**Extermination 8.5**

**The Mark of Commorragh**

*What is the Mark of Commorragh?*

*It might be surprising to say today, but before the unforgettable battle which took place in the Dark City, the term already existed, though it was rarely written in majuscules and spread to the galaxy at large.*

*The expression was applied indiscriminately to the scars and the slave-brands the masters of the Webway nexus carved in the flesh of their prisoners. As the Dynasts had quantities of Haemonculi in their service, who themselves had inherited their knowledge from the most questionable lore of the ancient Aeldari Empire, few species in this galaxy had the skill to remove them. But since the number of living beings managing to escape Commorragh by cycle was extremely low, it wasn’t like this information was galaxy-wide knowledge. Or at least it wasn’t before the humans freed millions of slaves from the slave-markets, the pits and the arenas.*

*The forces of the Imperium wasted no time in inflicting their own marks on the bodies and the psyche of the Aeldari fighting in the new war zone. While billions of Commorragh Aeldari died under the lances and the macro-weapons of their enemies, millions disappeared in the Webway to save their lives. These Drukhari souls would be branded by the defeat in their flesh, as the destruction of the Haemonculi lairs forbid the removal of the wounds, the curing of the burns, and the replacement of missing limbs.*

*The other effect, far worse, was mental in nature. Every warrior, be he or she born under the crystal-sky of a Craftworld or in the vat-wombs of a Dark Coven, would remember for eternity the endless tides of the insect swarm coming to kill him or her. In a very short amount of time, the survivors of this battle, myself included, would all suffer to varying degrees from a disastrously crippling entomophobia.*

*In any major conflict, this would have been the most terrible legacy an enemy could harm us with. At Commorragh, it would be one factor among a litany of things to mourn for. Splendid shipyards crashing down in flames, resurrection labs utterly annihilated, armies and fleets exploding with every heartbeat, and the stability of the Dark City being compromised created an ocean of bad news prompt to paralyze any strategist.*

*But this was not the Mark of Commorragh. The Mark was when the Talisman of Vaul, the great war-weapon the humans call Blackstone Fortresses, fired for the second time.*

*I was not here, and yet I feel it burning in my soul. We are all feeling it burn, save maybe the Queen of Blades...but then the First Sword-bearer was always the exception, not the rule.*

*Even after all these cycles, I feel its touch, no matter how distant from the golden flames I am and how many psychic protections are between me and the Great Ocean.*

*As long as Maelsha’eil Dannan endures and a single Aeldari continues to breathe, the Mark of Commorragh will continue to burn.*

*I am Aurelia Malys. The Second Fall has crushed the shadows of Empire we clung to.*

*The Mark still burns as I write these words.*

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*I know there is a considerable irony that I’m saying this in the first place, but space battles which are decisive from both a tactical and a strategic point of view have to be a rarity.*

*The major reason? The galactic void is vast, and for all the existing technology available to the space-faring species, a naval commander usually can see its enemy coming millions of kilometres away. Therefore the defender will have hours at best, days at worse, to study his enemy and assess if the opposing side is stronger or weaker than him.*

*If it’s the latter case, it’s highly likely the defender will try to engage in a round of asymmetric warfare, or flee the system where the fight is taking place. Space is vast, after all, and if an Admiral wants to disengage, it would take a few miracles for his adversary to catch up before he flees into the Warp.*

*Besides, it’s extremely unlikely the enemy will want to pursue unless there’s critical goals to be accomplished like highly-classified information aboard one of the escapees’ starships which must be destroyed at all costs. Much like an Admiral won’t pretend for all his bravado that a glorious last stand is the sole and only option. Every Warp-capable warship is worth billions of Throne Gelts, and represents a colossal amount of investment, be it in metal, time, or manpower. This kind of asset can’t be sacrificed on a whim.*

*Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. If the defending fleet must stand and fight, either because the world it is defending is too important to abandon, or due to formal mission orders overwriting the prudence the Emperor expects of his officers, a fleet-versus-fleet action will be fought.*

*But these titanic clashes are extremely rare. Worlds which must be defended at all costs are not legion, and the Imperium has most often than not reserve squadrons to provide if such an important inhabited system is about to be conquered. And save a few species like the greenskins, the enemy Admiral must be careful with its naval resources too. As the attacking party, the invading fleet will be far from any allied base if it is defeated, and going back through the Warp with critical damage is something a competent Admiral dreads.*

*Or so every wise and experimented Navy expert loves to remind me.*

*These poor advisors have yet to find a single consensus why every operation I launch, these ‘exceptional’ battles are fought in such cataclysmic actions.*

*The Battle of the Death Star may have been recorded as an anomaly. After the Battle of Commorragh, ‘coincidence’ was less and less viable to express your opinion...*

Extract from Archive C-0007-K-106, secured in the Fafnir-Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by Lady Taylor Hebert between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

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“*By any reasonable strategy, never a Blackstone Fortress should have been sent in the Webway. The Imperium has only been able to find six of them in the entire galaxy after all, and the devastating power they wield should have been made sure they were the core of some major world’s defensive measures, not part of what was for all intents and purposes a suicidal operation. But the Battle of Commorragh’s very existence was never reasonable in the first place. And in the end, if one wants to hurt Chaos, one can hardly complain about the measures employed*...” attributed to Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper, 296M35, Battle of Commorragh.

“*Battles which are fought with more than one hundred capital warships when adding allied and enemy forces together are few in the long list of naval engagements the Imperial Navy and the starships loyal to His Most Holy Majesty fight every year. When an average Battlefleet has two or three battleships and six first-rate cruisers, how can it be otherwise? Obviously, this made the Battle of Commorragh, and especially the second phase in the Port of Lost Souls, a near-impossibility. After the huge losses suffered in the first phase of the carnage, the last thing the xenos should have wanted was to come back for another round. But they did it. And thus one of the greatest space battles of this millennium started.*

*Let’s imagine it for a few minutes. One Blackstone Fortress, three Arks Mechanicus, twelve Battleships, seven Fast Battleships, five Astartes battle-Barges, three Battlecruisers, one antique War-Ark, two Grand Cruisers, one Star Galleon, fifty-two first-rate Cruisers, thirty Strike Cruisers, nine Necron Battleships, and hundreds of escorts to provide support on one side. On the other, a coalition of many pirates, corsairs and monsters gathered by the perfidious long-ears. Post-battle data would give them the numbers of one hundred and thirty-one battleships, two hundred and ninety-eight cruisers, and two thousand two hundred and eighty-six escorts. The number of starfighters and light attack craft was more difficult to count, but there had to be tens of thousands of them.*

*The mere thought of fighting such a battle should have given one side pause. It didn’t. The xenos wanted vengeance for their dying city, and we wanted to punish the long-ears for the countless raids and genocides they had committed on our civilians.*

*It was a battle of legend. And many heroes died to win it*.” Extract from a speech of Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal at Wuhan, 300M35.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

Thought for the day: Burn the Unclean with the fires of Purity.

**Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity***

**The Last Sentinel**

Judging by the number of ships coming in their direction, their arrival in the Port of Lost Souls had not been unremarked. Then again, it was practically impossible to hide a Blackstone Fortress when one was looking for it – unless you were blind and deaf.

“Webway-transition complete,” Magos X-Iota – not the real name of the Adept, but the one which had been given to him to protect him from sorcery attacks – announced. “Priority communications from Archmagos Prime Hediatrix indicate J-Gate power sources will need to switch out in three minutes to avoid overload and proceed to emergency reparations.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Receiving psychic data-stream from the *Enterprise*,” the twelve mechadendrites-armed Tech-Priest of Mars continued, “the Core Crystal is indeed able to interact with the Black Matrix and unlock the armament of the *Will of Eternity*.”

There was no smile, no shout of victory. The ten warriors of the Silent Sisterhood surrounding him were as ever standing vigil like silent statues. The Magos was continuing its vital maintenance and overseer’s control of the Blackstone Fortress with the few servitors which had come aboard with him.

“So my liege’s gamble has worked.”

Without the two artefacts known as the *Eye of Night* and the *Hand of Darkness*, the superweapons of the Aeldari that humanity had taken to call Blackstone Fortresses couldn’t be activated. Yet this had presented a huge dilemma. Many cults of the parasites reigning in the Empyrean were monitoring the location of these two ancient xenos objects. The moment the two were taken into formal Imperial custody, the Four Ruinous Powers would have been alerted of what the plan called for.

Thus he had only taken the *Eye of Night*, reactivating the defensive and manoeuvring potential, hoping the Core Crystal of Objective H could indeed reactivate the armament of the *Will of Eternity* in place of the *Hand of Darkness*. It seemed it had worked. Now it remained to be seen if the rest of the plan was still viable.

“Lowering the shields on section D and E to allow Asset J-2 to land on the Blackstone Fortress,” X-Iota informed him, with Oblivion Knight Laura Chimalma playing the role of the vigilant shadow close to the member of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

The equivalent of several xenos vid-screens lit on in the crystal cavern, showing his little group what was truly a huge green-gold moth glowing with the Emperor’s power. If the wingspan of this insect wasn’t two hundred metres long, it wasn’t by much?

“Asset J-2 is inside the super-structure. Shields returned to seventy percent on all sections. All offensive and defensive measures are now fully operational.”

“Outstanding.” The Blackstone Fortress’ defences were not functioning according to principles and technological processes used by Imperial technology, but their performance could be measured, and the energy field protecting the Fortress was stronger than the void shields of a Gloriana super-battleship. When the Enemy was going to assault them, they would not have an easy task ahead of them. “For the present time, use only the Mechanicus-installed weapons. We must give time to J-2 to do what it came for.”

“By your orders. J-Gate deactivated behind us. The Enterprise is taking position behind the *Will of Eternity*, leading the Caribbean Fleet. The Ultima 70th Battlefleet is on our left flank. The Bakka 13th Fleet is on our right.”

The Last Sentinel acknowledged again, though most of his attention was on the sensors following the movements of the moth inside the arteries of the Blackstone Fortress. His liege had told him the powers of Weaver were without peers where insects were mentioned, but as a warrior and a protector, he couldn’t help but feel some concerns. In an open battlefield, shooting down this insect would be an easy thing for any aerial-superiority fighter or anti-air battery. In the corridors of the *Will of Eternity*, and with a crew reduced to a mere two dozen of souls, it would take a lot of time and lives to bring the recalcitrant moth to heel, and the Enemy was not going to give them that much time.

Fortunately, the moth was under control and after a minute of navigation, went straight to land on the gigantic Noctilith Crystal in the heart of the *Will of Eternity*. For once, the xenos’ arrogance to build extremely large avenues had been a boon.

The huge insect opened its mouth, and a golden orb of psychic energy materialised and immediately struck the Noctilith surface of the psychic artefact that the Mechanicus had given unoriginally the name of Black Crystal.

At first sight, nothing seemed to have changed. But only at first sight. Thanks to the advanced xenos sensors, he could see small golden veins beginning to spread on the surface of the Noctilith. The light was spreading and soon the Blackstone Fortress’ core would be coursing with anti-daemonic energy.

There was only one question worth asking now.

“How long, Magos?” asked Constantin Valdor, first Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, First of the Ten Thousand, Grand Companion of the Master of Mankind, Holder of Two Thousand Names, and Hero of the Siege of Terra. “How long until the *Will of Eternity* can fire?”

The Custodes was old, and had seen too much evil in an eternity of service. But in this moment, Constantin couldn’t help but grasp the feeling of hope with both hands.

An opportunity that he had believed long gone was born anew.

And they were going to have an answer quadrillions of beings had fought and died for to have an answer to in billions of conflicts.

Was it possible to kill one of the Ruinous Powers?

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

**Magnificent Xelian Gate**

**Battleship *Empire Reborn***

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

“We can’t take control of it at distance. The Mon-keigh must have an artefact which protects the Talisman of Vaul from our attempt efforts!”

“May Khaine tear their hearts from their thoracic cages and devour their souls...” one of the Autarch communicating from one of the other battleships cursed the primates.

The despair was palpable on the bridge of the *Empire Reborn*. By Isha, it was pungent on every warship of the Tempest of Blades and the Drukhari raiders!

“How by the Gods did they manage it?” asked a Striking Scorpion Exarch. “The Talismans of Vaul are relics of our Empire and the memories of their existence and their power are only kept in a few rare Craftworlds! How can a bunch of upstart primates be aware of them, much less use one for their purposes?”

“They must have found at least one after the Fall,” a Dire Avenger Exarch said in a defeated voice. “As it was not towed by smaller ships when it came out of the Descending Emerald Gate, they must have seized one of the great relics to activate one of its systems beforehand. And now that they have united with their friends of the Commorragh invasion, another artefact found in its ruins confers them more power over the great battle-station.”

There were plenty of livid faces everywhere he turned his head. It wasn’t surprising, since even one Talisman of Vaul had the firepower to destroy fleets alone and unsupported. Unfortunately, the obsidian-black space bastion had immediately been surrounded by the three Mon-keigh fleet.

“Under the circumstances,” Faer forced himself to utter the words, no matter how unpleasant, “the Mon-keigh have backed us into a corner. All the Webway Gates behind us are closed and I fear they won’t reopen anymore. We can’t stay there and wait for them to reopen. The Legions of She-Who-Thirsts are on their way now that we retreat from River Khaides and the Sprawls, and even if they weren’t, these tunnels won’t survive when the Talisman fires its main weapon.”

High Farseer Faer Machdavar wasn’t a coward, but he shivered after his last words. There were many things that couldn’t frighten him, but firing a psychic weapon of this power in a part of the Webway already badly destabilised by the fall of Khaine’s Gate and the Abyss of Dreams would likely create such a cataclysm that his entire fleet and the soul of everyone aboard would die...if they were lucky.

“High Farseer, I agree with everything you said,” began the last living Exarch of the Howling Banshees of the entire expeditionary force, “but for all the firepower of this fleet, I don’t know if we can defeat the Mon-keigh and lower the shields of the Talisman long enough to land our troops on it!”

“We have them largely outnumbered!” protested the closest Asuryani Admiral in the uniform of the Mariner Path.

“With all due respect,” the red-haired female wearing an armour which had been white at some point but now was two-thirds crimson spoke in a tone with no respect at all, “they have between twenty and thirty battleships of all types out there, and if there’s one thing our enemies have proven in the last naval battles, it’s that when we fight their type of war, their warships are far more adequate to survive the inferno of capital weapons than ours. We may have them outnumbered one-to-four, but I’m rather sure they could have destroyed two or three of ours for one of them before they were reinforced by a Talisman.”

“And what do you want us to do?” the Dire Avenger Exarch asked sardonically. “Like the High Farseer said, we can’t turn away and flee; the Gates we arrived through are closed, possibly forever. We haven’t the time to find new ones. And we can’t exactly open new Gates in the Port of Lost Souls while avoiding battle with the Mon-keigh!”

“I agree with Exarch Kriendil,” a red-armoured Autarch approved. “And I want to add that the only Gate which is fully active and not controlled by She-Who-Thirsts is the Eversprings Gate. But as you can see, not only the Mon-keigh would be able to reach it before we do, the nine battleships of the Yngir will also be able to intercept us if we try to race straight for it. No, the moment the damned Yngir device fails, we must attack and destroy their fleets, and retake control of the Talisman of Vaul. Oh, and kill Weaver I suppose.”

“There is another option.” The vehemence of the Howling Banshee granted her three heartbeats of silence.

“And what is this miraculous solution that no one but you has successfully thought of?” Faer did not chuckle, the poor female was manifestly out of her wits.

“WE COULD SURRENDER!” the Howling Banshee shouted. “WE COULD STOP THROWING MILLIONS OF GOOD WARRIORS IN THE MAW OF SHE-WHO-THIRSTS BECAUSE YOU’RE JUST TOO STUPID TO-“

“I’ve heard enough. Autarch, please arrest her and make sure she’s locked into her quarters.”

But the two first hands which were laid on the bloody armour were severed and the Howling Banshee, helmet-less, grinned at him with an expression where there was nothing but rage and folly.

“THIS IS YOUR FAULT! THIS IS YOUR FAULT MY SISTERS ARE DEAD!” His bodyguards threw themselves against the insane Exarch in a whirlwind of blades. “THEY CALL YOU FARSEER! SEER OF OUR DOOM! SEER OF DEATH AND DISASTER! WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE LISTENED TO-“

At last the Howling Banshee fell, but Faer could not hide a grimace when he saw the number of lives the kinslayer Exarch had taken with her blades. Five of his bodyguards, four warriors of low-rank, two Exarchs, and one Autarch were dead. Five more Asuryani were in need of urgent medical help.

“Send all the wounded to the healers.” A musical martial tune was heard on the bridge, the agreed advance warning the Yngir technology was at last unable to stop them. “We have bled and died, but we are the Chosen Children of Asuryan! The galaxy belongs to us! We will not succumb to despair or folly! We will not be corrupted! We are the Swordwind of Biel-Tan! We stand strong and our enemies will fear this day, for they have aroused our wrath! We will crush the Mon-keigh and restore Aeldari hegemony in the Webway! For Biel-Tan! For the New Age of Empire!”

“For Biel-Tan! For the Storm and the Blade!”

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

If people were able to observe the Dark Prince as it reacted to the arrival of the Blackstone Fortress in the Port of Lost Souls and not get pulverised by the pink maelstrom of psychic energy, the term ‘unholy rage’ would probably have been used.

Many handmaidens and one Keeper of Secret were disintegrated by the sheer anger of the entity holding dominion over their essence.

Yet, unknown to the daemons fleeing the wrath of She-Who-Thirsts, under the endless hate, there was a new feeling the Power of Excess was experiencing for the first time of its existence.

This emotion was fear.

One easily forgot, but Slaanesh was not just one of the Ruinous Powers; by all conventional definitions, it was also an Aeldari God. Why wouldn’t it be? It was Aeldari worship which had given birth to Excess as it stood. It was Aeldari cults which had helped it coalesce in the Warp. And it was Aeldari souls by the billions which had fuelled step by step its galaxy-shattering ascension.

As a result, while no Blackstone Fortress had ever been fired in anger after the Fall, Slaanesh had devoured the memories of many Aeldari who did assist to such an event. It had access to the souls of the artisans who maintained the systems of these massive battle-stations aeons ago. It had the knowledge many Admirals and crewmen had taken for granted before their long period of decadence.

And so the Doom of the Aeldari knew the terrible Warp cannons of the Blackstone Fortresses, also called Talismans of Vaul, were capable of breaking the barrier between the Immaterium and realspace in a controlled manner, firing a beam of Immaterium energy powerful enough to permanently kill most beings of this galaxy.

This list of beings didn’t include Slaanesh, obviously. As one of the Four Great Aspects of the Primordial Annihilator, the Dark Prince obviously was a psychic creature, and firing a beam of psychic energy at it had all the chances to re-energise it, not cause it a minor inconvenience.

That was in part why it hadn’t watched the Blackstone Fortresses of the Gothic Sector as the Battle of Commorragh raged. What use could the humans possibly have for battle-stations that would not harm its Legions?

This had not taken into account the peculiar nature of Noctilith. Depending on the nature of the power it was infused with, the black crystals could acquire properties most space-faring civilisations would find magical. For example, once a sorcerer poured raw chaotic energy into it, they obtained a material oozing corruption the few servants of Ruin aware of its existence called Octarite. The Necron Crypteks had been able to develop another substance when they subjected it to top-secret engines of their anti-Warp program, repelling the Warp and creating the incomplete Pylon network extending from Cadia to the Eastern Fringe.

But neither Slaanesh nor the other Three had ever asked themselves the question what would happen if the Noctilith at the heart of a Blackstone Fortress was infused with Anathema’s light.

Though to give credit where it was due, Chaos had invested a large amount of time and energy to ensure their most dangerous enemy was able to acquire minimal quantities of the substance before and during the Heresy.

But this was the past. Now the Dark Prince realised this was no longer a hypothetic situation. If the Blackstone Fortress fired, an Anathema-beam would be created and the name of the target was rather evident.

And while in usual circumstances the damage would have been considerable, this was before Khaine’s Gate was opened.

In its ignorance, Excess had opened the door preventing the Master of Mankind to attack it directly.

Slaanesh shrieked in a fury that mortals had no hope to fully understand, nor would they want to. But the fury rapidly abated and fear returned.

The trap had been revealed and the Doom of the Aeldari was now conscious of its folly. If it had been at full strength, maybe enduring the Anathema attack would not be a problem. But it was weakened, its Legions had suffered considerable losses, and such a mighty blow might very well do the impossible.

And it was impossible to close the Gates it had opened so negligently in the last hours. Too much had been done for a withdrawal to be possible.

There was only one course of action left.

“**DESTROY THE TALISMAN OF VAUL! DESTROY IT BEFORE IT FIRES**!” The Dark Prince ordered. “**ATTACK! KILL THEM ALL! ATTACK! DON’T LET THE WARP CANNON FIRE! ATTACK!**”

Legions which had tried to mitigate the damage on several critical fronts were teleported back to the Palace and unleashed through Khaine’s Gate.

Then Slaanesh did what it had never envisaged to do since immemorial time. It stood and went to wage war in person.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Battleship *Evolution of Necrodermis***

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Destruction-Overlord Sitkah**

There were very few things in the galaxy which could grant a necron Overlord, no matter the Dynasty he or she was sworn to, an unconditional sense of satisfaction.

But knowing the humans had managed to return one of the Aeldari most prized weapons against them and having the certainty the long-ears was unquestionably one.

“It’s eminently regrettable we can’t see the faces of the Drukhari and Asuryani now,” one of the many Nemesors watching the human-held Aeldari station charge its shields.

“Eminently regrettable indeed,” Sitkah approved, and promised herself that if the opportunity presented itself, she would capture a few of the arrogant spawns of the Old Ones to properly taunt them. After all, it was really the height of incompetence to lose one of the greatest war-weapons of your civilisation to a race less advanced technologically than you. Had the Blackstone Fortresses been Necron in origin, the humans wouldn’t have been able to go close to the AI’s core and the chances of success of a non-Necron activating and controlling a Tomb-World Nexus without Necron or C’Tan’s help were so low they might not exist at all.

“Destruction-Overlord, the empyrean creatures are coming through the Gates. Orders?”

“Destroy everything, beginning with the Vileth shipyards.”

With most of the Port of Lost Souls burning or a cemetery of wrecks and crippled hulks, the assets which had survived would not do much good to anything capturing them. Assuming there was a Port of Lost Souls left in several hours, and the presence of the human-held Talisman of Vaul argued against this scenario. But Sitkah had not survived the War in Heaven by taking chances. It was already bad enough the Queen of Blades was still fighting among the younger races and decimated their infantry as easily as in the past, the pink tides were not going to find anything left to rebuild the slave-markets.

“Secondary batteries ready to fire. Priority target is the Vileth shipyards,” another Nemesor said formally.

“Fire,” Sitkah commanded, and a minor part of the arsenal of nine Cairn-class battleships was unleashed against targets which could not evade, flee or provide any counter-strike.

By the end of the first volley, the last installations of Commorragh which had been left intact to facilitate the human invasion were burning in green flames and torn apart, and the fuel depots and ammunitions abandoned triggered huge explosions in red, green and black.

“The vanguard of the horde has been diminished by approximately twenty percent, Overlord.”

“Status of the slaves the Imperium abandoned on the platform?”

“The human nuclear weapons have detonated, Overlord. Our sensors can confirm one hundred percent of fatalities.”

Sitkah nodded. Weaver had held true to her words, on this point like the others spoken with them.

In the end, for all the logistical skills the humans had developed moving large numbers of living beings, the transport of millions in less than four of their ‘Terran’ days was an impossibility, especially with the need to verify the Drukhari had not used their slaves as unwitting bio-weapons.

And with the extremely tight timetable both humans and Necrons had operated under, there were things that could not be done.

Plenty of relics had been recovered – the red-robed humans trying to achieve the union of flesh and metal had by the Phaerakh’s reports delivered over ten large containers of various heirlooms and devices to the exchange point – and many major objectives had been fulfilled despite the opposition of the debased Drukhari.

But there had never been any question many of the slaves freed were going to be left behind. Some of the Nemesors had contacted very discreetly their counterparts to wonder if said humans considered biotransference an acceptable alternative, but the answer had been a polite ‘no’.

Sitkah didn’t blame them, and by the electronic format of her messages, neither did her Mighty Phaerakh. Biotransference could be considered a salvation of a sort from the weaknesses of organic life. But it was also a slavery of metal, protocols and emotionless duty.

Besides, the Destruction-Overlord was reasonably sure there were also intelligence and philosophical issues at play.

“The Nemesors have compiled our losses, Destruction-Overlord. Thirty per cent of the infantry and eleven percent of the armour have been critically damaged and will need ultra-resurrection protocols and rebuilding.”

“The losses are far more than acceptable given the assets obtained from the Drukhari storehouses,” the noble of the Nerushlatset dynasty dismissed the predictable argument immediately, “the vast quantities of Necrodermis those thieves had the audacity to grab from Necron Tomb-Worlds was sufficient alone to justify this expedition in the Webway.”

And the hyperalchemical metal all the Necrons were built with to diverse degrees was not the only successful recovery. Ancient treasures, weapons, crystalline engravings, religious texts protected by majestic-grade stasis technology of the Great Sleep were theirs once more too. The sum of the relics and Necron-forged metal did more than compensate the terrible damage inflicted to six of her battleships and three-fifths of the Khopesh-class cruisers.

If these successes had been limited to this, all their processors and AI’s would have confirmed this was a one-sided victory, as the destruction of the Drukhari shipyards eliminated the potential rebirth of an Aeldari Empire.

But it wasn’t limited to this. The Necrons had captured millions of xenos that the humans were unable to use as expendable meat to stop their enemies, and though many of these upstart creatures refused to serve them in life, the fact was biotransference worked for everyone, and once in a low-grade body of Necrodermis, it didn’t matter anymore whether the soul consumed was a Necrontyr peasant or the favourite bodyguard of a long-ear.

The phalanxes of the Nerushlatset dynasty were going to grow once more and the Crownworld would begin to rebuild the losses from the Silent Betrayal at the end of the War in Heaven.

“The Talisman of Vaul isn’t firing for the moment.”

“If the humans try to realise an evolved transmutation of Noctilith like you predicted, this is not surprising, Cryptek. Now shift the main batteries to the I-Zone. The debased descendants of our former foes are not going to be the patient sort, I think.”

As her sentence ended, the Drukhari and the rest of their sub-Aeldari coalition proved her right. From the marked Gates where they knew the massive enemy fleets awaited, a storm of torpedoes, pulsars and laser weaponry burst out and began to hammer the large minefields which had been emplaced after the first counter-attack.

“They have learned,” a Cryptek as he analysed the data coming from the large scarab-drones abandoned in low-powered mode precisely for that purpose.

“The Enemy is using a new type of torpedo,” added one of his brethren. “It’s certainly one of the ‘new’ versions using War in Heaven knowledge the long-ears found in their scrap yards.”

Sitkah clicked her fingers in disapproval.

“I know the Drukhari of Commorragh and the Asuryani of Biel-Tan have done nothing to impress us, but let’s not underestimate our enemy. They do not possess the combination of psychic and technology which made them dangerous opponents, true. But they can still kill us and they have nothing left to lose now. Do not underestimate them. Raise the shields to full power, and prepare for a Obelisk-pattern bombardment for all the main batteries of our Cairns.”

“My apologies, Destructor-Overlord,” her subordinate bowed. “Your wisdom brightens our engrams, as always. We will not underestimate this new enemy fleet.”

“Minefield 2 and 3 down by forty percent. Minefield 1 down by sixty percent,” her sensors’ expert told her as hundreds of new explosions submerged the first line of defence. “It appears the long-ears have stocked a lot of ammunition while the Dolmen Seal kept them out of the Port.”

Clearly, this presaged nothing good for the fleet engagement which was about to start and Sitkah was not exactly confident even a single ship of her command was going to survive the massacre.

But it was likely the last and most powerful fleet of the Drukhari, and as long as her Nemesors and herself participated in its destruction, the threat represented by the remnants would be manageable for millions of Necron years.

But for all the detachment granted by her processing cycles and her long experience of naval commander, even the Destