let them go down the path of damnation alone, there was no denying they had usually been a force of Order. When the Dark Princess of Excess devoured them, the damage done to the Immaterium was beyond cataclysmic. And five millennia of unending carnage, beginning with the Horus Heresy and ending with the latest Black Crusade, had not contributed to positive developments in the depths of the Sea of Souls.

The Warp was very much the poisonous pit the average Imperial citizen was warned against.

It was a cesspool of corruption, and if many species had not invented painful and terribly complicated processes to protect themselves from the worst of it, it would have been extremely likely every latent psyker would be doomed the moment he or she was born.

The result of an entity not affiliated or enslaved to any of the beings which were quite aptly described as 'Ruinous Powers' doing the equivalent of opening her eyes and mouth, therefore, was a hurricane of untold violence.

Atharti was not a Goddess of Chaos. She had been forged by **Administration**, and her Aspects had been merged to unite in **Symbiosis**.

She was of **Order**.

But the Warp was **Chaos**.

Yet Atharti existed. She was born. She already had power and worshippers.

Something was wrong.

The fuchsia explosion would have been described as terrifying, if there was someone to witness it.

Fortunately for the Ruinous Powers, it was – relatively – far from their Domains.

And in the Eye of Terror, the only planet in the vicinity was governed by some outcasts which had fled there after the Siege of Terra, ruled by degenerate mutants descending from the unholy coupling of Imperialis Armada's noble officers and some form of four-armed Aeldari-created monsters.

They were insignificant and would not be missed.

At least, that was what the Lords of Change would pretend afterwards to those sorcerers summoning them to ask them the reason behind the latest disastrous events.

This wasn't the only planet which was shattered by the birth song of the Aeldari Goddess of **Symbiosis**.

Across the galaxy, one by one, four other planets died. All those astral bodies had in common was that they were tainted by a mutant species which in some way could be traced back to the sins of the deceased Aeldari Empire.

Each time the planet died, and there was nothing salvageable in the aftermath.

Asteroid Belts were formed from the debris, but aside from the souls of their worshippers, the Four weren't able to save anything from these manifestations of apocalyptic fury.

The Warp calmed relatively quickly after that.

Yet the self-proclaimed Gods of Chaos felt something wasn't right.

The immense depths of the Sea of Souls, a dimension which was considered truly infinite in everything, included madness, seemed a little less potent, a little less **chaotic**.

And as the maelstrom of fuchsia energy began to coalesce into something they could predict, the Four discovered an immense sphere their power was unable to influence or to see the intricate details of.

A new Domain had been created, in the heart of the Immaterium, and Chaos had no power over it.

The reaction of the Four and many other malevolent entities was absolutely, totally, epically *reality-shattering*.

**The** **Webway**

**The Black Library**

**The Stairwell of Fools – lower floors of the most secure book collections**

There were no Masques present in the vicinity of the Stairwell of Fools when Atharti was born.

Thus there were no Harlequins to hear a God cry.

These simple words could not accurately describe the scene, of course.

First of all, the God was crying yes, but he was also laughing.

And as he laughed, his surroundings changed.

For this was one of the greatest secrets of the Laughing God.

Unlike all the other Aeldari Gods and Goddesses originally created by the Old Ones, the Great Harlequin had recognised very early that the strict policy of non-interference in Aeldari affairs was going to lead to a spectacular disaster.

And so, subtly, with all the art and finesse of someone about to pull the greatest scam of his existence, the Great Fool had slowly relinquished all the influence and power he ever held from the Warp, and traded it away for more power and influence in the Webway itself.

Ultimately, Cegorach had sold his Warp Domain, and exchanged it for another in the Webway.

Thus unlike the other Gods, he could flee when the Dark Princess was born and one by one, the Pantheon died.

Slaanesh had been more than suspicious, of course. The Goddess of Excess had been of an arrogance defying mortal understanding, but she was not completely stupid. She had suspected what Cegorach had done.

But Slaanesh was dead, and whatever she had thought of his plans, it was evident it had not communicated them to the other Three...though the First Fool would not lower his guard, obviously.

One indiscretion, one wrong word in the wrong ear, and some agent of the Primordial Annihilator might get the idea that Cegorach was defending the Black Library not because it was such a fantastic source of lore against the manipulations and treacherous schemes of Chaos, but because it was the doorstep to Cegorach's Domain.

Which would be extremely damaging, because if that idea were to spread out, it would be confirming the truth.

"**And yet, Weaver's latest jest is greater than mine**," the Great Harlequin murmured. "**She is not Aeldari, yet she is the Empress. She does not understand us, yet she creates a Goddess. She destroys and kills us, yet she is our salvation**."

The Creator of the Library laughed.

The Laughing Fool cried.

"**Ah, Khaine, cruel, bloody-handed, stupid Khaine. You didn't stand a chance against her. Standing against her on her moment of ascension? You should have attacked Nyx a few cycles ago; that way the defeat would have been less humiliating**."

For an eternity, Cegorach danced the Masque Form known as the *Heroes' Path*.

There was no Troupe to assist him, and no spectator to enjoy the display, but it did not matter.

Cegorach was the actors, the scene, and the intended audience.

For the dance warned against the problems Aeldari pride could cause, and it was something even a God had to be wary about.

"**A new equilibrium will be reached soon. And Weaver is the key...the key to everything**."

The future was, ever since the Destruction of Commorragh, incredibly complex. Prophecies changed and went in directions that even he, the Great Harlequin, found difficult to interpret.

"**I will have to speak with my new Empress soon**." The last tear of the deity disappeared, and the Laughing God chuckled. "**Many, many things have to be spoken. My Masques do not need Atharti's blessings, for they are mine. But the recruitment...that is a problem, isn't it? Atharti could be as powerless as Khaine when it comes to me...but she is not, for there is an Empress willing to establish boundaries**."

The next outburst of laughter was quite dramatic, if he said so himself.

"**Quite the performance, isn't? The trickster was tricked**. **Now let's await the end of the play. I think it is going to be as astonishing as the rest of the performance**..."

**The Warp**

**Symbiosis Domain**

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

She woke up.

Weird.

Taylor didn't remember falling unconscious.

And she didn't remember feeling...refreshed. Rested. At peace.

But she was.

Examining her surroundings, the insect-mistress discovered she was in a tree.

A very, very large tree.

The ground had to be something like twenty metres below her.

It was a very, very good thing she didn't suffer from acrophobia.

"We were supposed to be on the *Vengeful Spirit*..."

And here she was, in the middle of a luxuriant and all too real jungle.

A small chuckle echoed in the air, and a half-naked red-skinned Aeldari was by her side.

Her breasts and over a third of her body had been painted with white glyphs. A loincloth of simple leather and animal fur covered her modesty around her waist. Her feet were clearly showing her soft red skin colour, the sandals she wore being light, and the furred vambraces over the lower part of the leg purely decorative. Her body was sculpted like a blade, muscular, but not in the sense of the absolute physical lethality one thought of when the Queen of Blades was nearby. The impression was somewhat tribal, but still managed an edge of...nobility and harmony.

The eyes, however, could not belong to any mortal being. They were a sea of fuchsia, and stars of green shone in them.

"Atharti," the Queen of the Swarm whispered.

"**Empress Taylor Hebert**," the Goddess answered and somehow, her voice was reassurance. "**I can call you Taylor, can I**?"

"You can." Suddenly, the memories of everything that had happened in the last minutes returned. "We were successful."

"**You were**," the Goddess confirmed. "**And I thank you for it. Being whole...the feeling is simply exquisite after enduring powerlessness for so long**. **I would never have achieved it without you. I am in your debt, Taylor**."

The graceful red fingers half-covered in white paint touched her, and the emotions which went with it...it was *good*.

Not the sort of good which filled your mind with pure pleasure, but more the kind that made you happy.

You were happy that life deserved to be lived. That there was good in this galaxy that was worth defending.

That your sacrifices, in the end, were never in vain.

"Aurelia helped."

In fact, the Herald had been a decisive factor at critical moments. Without her...the memory of the atrocious pain which had coursed through her body each time she summoned an Aspect was an experience she had really no wish, absolutely no wish whatsoever, to ever repeat.

"**She did. I'm letting her rest right now. My High Priestess is less resilient than you, I'm afraid**."

High Priestess. Not Herald. Before...everything that had just happened, Taylor would likely have dismissed the choice of words as irrelevant. Not anymore.

"If there's one of your current followers who deserves it, it's her. She was ready to risk everything so that her species would have a bright future...including a potential death at my hands."

The Aeldari Goddess didn't answer...but passed a hand through her black hair. Something that shouldn't happen, given that her helmet was...on another tree, metres away. As was the *Angel's Tear* power armour she wore before coming here.

Taylor had felt exactly nothing, and yet she was half-naked...with a loincloth and a similar attire as the Goddess was wearing.

"Nice trick." The Lady General chose to take it in good humour. "Is it something one can learn?"

"**Everything can be learned**." Atharti brought her dark red lips close to Taylor’s left ear. "**But this trick, as you called it, is the authority granted by my Domain. I am the Domain, now that you have made me complete, Taylor**."

The Angel of Sacrifice digested this information while enjoying the present. The scent of the jungle around them included dozens of pleasant aroma. There was life around her, and she could try to control the insects' essence...but why would she? There was serenity and peace.

One could easily spend eternity in such a place.

But she wouldn't.

The sensations created by Symbiosis were not enough to make her forget what was happening at Ardium.

"Can you send me back to Ardium, Atharti?" The parahuman huffed. "Before your now-High Priestess spirited me away, I had a number of detestable creatures to exterminate."

"**I can**." The Goddess taking the form of one of the future looks the Aeldari would adopt in the near-immediate future nodded. "**But I don't think it would be in our best interest**."

Taylor gave the Goddess a very ironic expression.

"Of course you would think that." The Lady General huffed again. "Why? Because in case there's been something I missed, the two Aspect-Shards of Vainglory and Paramountcy can't be purified and added to your core."

**Symbiosis** was born and divinely empowered. More than that, she was stable. Five was her sacred number now.

Yes, it was a pity that the two additional Aspects could not be added. Taylor had really hoped that by having an Aeldari Goddess with seven as her sacred number, they could launch a direct offensive against Nurgle.

Apparently, that wouldn't happen. It was a pity...but it offered other opportunities.

"**I have no** **intention of** **consuming that kind of disgusting meal, don't worry my Empress**." The glyphs of white paint changed on Atharti's body...and surprisingly they turned out to be white spider symbols. "**But the Aspects are still imprisoned as the battle between** **the different factions of Chaos and their undead enemies rages. All the influence of the King in Yellow was poured out to make you fail and delay the destruction of the taint those Shards carried; it could not destroy their prison-jail as well**."

"That may very well change in the near future." Taylor replied unconvinced.

"**Oh, it will**." The white-haired Aeldari Goddess assured her. "**If not by the skeleton slaves of this betrayer, then by the claws and talons of one of the Chaos Four's daemons. But for now, you are the warden of these two jails. You are in control and determine their destiny, Taylor. Not Chaos. Not that perfidious thing which tried to strangle me before I was truly born. You**."

Clearly, viewed like that...it wasn't the kind of asset one should leave behind.

"All right Atharti, I can see the advantages. Though I have to say, they fall in the 'advantages for *me*' category. What makes you so interested in me returning to that lair of perdition?"

Before she asked the important question, Taylor knew what the Goddess of Symbiosis wanted.

If the Aspect-Shards were useless – they were useful only as a weapon to be absolutely denied to their mutual enemies – that didn't leave a lot of possibilities.

"**I** **want the Muses, Taylor...as I'm sure you have guessed**."

"I thought you had ambitions where they are concerned." The implications made her frown, though. "Surely you're after the Muses' powerful essences rather than their souls, right? I ad a vivid vision summarising of how Hekatii became what she was, and 'unrepentant Queen of murder and blood' is probably the nicest thing I can say about her."

"**I want their authority as Muses to solidify my authority over the Aeldari who will choose to worship my Aspects, yes**." Atharti opened her mouth to whistle an amazing yet frustrated sound. "**When you created me, you gave me the knowledge of what Hekatii did. I agree with you, she was...and unfortunately still is, an unrepentant Murder Queen. Since the four other Muses were corrupted into worshipping unborn Slaanesh, I don't think we should expect any of them to be paragons of virtue. I firmly intend to purify their essence and discard the souls and memories associated with them before linking them to my authority**."

"You have that kind of power now that you're complete?" That would be another surprise...

"**No, but I can keep the Muses' essences in their prisons the time it will take my Empress to come and purify them**."

Ha! False alert, everything was normal...for a certain definition of normal.

"I suppose you intend to make Aurelia Malys a Muse?"

"**As you said earlier, she deserves a reward. And I intend to give her the power to silence all doubters who might think her title of High Priestess is undeserved**."

Well, Taylor wasn't going to argue with that.

"I see your point. But the risks remain...colossal."

Khorne had more or less sold his claim to the Heart of Khaine to the highest bidder just to grab one of the 'Dark Muses'.

Taylor hated the Ruinous Powers with a passion. The sooner those monsters were eliminated, the better for Mankind.

But the recent events had proved that the abominations weren't stupid. If the Ruinous Power of War and Blood thought the psychopathic Red Crone was worth the claim, then that was likely the case.

Maybe the other Muses were not as powerful as the former Apprentice of the Queen of Blades. But maybe they were.

In any case, neither Chaos nor the other possible interested parties were going to let her take the Muses away. Not since the counter-authority which kept most of the daemons at bay was likely going to disappear the moment she reappeared there.

"I'm really sorry, but...what are you doing?"

Atharti had just dropped the loincloth she wore.

And for all Wei had taught her many things...the Angel of Sacrifice couldn't stop blushing as she watched the Aeldari deity's body.

"**I am going to seduce you...and give you a few more incentives to accept the dangerous mission I propose**."

After a second of astonishment, Taylor steeled herself.

"Nice try. But no. I am a happily married woman."

“**I will apologise to your wife in person?”**

"No."

"**Most Aeldari and Humans would give up their souls for a few minutes with me, as I'm sure you know**."

"Yes. But I am not 'most Humans', Atharti."

"**Indeed**."

There was another sultry grin, but it didn't change her mind.

There was a sound of ice cracking.

And then everything changed again.

She was once again wearing the *Angel's Tear* armour, minus the angelic helmet which was in her hands.

They were no longer in the middle of a tropical forest, oh no.

They were on a massive iceberg, which itself was floating in the middle of a windy, cold sea.

And Atharti had changed her appearance once more...this time it was a blue-skinned Aeldari who was staring at her. The appearance was clearly more...commanding, although less inclined to martial skills. And it was a body covered in a crystalline white armour, with animal furs used as decoration on the shoulders and the belt.

The eyes remained the same, though. Fuchsia irises, and the green stars bathing in this fascinating power.

If the former Aspect was **Passion**, then this one was undoubtedly **Moderation**.

Taylor cleared her throat.

"You were speaking of incentives?"

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Macragge Civitas District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**66 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Elena** **Kerrigan**

It had taken Elena exactly ten seconds to conclude that she was going to lose this fight.

And she hadn't exactly been optimistic about the outcome before that. That was why she had said she was going to delay the Traitor Primarch.

He had a...let's call it a *monstrous presence*.

Maybe there was a proper term for it. But Elena didn't know that word or series of words, assuming it ever existed. One thing was sure though, it had some points in common with the 'transhuman shock' of the Adeptus Astartes...but it was far, far greater than anything given off by a Chapter Master of the Space Marines.

In one way, this was unsurprising. This was a Traitor Primarch, a fallen son of the Emperor.

On the other hand, it was incredibly infuriating. Everything a Callidus Assassin had to train herself halfway to death to master, this enemy seemed to have it in spades, and he had gained it effortlessly, whether through his birth or the pacts the abominations of the Warp were all too pleased to grant him.

Everything was given to him. Even now, when Elena was sure the daemons-in-chief mustn't be too pleased with all his failures – an entire Traitor Titan Legio destroyed on the Fields of Pharsalus couldn't be part of the plan – they granted him the ability to summon countless horrors with each second.

And it worked.

Elena couldn't beat him. She was not as powerful as Taylor Hebert.

Worse, her style of fighting was very much the one embraced by the Callidus Temple: strike by surprise, and make sure the target doesn't realise it is in danger before it's too late.

Something that should be easy with her parahuman powers...except it was not. Going through walls, entirely bypassing gates, and avoiding all kinds of material obstacles...it didn't work.

The Traitor Primarch always seemed to know of her approach long before she was in position to strike.

And thanks to some daemon-sorcery-thing, the Power Maul the Arch-Heretic was fighting with had the power to hurt her even when she was in shadow-form.

Yes, Elena had discovered that the hard way. And if the power of the Angel of Shadows hadn't been within her, it was a certainty she would have been pulverised when the damned weapon sent her slamming against a wall.

As it was, though the pain was tolerable and her powers undiminished, Elena knew she was definitely slowing down.

It wasn't even a question of trying to strike down the Traitor Primarch; all she was doing in the last few minutes was evading and re-evading.

Each second counted. The Angel of Shadows in her didn't know how she knew that, or the forces which were going to turn the tide, but she knew it.

And so she fought.

She jumped. She rolled. She tried to put as much distance between her and the Power Maul, all the while stabbing the daemons trying to intervene in the fight.

"All you're doing is delaying the inevitable, foolish girl." The betrayer exclaimed as after a new series of rolls and climbing some stairs, Elena definitely felt herself sweating, and it was not because it was so hot outside. "And I assure you, you are not so pure that I can't drag your soul to be punished by the Gods."

"I return you the favour." The young Callidus Assassin spat. "Your forces are butchered. I have seen the corpses of your army spread across the entire Valley. You are a bit difficult to kill, but your Space Marines aren't. Sooner or later, your Legion will be dead...and then everyone will come here to deal with your ugly mug."

There was no answer, but the velocity and sheer viciousness of the next strike convinced Elena she had accurately summed up something the Seventeenth Primarch was already aware of.

Time was running out for the Traitors.

"And you know it. That's why you intend to kill Guilliman. Because it is the only thing looking like a victory you will ever be able to achieve in a thousand years. How does it feel to know that soon, a generation of Imperial scholars will write tomes on the total disaster you called a Black Crusade?"

The next strike, Elena didn't even see it coming.

Mainly because it didn't come from the Power Maul or another 'conventional' weapon.

It was a sorcery attack, and in a move which reminded her of old memories of a nasty science-fiction manoeuvre...a titanic pressure began to clamp around her throat.

"I AM NOT DEFEATED! AND I THINK IT IS TIME YOU STOP OPPOSING THE WILL OF THE GODS!"

Elena saw her death in those pitiless eyes.

This was...a monster. Even by the standards of predator and prey that she had once believed in...this was someone far worse than she could possibly be.

This Primarch was a religious fanatic. He always was. He always would be.

The pressure increased, and her vision began to fail. Air, she needed air. And the shadows...the shadows were denied to her. She was-

"How ridiculous of you, a mere shadow-human, to believe you could ever measure up against a Primarch like me? Delay? Your delusion was as foolish as it was misplaced! One-on-one, you can't delay me!"

"What about two against one, slave of the Primordial Annihilator?"

There was a strike of violet light, and the pressure that was strangling her to death vanished.

**Yvraine** **Kaydinn**

Everything began with a choice.

Atharti was now a Goddess, so something had gone according to plan.

But it had never been a question of choosing.

The Goddess was supposed to be Carnality incarnate.

This wasn't what had happened.

Instead, the former Biel-Tan Asuryani could feel the primal song of their new deity.

It was **Carnality** *and* **Symbiosis**.

And, what was the more surprising point of this whole meta-thing stuff which gave her a headache...the choice wasn't about *that*.

It was between **Passion**, **Moderation**, and **Harmony**.

Images flashed in her mind each time she considered an Aspect.

Yvraine didn't think such a thing was possible, but then she had never been interested in the foundations of God-creation...for obvious reasons.

She descended the human stairs, once pristinely white, now darkened by the smoke of ugly engines of war and the consequences of the multiple fires the Primordial Annihilator seemed to delight in spreading the further they advanced.

Everything began with a choice.

No matter which Craftworld they hailed from, no matter which hidden haven they had found refuge in, no matter how poor the Webway City they tried to survive inside of...all descendents of the Aeldari would be presented the same choice once they declared their willingness to worship Atharti.

Yvraine didn't know the how or the why of the choice. The former Dire Avenger just knew it existed. And that it would be enforced.

Each soul having the great gene-work of the Aeldari species coursing through its veins would be given the choice once they were born and old enough to understand the importance of their decision.

The consequences were mind-boggling. The differences between Craftworlds, the tensions between Corsairs and Craftworlds, the battles between the Drukhari and the Asuryani...everything might soon be a thing of the past.

There would be a Goddess.

**Atharti**

There would be an Empress, enforcing the new Age.

**Weaver**

And there would be a choice.

**Passion**, **Moderation**, or **Harmony**?

Yvraine could freely admit she was reeling under the storm of revelations.

In fact, the astonishment was so extreme she almost didn't pay attention to just where the Cronesword was leading her to.

And it was...a great mistake, because it appeared the number of critical choices she would have to make today was not limited to something as vital as which Goddess Aspect she should follow.

That said, the second choice was rather easy.

Between the shadow-shrouded human and one of the biggest slaves of the Primordial Annihilator to ever exist, the path to follow was obvious.

"What about two against one, slave of the Primordial Annihilator?"

It was accompanied by one strike releasing her potential ally, while the enemy turned his attention towards her.

The eyes were beautiful in their own way, but the creature had distorted them into something vile.

The orbs retained a human appearance, for now. But Yvraine could see the evil lurking in them, and it was not some boon granted by Atharti or the Cronesword she wielded.

The immense being was just that damned and enslaved to the whims of Chaos.

"An Eldar..." the voice was calm, but for those who had the ears to listen, the hatred was there, a raging inferno somehow contained behind a strong shield, "and here I thought that after Commorragh, you were finally going to stop meddling with things out of your league. Flee, foolish female. Flee, and pray the attention of Weaver and other beings too powerful for you doesn't wander near your xenos head."

Yvraine, for once, was left absolutely speechless. The words had been uttered, but for a few seconds her mind refused to accept them.

When it did...when it did the former Asuryani of Biel-Tan giggled, because they could only mean one thing.

He didn't know.

The slave didn't know.

His Warp masters hadn't told him something so important because...well, she could speculate for cycles about it, but most likely there was no reason to waste secrets when one was going to discard the *slave* at the end of the farce anyway.

"Weaver...is our Empress now."

The slave the humans had called Lorgar Aurelian gaped.

The strongest reaction, however, came from her 'ally'.

"By everything twisted of the Necromunda pits, Hebert is going to tear this galaxy apart before I'm ninety!"

The enemy recovered first.

"That is irrelevant where I am concerned."

"I disagree-"

"No one asked for your opinion, xenos!"

Oh, so not only was this enemy a slave of the Primordial Annihilator, he also hated everything and everyone that was not of his own species.

How delightfully hypocritical of him.

Honestly, it wasn't like the things fighting by his side could not be qualified as Empyrean xenos...

Yvraine drew *Kha-vir* again.

"But you will hear it nonetheless before the end. I am looking for a dance. Will you be a partner, blinded slave of Chaos?"

"I have no time for this foolishness!" The enemy roared, and instantly unleashed upon them another terrible onslaught his masters gave him the power to channel through his body.

Yvraine closed her eyes...and made her choice.

Everything began with one, right?

And though **Moderation** had its virtues, it was not the way she lived her life.

**Harmony** could be pleasant, but it wasn't for her. Staying meditating in the middle of a jungle and doing nothing but tending to animals and flowers...it would bore after a few days.

"I choose...**Passion**."

Yvraine Kaydinn felt the eyes of the Goddess fall upon her.

And an explosion of fuchsia light illuminated everything.

There was a scream of rage.

And then her chest began to burn.

It didn't hurt.

**Primarch** **Lorgar Aurelian**

"I choose...**Passion**."

His attack failed.

And a scream of pure anger escaped his throat before he could control it.

For everything the xenos had said...it was *true*.

There was a blast of odious pink-purple light, and Lorgar could perceive Weaver and another Eldar joining their hands over the heart of a dead God.

The Primarch of the Word Bearers saw many things in that second which seemed to last as long as ten centuries...and with the sight came understanding.

Many things had not gone the Eldars' way. Commorragh had been destroyed. The Webway was a ruined shadow of its former glory. The Eldar themselves were pitifully few in number, courting oblivion closer with each battle, for they could not replenish their numbers.

All of it was true.

None of it mattered, now that they had a new Goddess to protect them.

"There are only the Gods, and those blasphemers who stand against them will be annihilated!" The Seventeenth Primarch shouted, his arm carrying *Illuminarum* already on the move.

But his weapon, his unbreakable Power Maul, was cast aside like it was nothing.

The Eldar's white hair had been evidently dyed; his gaze could discern the roots of brown. But it began to change faster than one could describe; from white dye tarnished by hours of battle, the hair turned into the essence of a colour that white snow would envy.

It wasn't the only change, far from it.

The skin, the unnatural skin which had evidently spent too long under artificial lights in the absence of a true sun, darkened considerably. It went from pale white to soft pink, then from this to dark pink, and finally to a shade of light but powerful red.

The very body changed. It was nothing incredibly spectacular, but to a Primarch's eye, it was rather significant. Where everything had been sharp, angular, there was a distinct change...a change of **Carnality**.

Lorgar struck again.

This time there was no psychic power of blasphemous origin to parry.

But the infernal sword bathed in pink-green power was there to parry the blow, right as the bodysuit-armour the xenos wore was transfigured into a pink-black armour with five purple gemstones looking like amethysts – yet which weren't – on her chest.

"**Atharti** disagrees with you," the counterattack was swift and terrible, and when Lorgar stopped the cursed blade, *Illuminarum* was in a defensive stance mere centimetres away from his throat. "And I think the Empress will reward me greatly if I bring her your head."

Lorgar opened his mouth to answer...and abandoned the idea as the Emperor's failed Angel tried to stab him in the back with her green C'Tan blade.

And of course, the Eldar did not stay inactive, far from it. With a speed which had never been observed by members of the Seventeenth Legion, the long-eared xenos pushed her attack.

It took two seconds for Lorgar to realise what had happened.

The Aspect choice...with a Goddess to manage their tremendous potential, the Eldar could unlock some of the incredible skills their ancestors took for granted before Slaanesh's birth.

And this one...this one had evidently accepted a significant handicap somewhere, but it was in exchange for increased physical skills.

A fireball formed in the hand not holding the sword, and Lorgar had to erect a shield to not get incinerated.

Correction: increased physical skills and pyrokinesist abilities.

It was only an educated guess, but he was going to assume these powers confirmed the shattered God Khaine had taken his last breath and now Weaver had handed to the Eldar powers that had never really been controllable in the last several millennia.

This was...unimportant.

He had to fight through them. He had to accomplish his mission.

Nothing else mattered.

"Two against one will change nothing, do you hear me?" The Primarch of the Word Bearers hissed between gritted teeth. "You worship False Gods, and I am the weapon of the Primordial Truth! LET THE GALAXY BURN!"

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**High** **Priestess Aurelia Malys**

They returned into the middle of **Chaos**.

In their absence, the amount of space protected by the golden light of Weaver had shrunk dramatically. Abominable things were still not able to touch or attack the crystal-prisons where Paramountcy, Vainglory, and four Muses' essences were imprisoned, but it was a very near thing.

A dozen more heartbeats and the creatures born of the Primordial Annihilator's savagery and malice would have reached them.

Of course, as Taylor Hebert drew *Elsar'bryn*, their advance was violently repelled.

For a brief moment, it was like watching a Sun of Hope being born. Aurelia could feel **Atharti** blessing the Empress' efforts, and **Symbiosis** empowered **Administration**, **Hope** and **Sacrifice**.

Reality was reasserted. The influence of the Primordial Annihilator was repelled.

The normal structure of a human starship, albeit one heavily corrupted, reappeared.

And an immense wave of light and crystal surged high, before plunging towards the daemonic hordes.

"**WEAVER COMES! SHE IS BRINGING THE LIGHT**!"

It didn't last long, but by Atharti, it was glorious.

They were only two against the entire hosts of the Primordial Annihilator and the silent phalanxes of skeletons ruled by the King in Yellow, but it didn't matter.

By blade and powers that had been properly unimaginable before Commorragh, they charged.

And Weaver was the Angel of Sacrifice. A corona of Light and Divine Power cloaked her, protecting her from all conventional and unconventional attacks.

Bloodletters were incinerated. Nurglings received shockwaves so powerful that the time between their materialisation and their banishment was infinitesimal. Horrors imploded as *Elsar'bryn* struck in their vicinity.

The enormous rats screeched in fear and tried to flee, biting and trampling each other in their haste to survive, a display of absolutely shameful cowardice if there ever was one.

The skeletons stood their ground until they were pulverised and reduced to dust once more.

It could not last.

The Aspects of the Primordial Annihilator abandoned their myriad of conflicts, the Ruinous Aspect of War being the first to answer the challenge. Millions of red daemons with black hooves, beastly faces and armed with reality-shattering blades were summoned into existence and bellowed their battle-cries.

The battlefield shook as the call of **War** resonated again.

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!"

Weaver was incredibly powerful, even more so now that Atharti was supporting her.

But this was not a fight they could win.

For each horde disintegrated or annihilated by crystals and golden flames, there were three more to take its place.

For every hateful and beastly daemon vanquished, ten more pressed on, and even the cowardly servants of Anarchy seemed to sense the tide had turned, bringing reinforcements and strange green-glowing weapons for a new offensive. And they shattered the road of bones, those upstart rodents, by explosions of green light which slaughtered more of them than they killed dead warriors, or by the simple deed of gnawing the bones until they broke.

The army of the King in Yellow ceased to exist, and its last remnants became nothing but broken bones and destroyed armour...though the baleful sensation that there was *something* observing her didn't decrease in the least.

It was a decisive turning point.

Slowly but inevitably the two of them were forced back until the Light only illuminated a small area, barely greater than the one which had been protected from the Primordial Annihilator when they returned.

The encirclement was complete, and as the daemons couldn't step into the Light for now, the fighting died down.

The Aeldari Empress landed next to her. Her slow breathing did much to reassure Aurelia.

"No new shade of paint for your skin?" Taylor Hebert joked...at least Aurelia thought it was a joke.

"I am the High Priestess of **Atharti**. I do not have to choose between **Moderation**, **Passion**, and **Harmony**. I am all of them."

"Truly fascinating."

"My Goddess didn't explain it to you?"

"She explained a lot of things, including some I didn't necessarily want to know," there was an amused snort. "But no, your skin colour and your choice...or lack of it...was not among our topics of conversation."

The sound of shattering crystal made sure there was no attempt to pursue the subject. Not that Aurelia would have been very willing to speak about very sensitive information when the Primordial Annihilator could hear everything.

But in that case, as she said, it was moot.

A fist burning in orange flames tore its way out of the prison-crystal. Soon it was the entire arm which was free.

The Dark Legions of the Warp grew silent, as with blow after blow, Addaioth of **Vainglory** destroyed the prison and bindings with which Weaver had immobilised him.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, Aurelia had to reluctantly agree that its appearance remained very similar to Khaine. There were fewer spikes and the shape of the God's shell was lither, tending towards an orange-obsidian Drukhari Incubus, but-

The power level was completely different, of course. The Bloody-Handed had been a blazing furnace; the being which had taken the title of All-Consuming Flame was a feeble bonfire, and...it was deeply ironic for millions of reasons.

"**FREE! FREE FROM YOUR TYRANNY, WEAVER**!"

Addaioth's power increased, though it remained...well, weak.

The Despoiler's point about the weakness of the Aeldari deities had never seemed more relevant than now for Vainglory.

"**AND NOW...I CLAIM MY FIRST VICTORY**!"

An enormous sword of black metal was raised over Addaioth's head. Orange lava fell from it, and as the fires burned, they also revealed the lacklustre quality of the instrument of death.

The blow was clearly intended to destroy the prison of Paramountcy...and the vulture Shard-Aspect immediately stopped its struggle to escape. There was no need for the services of a Farseer to know that the strike was not just going to destroy the bindings and the jail. It was going to weaken the prisoner too. And then Vainglory would no doubt devour Paramountcy.

"**FOR THE GLORY OF**-"

Aurelia closed her eyes, for the sheer brightness...it was beautiful, but terrible.

She reopened them as the All-Consuming Flame's primary weapon hit the ground in a phenomenal clang.

And yes, the hand of Addaioth was still attached to the sword.

It was not exactly a permanent wound. Already the wounded limb was regenerating...but it surely was a monumental humiliation...and a proof of weakness.

And uncountable daemons were the spectators.

"Seriously," Weaver commented sarcastically, her two blades drawn and burning with the power she had used to disarm Addaioth, "did you really think I was going to let you get away with this?"

"**YOU TRIED TO KILL ME**."

"Don't be ridiculous. That was just a warning shot. If I wanted you dead, you would be on the ground bleeding out your ichor."

"**YOU DARED STRIKE AGAINST ME**!"

"Yes? I mean, I killed Khaine. Did you think I would hesitate to strike you down?"

"**DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPRESS**!" The incarnation of Vainglory shouted, his sword materialising in his regenerated hand as the prison of Kharsaq El'Uriaq imploded. "**MY HERALD, YOU WILL**-"

The fight was short.

Weaver slammed into Addaioth like a flamboyant comet, and though the supreme ruler of Shaa-Dom tried to help his deity...it amounted to nothing.

A tornado of scarabs, hornets, and flies was created from crystal shards, and before one could say 'the battle began', it was all over.

Addaioth was on his back, wounded, and bleeding orange ichor. *Elsar'bryn* was against his neck.

And then the sound of applause arrived at her ears.

"Bravo, bravo!"

Kharsaq El'Uriaq shouted something...and he fell, rendered unconscious by a massive gauntlet of black metal.

There was no need to ask on whose order it had been done.

"This battle has really been...incredibly satisfying, Weaver."

"Warmaster Abaddon."

The daemonic hosts around them partially faded away, though there remained enough of them to overwhelm them the moment the Light faltered.

And it would.

Unlike his lieutenants, who remained many steps away from the illuminated battlefield, the Despoiler was literally touching the boundary between the two zones, creating a shower of black and golden sparks every time the claws of the monstrous claw-talon came into contact with it.

"I am really surprised to see you intervening right now."

"No, you are not." The not-enslaved colossus shrugged. "A woman as intelligent as you are would know, no matter the ambitions of an awakened Aeldari Goddess, that there are satisfying victories...and there is something called gluttony."

"I'm flattered. But with all the respect I have for you...I am not in the habit of leaving powerful weapons laying around to fall into the hands of my enemies."

Weaver jumped away from Addaioth's body. Prudently, the All-Consuming Flame stayed in its vulnerable position, perhaps considering – with reason – it was unlikely someone would focus on him for now.

"A most intelligent strategy, and one I completely support. But giving four Muses to **Symbiosis-Carnality** and setting two Aspects in opposition to the Gods? Maybe I shouldn't have said 'gluttony'. Maybe **Greed** is far more appropriate for the audacity of the scheme."

Aurelia really considered the idea of fighting the Warmaster of the Black Legion as the conversation went on.

Ultimately, and with great regret, she decided it was futile.

There was power in symbols, and since the horribly informed warlord had made no aggressive move, they would have to go on the offensive...which given what they were surrounded with, would not end in a victory...and that was assuming the Despoiler could not beat them two-on-one, which alas was a possibility that couldn't be dismissed.

"You are not *their* messenger."

"No," and the black tyrant grabbed a chair that had somehow survived all the fighting, before using it for its intended purpose. "I am just a humble *negotiator*."

The ridiculousness of the assertion was...let's say it had its place in a Harlequin's repertoire.

But it was a claim for something, and since no one chose to deny it...

The massive round table which had been shattered was reassembled by the Warp. One by one, the items which had been intact upon their arrival began to be repaired and flew back to their original locations.

"Shall we begin?"

**Macragge System**

**Ardium**

**Asculum Military District**

**Hive Asculum**

**67 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Rogue** **Trader Guts**

If Griffith had been there in the devastation with them, he would have concluded they were delaying the inevitable.

But Guts had never been good at accepting the inevitable, even when it was slammed in his face.

Especially when it was slammed in his face, to be honest.

"Come on!" He shouted. "This is our hour! Death to the Tyranids!"

And for good measure, his huge sword – which happened to be called *Dragonslayer* like his ship –destroyed the head of one more two metres-tall horror.

Casca of course chose to give a counter-order in the next seconds.

"What do you think you're doing, Guts? The second wall has fallen, even the Space Marines are retreating! If we don't withdraw, we are going to be overwhelmed!"

"If we withdraw," he had to stop as four more medium-sized Tyranid creatures charged him, spitting acid that would destroy most metals which weren't his huge sword, "we are going to be cornered on the upper levels."

"And if you don't," his lover retorted, "you will be dinner for those xenos! Withdraw!"

Everything in him screamed this was a mistake. They had to counterattack, break the enemy vanguard here and now. There weren't that many psychic Carnifexes in this wave...

This thought was interrupted as another Tyranid stormed out of a recently dug tunnel and tried to skewer him.

"Yes...yes, you are right," he was forced to concede, as over three hundred chitinous horns and claws proceeded to tear apart a fortified bunker to his right. "I follow the retreat. But we are making an error, I feel it."

"The error was holding where we were for as long as we did." The other member of the Band of the Hawk didn't let him have this one, damn it. "I am not the Eldar army monster. You are not a Primarch."

"Of course not. You are far prettier than her...and I have a bigger sword than him."

According to the rumours, Leman Russ had broken several swords by the fault of the Tyranids' acid and other agonising weaponry. *Dragonslayer*, in the meantime, remained perfectly intact...albeit covered in putrid slime and violet blood.

"She is far prettier than me? Really?"

No one who had heard this purr, no matter the distance, was going to mistake it for anything else.

Guts turned his head, and sure enough, the red-haired monster was *here*.

*The Queen of Blades was here*.

The psychopathic mind which thought fighting millions of psychic Tyranids with no one but a Primarch in support was here, one finger touching Casca's throat.

Guts didn't dare make a move, the threat of the Tyranids forgotten...though given how they were sliced apart by invisible blades, the danger was really slim...from them.

"Well? Is she really prettier than me?"

In desperate times like that...always bet on your lover, not on the xenos threatening you.

The Queen of Blades could kill him.

What Casca would do to him if he didn't give the right answer promised to be far more painful, last longer, and let him sleep alone in a very cold couch for the rest of his life.

"Yes, yes she is."

The red-haired Eldar...sighed?

"Why is everyone failing to give me proper respect today?" Lelith Hesperax complained loudly. "First, the spider, then the Primarch and his band of furry companions, and now you. It's like everyone has chosen this battle to upset me."

"Err..." That was not the reaction Guts expected...and neither did Casca.

Thousands of Tyranids screeched, and a new tide of red-black creatures charged through the breaches while firing quantities of lethal projectiles and bio-plasma, their sonic roars damaging the ferrocrete and the ceramite-reinforced buildings.

Nothing reached them, and one slash later, the Tyranids were all decapitated in less time than it took you to say 'God-Emperor'.

"All right. I have decided what I am going to do."

Guts stopped breathing...again.

"I will let Weaver punish you. As a loyal subject of the Empress, it is of course my duty to report the insubordinate fools everywhere I meet them."

What...what was she talking about?

"Besides, I've always had a weakness when it comes to annoying the aristocracy of the local authorities. You, the black-armoured brute!"

"Me?"

Casca giggled.

"You see another black-armoured brute nearby?" the red-haired army-killer inquired rhetorically and tersely. "You will stop wielding that ugly slab of black metal the moment this battle is over. It offends me to watch you fight like you do. Your lack of elegance and technique is hurting my eyes! Don't do it again, or I will ask my dear Empress to double your punishment!"

There was a flash of silver, and when Guts' eyes returned to functioning normally, the Queen of Blades was gone.

"When Griffith told you that using *Dragonslayer* like you did was going to cause you problems...I don't think that what was he had in mind."

"Har, har, har...thank you for the support Casca."

One second later, his lover was kissing him ferociously on the lips.

"And thank you for defending my honour...*my hero*."

Too bad five seconds later, the Tyranids were back...damn xenos had really a gift for ruining everything.

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **Taylor Hebert**

There was something surreal about what they were doing.

The weapons had been sheathed and kept far away from the seats they were using. While no armour had been removed, the helmets were, and the air was surprisingly...breathable and free from corruption. Yes, it was all relative, but it was the best she would get.

It was still surreal.

The table had changed to adopt a shape that was vaguely rectangular. Very vaguely. Still, that meant there were two sides, separated by a massive amount of some exotic wood.

On one side, the Chaos Warmaster and his lieutenant Astartes were seated.

Opposite to them, were Aurelia Malys and herself.

The two Aspect-Shards and the four crystals containing the Dark Muses were levitating between them.

This was not the only 'decoration'. Mere centimetres above the middle of the table, was a hololithic map of the Eye of Terror.

It did not show troop concentrations or any significant information about the Traitor Legions. There was no clue about the mysteries and secrets which waited to be discovered.

It only showed the points where the Ruinous Powers were intervening in real-time.

It showed the Great Game...and unsurprisingly, the Four were incredibly active.

Yes, even Malal. Though the greatest agitation of Anarchy was on the former homeworld of the Word Bearers, the Beast was attacking all across the Warp Storm.

It was somewhat...humbling. It was a reminder that in this unnatural realm spanning the equivalent of many Imperial Sectors, the Angel of Sacrifice was powerful, yet far below the level required to decide anything important.

"You begin to understand, I believe, why I did what I did."

"There are many ways I could interpret this, you know," Taylor answered, and the Lord of the Black Legion smiled. "If you refer to my Empress claim, yes I understand. You want Mankind to decide the fate of the galaxy. If the new Aeldari acknowledge me as their Empress, their role is more of...auxiliaries in the Imperial ranks, though the reality will be much more complicated and different. But in the Warp, the Aeldari will be...a lesser player."

"There needs to be balance in this universe." Abaddon replied, not outright confirming her theory...which might be a validation...or it might not. "Winning is not the answer to everything."

"Strong words when the...when the Ruinous Powers desire nothing more than the expansion of the numbers of the 'Chaos Pantheon' until it threatens all reality."

"Strong words, but you forget the problem born of the Old Ones' engineering." The voice was patient. Too patient. "The eight-pointed star is more than a symbol. It was there at the moment the first of them was created, and the very nature of the beings carved into the tapestry of the Immaterium ensured they would thrive and struggle to achieve the rest."

Something growled in the darkness, invisible and seething. No one gave it any attention.

"The nature of someone, be it a life of the Materium, or the essence of the Warp, can change."

"It can, but you have to work within certain boundaries. Your Emperor decided to replace Excess with Anarchy rather than risking the consequences of having Three instead of Four."

The Lady General didn't deny that. It would be monumentally hypocritical to do so. Oh, the Emperor had the plan and gave the order, but if she had to be honest, Taylor hadn't needed much convincing to go with that plan. It had promised to inflict huge amounts of pain on the Traitor Legions...and in the end, it did.

"There are four Ruinous Powers now." She would never call those entities Gods.

"But there is no balance."

The message behind the sentence was not difficult to decipher.

And though she decided to think ten good seconds about it, her answer was the same as it would have been had she not played several scenarios out in her head.

"Out of the question."

The Chaos Warmaster nodded, as if he wasn't surprised by her answer...and he likely wasn't. She probably wasn't very predictable in several aspects, but this one was really easy to anticipate.

"In that case, we return to the issue of not being too greedy."

Damn it.

Taylor had warned Atharti she was too ambitious...and it was more than justified, given the present circumstances.

"And what is the limit of the greed we are speaking about, Warmaster? The same the fallen master of the Eleventh Legion broke so recently?"

The former First Captain of the Sixteenth Legion said nothing for long seconds.

When he spoke again, there was no sign of anger or contrariety.

"All those who ignore where the limits are generally discover the price of hubris. There was a planet of sands once, you know. There were great landmasses of sand, limited by oceans. I remember having walked in the shadow of immense dunes. I remember the oases and the rivers lazily flowing to spill their waters into the oceans and the seas. But the King was perpetually unsatisfied."

"I have heard of it before." It was, alas, a failure likely as old as Mankind. "Ambition-"

"It was not his ambition, I understand it now." Abaddon for once interrupted her. "It was not something the Lord of **Change** whispered into his ears. It wasn't **Excess** either. It was not the thrill of **War**. It was not fear of his own mortality and the desire to embrace **Decay**. It was the Fifth Throne calling him."

"We speak of Warp Thrones, yet there is no such thing in reality."

"True. The better term would be 'Power to gather the claimed souls and erect a Domain against all contenders'." The veteran of uncountable brutal military campaigns smirked. "I prefer to use 'Throne' in a conversation."

That was a matter on which Taylor agreed with him...and it happened too frequently to be reassuring.

"What I am explaining, though, is that in the absence of balance, there are no coincidences, Lady Weaver. Skeletons do not walk on bone roads because they are satisfied with their predicament."

"The Ruinous Powers won't tolerate such a claim...and neither will the Emperor."

Striking the 'Ambassador' had been as much to challenge that claim as it had been anything else.

But as the reply she expected didn't come, Taylor tried to reassess everything that had happened in the last few hours. And suddenly, a short conversation exchanged while trying to battle her way in a Noctilith reserve of the Ymga Monolith was replayed in her head.

"Malicia. She searched for his homeworld."

"And your possible rival might have found the keys to access it."

Abaddon's comment was not what she wanted to hear. Unfortunately, there was a lot of that lately.

That said...it might not be a complete disaster for the Imperium. Now that the veil of secrecy was shattered, the heretics were going to charge towards the Calyx Expanse like Lisa smelling a mountain of strawberries.

"I want to hear your notion of balance...please."

"As you wish. Two Muses for two Muses. For each restriction you give, I can apply the same number of boundaries upon yours."

"Hmm...and the Aspects?"

"**I WILL NOT TOLERATE**-"

"*Be quiet*."

Addaioth's tantrum stopped immediately.

"One for one," Abaddon said as several of his lieutenants chuckled. "Or the two released into the Warp to follow their true nature. Your choice."

The Warmaster of the Black Legion did not threaten her. There was no curse, no manifestation of power, or any form of intimidation.

But it was evidence itself this was something the Despoiler wouldn't budge on.

And why would he?

They were in the Eye of Terror, on the terrain of his choosing.

If he wanted to avoid a repeat of the Horus-Sanguinius fight, Abaddon must avoid fighting her directly. But that was all the limits he had to restrain himself.

Taylor turned her head and stared at Aurelia. After a long moment of hesitation where her eyes flashed fuchsia and green, the High Priestess nodded.

The insect-mistress turned back to look at the Legionnaires of the Black Legion.

"Very well. We have an accord. Per the accord you wanted. Two Muses for two Muses. One Aspect for one Aspect. Balance and reciprocity...and as the host, I leave you the honour to begin."

"Most gracious," the Chaos Warmaster slightly inclined his head, "the Aspect I claim in the name of Pantheon is Vainglory."

"**YOU WILL NOT**-"

"No one asked for your opinion, weak parody of Khaine," one of the sorcerers interrupted.

By the time 'parody' was uttered, a sort of...black miasma had begun to wet the feet of the destructive Aspect.

"And any who want to worship him will have to acknowledge me as the **Warmaster**."

Note to self: the moment this campaign was over, convince the High Lords that the title had to be removed from the list of ranks available to any loyalist officer.

"The Harlequins won't exactly tolerate their presence in the Webway if you do that."

"I know. In fact, Weaver, I'm actually counting on it."

Yes...of course he was.

"Since you pushed for this claim, I can give one of my own."

"By all means..."

The Angel of Sacrifice abandoned her seat and moved towards Addaioth, whose legs were now covered in a sort of black substance presaging nothing good.

"When it was time to pick a side, Addaioth, you chose to side with my enemies."

"**And I would do it again, False Empress**."

There was no contrition and no remorse in the burning orange eyes.

Yes, she really had no reason to spare this being.

"I don't know what boons you will give to your worshippers, but I know very well the gift I will give them. You have chosen to dance upon the ashes of the First Empire, and you will be judged as such."

Something in her eyes must have warned the Aspect-Shard this had been his last mistake, for his next words were almost imploring.

"**Wait! Do not**-"

"Be quiet." She hissed. "If an Aeldari or any being bearing their gene-legacy wants to worship you, so be it. But they will know the side you chose to support. *The skin of all your followers will be the colour of night and ashes, and so will yours*. *This is my decree, and so it will stand*."

Addaioth screamed...and in mere seconds a hole opened under its feet, and a gigantic lake of black miasma swallowed the future Ruinous Power.

Chaos had taken its due.

Taylor took back her seat...just as Kharsaq El'Uriaq regained consciousness and began to transform.

The hair of the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom became a bright orange, as if it wasn’t hair, but truly the inferno of his self-proclaimed deity. His eyes began to burn in orange flames too. The skin, however, ceased to be the unnatural bone-white colour, and rapidly darkened. It took less than a minute, but when it ended, the Herald could boast a skin varying from dark grey to light black from head to toe.

Her command had been obeyed. The followers of Addaioth would indeed be eminently recognisable, with a skin the colour of night the moment they prostrated themselves before Addaioth.

Something that quite obviously, seemed to displease the Eldar in question who had been transformed.

"I will not forget this, *Maelsha'eil Dannan*."

"I assure you the feeling is mutual. Warmaster Abaddon?"

"The Muse Shaimesh. The Lord of Poisons. It seems to be perfect for the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom."

"What?"

"I do not desire any purification or alteration of any kind, Weaver."

"Duly noted."

The crystal imprisoning the Dark Muse broke, and a cloud of dark smoke erupted immediately from its ruin.

*The Aeldari is a hunter.*

*He was not born in the cities of the Empire of a Billion Moons.*

*He was born in the woods.*

*His parents teach him to hunt to never feel hungry.*

*They teach him many things, for they are loyal to the teachings of Kurnous.*

*Every hunt must be a precise and painless act. The animals one feeds upon exist in the grand cycle of life, and do not deserve to be punished for the problems of the hunter.*

*One hunts because one needs to; it is your responsibility that the next hunt comes later rather than sooner.*

*For a long, long time, the Aeldari youngling follows the advice.*

*He enters the ranks of Kurnous priesthood.*

*He becomes a Huntmaster.*

*His talents are so remarkable that they attract the attention of the Emperor and his mother, despite the distance between his woods and the capital world.*

*In another Age, it would be something outstanding.*

*In this age of decadence and hedonism, it is anything but.*

*Poisoned words are whispered into his ears.*

*Step by step, the hunter becomes unsatisfied.*

*Then the lack of satisfaction results in more hunts. It is a short journey before it worsens and cruelty begins. The animals are shot with extremely potent toxins so that they suffer in long and terrible agonies.*

*The changes are finally noticed. His parents come and they do not understand.*

*He challenges them. He hunts them. And he kills them.*

*By the time the envoys of Malekith return, there is nothing left of the noble Huntmaster of Kurnous.*

*He is Shaimesh, Lord of Poisons, Cruel Stinger, and Master of Cruelty. His soul is dark, and his body is transformed to reflect this.*

*Before the end of an Empire, those who will become the Haemonculi of Commorragh will worship him*.

Kharsaq El'Uriaq screamed as the smoke entered via his mouth, and Taylor could not repress a wince, because well...without imposed limits, it really looked like a Possession.

The new looks born of the previous transformation weren't altered.

The aura cloaking the Tyrant of the Drukhari however...it was far weaker than the power of the Queen of Blades, to be sure. But it was a thunderstorm of...slime and poison. Whatever came out of this parody of Symbiosis, it wouldn't be good at all.

"Your Second Muse?" The Lady of the Nyx Sector feigned boredom, though the...the thing which was going to take control of the Drukhari was disgusting in the extreme, no matter if it was Shaimesh or the original owner.

"The Muse Vileth. The Lord of Twilight. The Carrion Reaver. The Muse's power is to go to the Baron Sathonyx."

She didn't recognise the name...not that it was much of a surprise. Any Drukhari or other Eldar warrior who had allied himself with the Black Legion was not going to be in her databases, unless he launched a raid against an Imperial planet while clad in Black Legion armour. And it was a big galaxy.

"No restrictions?"

"No restrictions."

Damn, the Despoiler really didn't care if the Drukhari managed to resist the Possession of the Muse and absorb the power or not.

Anyway, it was not her problem...

Another crystal broke.

There was no smoke this time, more...a sort of long tongue covered in blades.

And then it went missing.

There was a short flash, but nothing like what had happened for the previous Muses.

The only useful knowledge drawn from it was...*Vileth was the former Sun Warden, the High Priest of Asuryan*.

"My part is done. Your turn, Weaver."

"Thank you, *Warmaster*. First, I-"

The storm raged again, and this time it was far, far worse than before. On the hololithic map, it appeared as if every horde of horrors and abominations from the Eye of Terror was summoned to a single location.

Here.

The weapons were summoned back. The helmet was sealed.

"So much for balance and not being greedy."

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**The Temple of Correction**

**67 hours after the Mark of Oblivion**

**Primarch** **Lorgar Aurelian**

Lorgar was bleeding.

By all rights, his Primarch regeneration abilities should have erased the pinpricks he had suffered in mere seconds.

Except these flesh wounds had been inflicted by a C'Tan Blade and a cursed Eldar sword.

It wasn't impossible to undo the effect those stabs had on his flesh. These weren't Fulgurite-infused weapons, after all.

But it would require a lengthy ritual, and plenty of time.

Lorgar didn't have that time.

And so he was bleeding, bleeding on the white marble steps of the Temple of Correction, Guilliman's monument of vanity when his brother was alive, and now his mausoleum as the pompous idiot was in a near-death state.

It hurt, but the pain was something he had been intimately familiar with before.

He could ignore it.

He had to ignore it, save when it gave him fuel for his rage, and the power to continue channelling enough sorcery so that the enemy bombardment didn't injure him anymore than he already was.

Because yes, while the incomplete Angel of Shadows and her Eldar ally had fled when they were too wounded to delay him a second longer, the Ultramar Auxilia was relentlessly launching attacks.

They accomplished nothing but their own deaths tactically, but that wasn't the point.

The Great Game was entering a new and terrible phase.

Lorgar felt it.

Everyone who had the eyes to see and the ears to listen could sense it.

And unfortunately, this meant these relentless attacks did everything they were supposed to do, which was forcing him to waste precious time he couldn't afford.

His survival and the future of his Legion depended upon him arriving in time.

He had to arrive in time.

The Gods willed it.

The blasphemers and the blinded ignorant worshippers of Guilliman weren't making this easy. There were landmines everywhere, most of them thrown by mechanised launchers the moment he arrived in their sight. Rhinos and defence turrets were hammering him with every step.

The artillery forces of the citadel were expending monumental quantities of ammunition.

Lorgar was bleeding, and he was alone.

The shells and the plasma explosions made it difficult enough to keep a constant sorcery shield to protect himself, and fight the platoons of delusional mortals; the Seventeenth Primarch did not have the concentration or the fortitude to summon Neverborn on top of that.

He still had one last card to play. Not all was lost, for all he saw the inferno in the distance that had become Macragge City.

Lorgar destroyed one more Hydra Tank and two Chimera vehicles, before finally reaching the esplanade that had been his destination all along.

The view was superb, a part of his mind reluctantly admitted.

Arches of blue and white marble were on his left and right. The walls had stupendous mosaics between the military defences.

The marble stairs were behind him, and now the floor of the Fortress was Ultramar blue and gold interlaced. There were marble statues of Legionnaires of the Great Crusade, and scenes of heroic victories surrounded by great fountains of bronze.

But the last gates were barred.

And between him and this imposing obstacle, over four hundred Skitarii and two Mechanicus Knights – House Taranis, if he wasn't mistaken – were waiting in complete silence.

They shouldn't be here. The Lords of Mars should have no reason to come to Guilliman's aid in the Ultramarines' darkest hour.

One more delay.

More seconds lost.

And time was running out.

"Step out of my way, or die."

The Thermal Cannons of the Knights went from idle to targeting him. So did the four hundred Galvanic Rifles of the Skitarii. The esplanade began to burn as the artillery resumed its bombardment in vain attempts to make him falter.

He would not fail.

He was the servant of the Gods.

He was their Word Bearer.

"Then you have chosen...death."

**Somewhere in the Eye of Terror**

**Gloriana Battleship *Vengeful Spirit***

**Lady** **General Taylor Hebert**

Obviously, the Ruinous Powers had never intended to respect this negotiation.

And honestly, Taylor had never thought they would.

The Four were the Ruinous Powers. Malal was in all likelihood the craziest of the Four, which was saying quite something, but it was not crazier than the other Three by much.

They were evil incarnate.

They loved to corrupt everything which was human, and many other things which were not.

Maybe Warmaster Abaddon had intended to respect the equality of the negotiations. Maybe he hadn't. There would be no way to know for sure for a long, long time.

Because one thing was certain: staying on the *Vengeful Spirit* right now was a guaranteed death sentence.

Fortunately, the Ruinous Powers had made a major mistake.

They had wanted to deny her *everything* that had been negotiated.

But by doing so, she was no longer bound by her oath.

And she had given the Despoiler what he wanted.

It was anything but satisfactory, but it had broken any chains which might restrict her in return.

And so, as all the hells opened before her, the Nebula's Shard was in her hand and she uttered a single word.

"*Shatter*."

The target was not Abaddon. As much as she would have wanted to remove him from the board, there was no question an attack at this very moment would have epically failed.

The target wasn't Kharsaq El'Uriaq either. That would be too close to breaking her word.

As for the warlords of the Black Legion, the idea was ridiculous in the extreme. As important as they were for Abaddon, they simply didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

No, the target was the Shard-Aspect of **Paramountcy**.

Tzeentch's prize.

The half-mutated vulture that **Change** did not have the time to assimilate correctly.

Atharti had wanted it in the hope that one day, it would become another Aeldari God, but Taylor had convinced her it was out of their combined reach.

"**NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!"

The shriek of an abomination engulfed reality.

Not for long, though.

The explosion which came after was truly *cataclysmic*.

The Angel of Sacrifice used her powers to protect herself as well as Aurelia Malys.

It was...not entirely successful.

It was like being drowned in the most violent and horrifyingly dangerous ocean of the entire galaxy.

And then it stopped.

Her armour...was not in the best of states as she breathed and examined her surroundings. Plenty of fissures, plenty of the gold had been ripped from it, revealing the Auramite underneath.

But she was alive. She may have created a nice elephant-sized crater while falling from the *Vengeful Spirit*, but this was unimportant save for her pride.

She was alive. Which was far better than any of the moderate scenarios she had imagined.

She was alive...and though everything around her was ruined and a spectacle of grey-brown devastation, Taylor laughed.

She was alive.

A second later, Aurelia Malys crawled out of another crater behind her.

"The exit strategy...was impressive." The High Priestess said weakly. "Maybe a little warning first, next time?"

Taylor snorted.

"Chaos didn't give me enough time."

And that had the merit of being the pure and honest truth.

"We're alive."

"We're alive, and Chaos will have one less weapon to torment us with."

It was regrettable she had been unable to destroy Addaioth too; while the 'Pretender' was still very weak, it would be a rival for Atharti. And no, Taylor didn't believe for a single second in balance or such other nonsense. Stillborn Ruinous Powers were best destroyed as quickly as possible. There was Anarchy to backstab the other Three; one didn't need a Fifth Throne.

But Paramountcy was shattered. Whatever survived after that wouldn't be powerful enough to have a single daemon servant, much less be considered a Power in its own right.

"Anyway," Taylor sighed, "we need to return to Macragge."

"Ahem...since you brought up the idea, my Empress..."

The hesitant tone was not what she wanted to hear.

"Are you sure you cleared the idea with my Goddess? Because the disruption of Paramountcy's shattering seemed to have...disrupted everything. I can sense my Goddess, but it's a distant light, very far away...and I can't feel the Sword of Paths at all."

Taylor groaned.

"Are you telling me, High Priestess, that we are in the middle of this nice little region of space known as the Eye of Terror...and we have no way out?"

"Err...yes?"

"Wonderful, really...just wonderful."

The urge was there to try to slam her armoured head against this planet, and see which side was the first to give up.

"Fortunately, I think we have another option."

Turning her head to see what Aurelia was looking at, Taylor saw them.

They levitated out of the void with no sound to announce their arrival.

They were the two last crystal-prisons.

They were the containers of the two Muses' souls and powers.

There was shocked silence for a good minute. Aurelia was the first of their duo to speak her mind.

"Maybe the Despoiler is behind this."

"Correction: the Despoiler is absolutely behind this." Taylor paused. "Or for some mysterious reason, the Muses inside those crystals have suddenly become fond of me." Something that was utterly ridiculous, for those were willing servants of Slaanesh, as she hadn't had the time to destroy the taint of Excess in them.

"No, that's definitely the Warmaster's work."

Abaddon had upheld his end of the bargain, even if the Ruinous Powers didn't. It was nice...and not. There would be no favour owed, no negotiation that could be transformed into a weapon...

"Ah, hell. If I purify one Muse, can you get us out of here?"

"I...I don't think so, my Empress. I think that if I take the power and the knowledge of a Muse, I will be able to...*I* will be able to leave. The ripples echoing through Slaanesh's cradle will no longer be a factor...for me."

Taylor grimaced, once more glad her face was hidden by a helmet.

"Very well. One of us has to escape and-"

"My Empress. There are two Muses' essences. We can use each one."

"Don't be ridiculous-"

But for all the hindrance the helmet of the new High Priestess wasn't transparent...the insect-mistress didn't have the feeling Aurelia Malys was joking.

"I am human. I am not an Aeldari."

*Technically*, a little voice in her head laughed, *you are*-

"By claim, you are our Empress. Thus you are an Aeldari." Aurelia shook her head, looked like she was going to take a step back...before continuing. "And I sense...forgive me, but I believe you are not yet...complete. You have one more step before..."

The end did not come, and she had to finish herself.

"Before whatever I am destined to become is complete." Mentally, the last hours had been bloody exhausting. "Was this your plan all along?"

"No!" The exclamation was sincere. "I mean, I didn't know what was going to happen with my Goddess, never mind...everything...every revelation and trap which activated on our path..."

Yes, in a way, it was...really paranoid of her to expect anyone to have anticipated everything that happened on the *Vengeful Spirit*.

"The Muses...what do you know about them?"

"Lhilitu, the Consort of the Void. Her main source of the worship at Commorragh was the Cult of the Lhameans, elite courtesans of the Drukhari who doubled as poisoners, exceptional advisors...and imaginative lovers."

Wonderful. Even with the taint of Excess removed, this was not something she wanted to touch.

"And the other?"

"Ynesth, the Dark Genesis. I don't know much about her, I'm afraid. She wasn't worshipped where I lived..."

This day just kept getting better and better.

But what little was known of Lhilitu didn't sound good.

There were many things that she could do, but play the role of courtesan? Nah, that was Wei's favourite hobby when they were alone.

Taylor was a warlord. Maybe she wasn’t always a warlord. But she wasn't a courtesan.

Wordlessly, the Angel of Sacrifice let her powers burn in golden flames the first crystal-prison.

*She is the Oracle of Lileath.*

*A young Aeldari girl, she is the voice of the Goddess of Dreams and Fortune.*

*She is the light of the Maiden Moon.*

*It should mean a lot.*

*It means nothing.*

*The visions of the Goddess have been nonexistent for an eternity. The fortunes of Her Temples are a litany of humiliations and odious insults.*

*Each cycle sees many more temples and sacred altars succumb to Excess. Each day and night cycle sees more Priestesses abandon the Path of Maidenhood of their own volition and debase themselves in dark orgies and vile celebrations.*

*The Aeldari girl is strong of will, and resists when so many flees the temple.*

*She grows into a formidable woman, and for a time, the greatest temple of Lileath resists the encroaching darkness.*

*But there is no one to tell her that her cause is just.*

*There is no one to tell her there is still hope.*

*Worse, the ones who have seen the disaster coming, the ones building the great ships which will be known as Craftworlds, sneer at her efforts. The Gods and the Goddesses are silent. They won't help. Abandoning everything they had ever known is reason. Staying where the disease is the most virulent is folly.*

*The words hurt. The soul is wounded.*

*The woman that was no longer a girl is still strong. She resists for many moon cycles.*

*But in the end, of all the Priestesses of the Great Temple, she is the last one to remain.*

*Alone, in a structure so vast it could easily host a million Aeldari.*

*Alone, and her Goddess has abandoned her.*

*She snaps.*

*Under three moons she no longer believes in, the Maiden leaves the Temple and joins the debauchery which constantly rages in the streets of the Empire's heart.*

*Under the light of three moons, the Oracle loses her maidenhood, her innocence, and is rewarded in kind by Excess for the first sacrilege she ever committed.*

*By the end of the night, Lileath has lost her High Priestess.*

*And Lhilitu, the Consort of the Void, rises*.

"This Muse is for you."

The blast of violet energy was spectacular.

But in a good way, nothing like the...possession which had been upon El'Uriaq.

The armour she wore disintegrated into a million pieces. But there was no danger to her life.

The skin of the High Priestess of Atharti turned a beautiful, soft, silver. Her hair rose in a corona of violet, and soon they absorbed the power of it. The seductive aura became overwhelming. Grace itself seemed to be incarnated in the new body. Violet of hair, and the fuchsia for her eyes, Aurelia Malys burned with new exalting power.

And finally, the armour reformed...or would it be more accurate to say the Aeldari female could rebuild the armour with her powers. Except it was no longer its original colour. The armour was silver-white, with fuchsia markings.

It was however very carnal...to say the least. Tight-fitting, highlighting and emphasizing every curve and detail of her body, one couldn't say it left much to the imagination.

"Oh..." This was almost a purr similar to the Queen of Blades, melodious and...very sensual. "Thank you, my Empress."

"Well...glad you liked it." Taylor replied. "Is your theory confirmed?"

Aurelia nodded.

"I know I can leave. I know how to...walk in the Moon's reflection...your language does not have the words to correctly describe the power and grace of the skill. But this is not something that allows me to bring passengers."

Hell.

She wasn't the kind of girl to ask for help every time there was a problem, but maybe this was the Emperor's opportunity to give her a clue or two about what she was supposed to do...

**Macragge**

**Magna Macragge Military District**

**Fortress of Hera**

**The Temple of Correction**

**Shrine of Guilliman**

**Chapter** **Master Cato Valens**

The moment hellish flames began to burn the metal of the Shrine's Gates, Cato's last hopes died.

"The Brazen Consuls and the Black Templars have acknowledged our message, Chapter Master. There are less than twenty minutes away."

"We don't have twenty minutes," the Lord Regent of Macragge replied as something enormous hammered the adamantium-reinforced gates...and left an enormous dent in them. As if it couldn't get worse, more multicoloured Warpfire burned the metal and the other ancient protections, making a mockery of the works of the best Macraggian Techmarines. "We will be lucky to have two."

Archmagos Belisarius Cawl had sent his forces to intercept the Traitor Primarch without protest.

And with two Knights and countless weapons that the Ultramarines didn’t have in their arsenal, Cato Valens had really thought this would be enough.

He had been wrong.

Lorgar was an unstoppable force of evil.

They had taken great pains to be as unpredictable as possible. The Ultramar commanders had ignored most of the Codex restrictions relative to tactics, and done their utmost to see the Archfiend perish.

Ancient Dreadnoughts had died a second death wielding volatile weaponry not used since the thirty-first millennium. Auxilia had burned, closing the distance and detonating heavy loads of ammunition just to give their brothers-in-arms a chance. Plasma Blasters, Lascarbines, Combi-Bolters, Lascannons, minefields; be it vehicle-mounted, fixed killing ground, or hand-wielded, they had tried everything in most of the combinations that could give them a chance to kill the Arch-Heretic.

It had not worked.

And aside from a few conditions they did not fully understand, the Traitor Primarch was showing no sign he had fought for hours and dealt crushing defeat after crushing defeat to the garrison of the Fortress of Hera.

The abominations the Word Bearers worshipped had truly done too good of a job when it came to gifts to keep this putrid soul alive.

"This is our hour." The Chapter Master of the Ultramarines announced to the twelve battle-brothers around him. "We will wait until he's at extreme close range before firing the Rapier Laser Destroyers."

They had not tried that, mainly because there weren't that many of them left.

"And the Graviton Cannons?"

"Half a second later. If the Rapiers manage to wound him, it could cause him severe injuries."

And maybe, maybe, the thousand Auxilia members left would be able to overwhelm the Traitor Primarch, even if none of the Ultramarines present survived.

"We are the Ultramarines. We are the inheritors of the Calth Legacy. You know what that bastard has done to our ancestors. You know what his forces have done in his name at Ravenna, Illyrium, and Macragge City itself. You know what he intends to do here. Do not show him any mercy for this Arch-Traitor deserves none. Kill him, and send his soul screaming to the pits the daemons he calls masters have prepared for him!"

The strikes against the gates of the Shrine increased in intensity...before decreasing in frequency?

"What is he preparing-"

A vast thing burst into existence in front of them, and Cato almost vomited, for all his transhuman resistance to extreme and Warp-tainted smells.

"FIRE!"

It was not a second too soon, as unnatural mushrooms and long green tongues were revealed covering the 'body' of the thing...but it absorbed their fire like it didn't exist.

They had to parry countless blows and evade some of the foulest things...and one of his brothers was gripped by an abominable tongue, dragged to a maw, and swallowed.

"Damn the Traitors! Draw your blades, brother! We will have to-"

"**Mhh...the souls of the Ultramarines are particularly tasty. For once, Lorgar has fulfilled his bargain**!"

"*No, he didn't*."

There was Light.

The Warp monster screeched in agony.

"**No! You can't be here, the Gods saw you disappear into the abyss**!"

It began to rain...crystals?

And the daemon shrieked in pain.

"The problem isn't that I can't be here, abomination. The real problem is that you can't be here either. This is the Shrine of Guilliman. *And you weren’t invited*."

The next explosion shook the Temple of Correction to its foundations.

When the smoke dissipated, there was no daemon left. Not even a speck of its disgusting corpse.

The golden-armoured woman who had killed the enemy, however...she definitely was there.

Cato observed her silently. By all rights, this was impossible...the Lady General was supposed to be fighting on Ardium, by the last report...

"Lady General Taylor Hebert, Chosen of the Omnissiah!" Cawl chirped happily from his position next to the Shrine, confirming the unexplainable.

But then she was here, and she had saved them. Who was he to complain?

"Lady Weaver, thank you for-"

The warrior deployed her long golden wings, and raised her hand.

"Lord Regent. The disaster isn't averted and we don't have time for the courtesies. My question is simple: what are you ready to **Sacrifice** for Guilliman?"

At first wrath burned in his two hearts, because the question put in doubt everything. Then he felt shame...because the doubts were very much validated by his actions.

And ultimately...Cato Valens felt a pull. A pull of duty, yes. It was an emotion both familiar and completely alien.

"Absolutely everything." The Regent of Macragge answered with everything he had in his hearts.

"Good." Warpfire resumed its work of destruction upon the gates, as if it had been informed of the daemon's destruction...and it likely had been. "It has been an honour meeting you before the end."

Eight seconds later, the adamantium and other metals could no longer resist the Ruinous Powers of the Warp, and a terrible explosion rocked the Shrine.

The Traitor Primarch advanced, fallen son of the Emperor, shadow of murder, Arch-Heretic...and surprisingly and pleasantly, his armour was pierced by uncountable holes, with dozens of wounds still bleeding.

"Primarch Lorgar Aurelian, I presume."

**Primarch** **Lorgar Aurelian**

"Primarch Lorgar Aurelian, I presume."

No.

No!

NO!

Lorgar knew many curse words, both from the servants of the Gods and from those who weren't.

In five seconds, he remembered several thousand of them.

He didn't speak them. He didn't shout them. He didn't dare utter them.

What would be the use of wasting what precious time he had left?

And when the Seventeenth Primarch opened his mouth, it was because the Gods had ordered him to do so.

"**The sacrifice of the Ultramarines could bring you here**," They hissed. "**But no one Sacrificed himself to allow you to escape the Eye. How?**"

"Do you really expect me," the one who had taken the mantle of Sanguinius replied, amused, "to truthfully answer that question?"

**"HOW?"**

There was more than the power of the Three behind that single word which could have been translated into a million languages.

It brought nothing but defiance from its intended target.

"You are very loud, parasites. I'm warning you: raising the vocal volume of your puppet one more time isn't going to change my answer."

The power of the Gods changed and became...different.

And when Lorgar spoke again, it was not under the influence of the Three.

"How many battlefields have you abandoned, *Angel*, to come here and save my brother?"

"Too many," the blasphemous woman replied easily, too easily, "but I blame the Eldar for that. Don't worry, I will return to the process of exterminating your Legion the moment your cold dead body hits the marble floor."

"You will do nothing, failed copy of Sanguinius. **S'gbjhdmrhsrovhcne!**"

The power the Gods had given him struck the dome above his head, creating an enormous disruption in the energy shield and wards of the Temple of Correction.

"Many pilgrims who came to this Shrine were not as loyal as you thought! **C'fjrgoilthbnv'bspq**!"

A teleportation homer which had been hidden in a statue for near five thousand Terran years activated. Marble splinters flew across the room, and eighteen of the most loyal and faithful of his sons teleported into the Shrine, clad in their eighth-blessed Terminator armours, armed with the most potent and blessed weapons of their Legion.

"My sons! Destroy the Stasis Field!"

And in a single, impeccable volley, eighteen weapons accomplished the destiny of the Gods.

**Chapter** **Master Cato Valens**

The moment the teleportation homer was activated – and really, how long had this device been waiting inside one of the Shrine's statues – the final plan of the heretics was obvious.

The Word Bearers were going to destroy the stasis field. Their Lord, Liege, and Father, would be exposed to the ravages of time, giving him less than a minute of life left to live.

And Cato fully understood what Weaver had asked of him.

There were many things he didn't know, and suddenly he wished he had paid a bit more attention to the reports of Aeonid Thiel, sent more queries in direction of Nyx. Could the Archmagos of Mars present in the Shrine's greatest hall really produce an antidote to whatever fell substance the Naga had used? Could Weaver, with only minimal support, challenge a Primarch and win?

Deep inside, the Lord Regent of Macragge knew he would never have the answer.

It didn't matter.

In many ways, it made everything easier.

The heretics teleported into the Shrine.

"I am Cato Valens, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines, Lord Regent of the Realm of Ultramar...and Lord Macragge." He shouted. "And I formally cede my authority to my Captains, for in the name of the Emperor, I **Sacrifice** everything! I pay the price, for mine is that no Traitor shall see another dawn!"

Bolters opened fire.

Rapier Cannons shot back.

His last brothers unleashed their wrath.

Light blossomed in his chest, and by the Golden Throne it hurt.

*This will give him ten hours.*

Cato Valens, for the second time of this campaign, felt himself dying.

But this time, he embraced the feeling.

The world was losing all colour, but Weaver shone like the Emperor Himself in the darkness.

Golden flames were burning.

And as he held his last breath, the Regent of Macragge heard her speaking words which gave him untold joy.

"*Roboute Guilliman will not die today*."

**Primarch** **Lorgar Aurelian**

The Stasis Field failed.

"*Roboute Guilliman will not die today*."

All relief Lorgar could have felt died as a titanic amount of **Sacrifice** erupted in the Shrine.

Weaver was burning in golden flames...but she had not disappeared from view.

The same couldn't be said of his brother...of the entire area where a marble throne and other ridiculously ostentatious furniture had been seen, his eyes could observe nothing but a golden inferno.

In a way, it didn't matter.

Lorgar knew exactly what had happened. It wasn't all that difficult, watching the foolish Chapter Master burning in the same pyre after screaming his **Sacrifice**.

The son was Sacrificing himself to give a respite for the father.

Would it be enough? Lorgar was tempted to say no, but then the wretched red-robed creature calling itself a Tech-Priest threw itself into the flames where Guilliman had disappeared.

And there had been some vials held in his mechadendrites-

No.

This wasn't going to happen.

"My sons-"

"SURPRISE!"

Six of his elite strike force had survived the initial devastating counter-barrage of the enemy.

Two died instantly when a blue Dreadnought wearing a pirate hat broke through the marble wall and used an enormous Plasma Gun at extreme close-quarters.

The four survivors were immediately bombarded by bone projectiles and enormous nets looking like...never mind, there were spiders coming behind the Dreadnought.

"FOR THE WEBMISTRESS!"

Lorgar struck. This was his only chance and if Weaver died-

*Illuminarum* was stopped well before it could pulverise her head.

And the enormous strength behind it...damn it, where did she find the strength? She wasn't a Primarch!

"I said: *Roboute Guilliman will not die today. A Sacrifice has been made, and Death is not wanted in my Domain.*"

The arrogance. The sheer arrogance of this child. How dare she? How dare she refuse the Gods? How dare she stand against the Great Game and the Primordial Truth?

"You can't change the rules, Weaver! Roboute Guilliman will die!"

A gigantic spider jumped and tried to stab him in the back, and Lorgar had to take a step back to parry the blow.

"*Not today*."

**Author's note**:

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

This is where *Extinction 11-4 Die another Day*, ends.

The Extinction Arc will continue and end in the next chapter*.* Its provisional title is *Extinction 11-5 Avengers*.

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

Alternate History page: www . /forum /threads /weaver-option-thread-3-the-5th-black-crusade-story-only.506948/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption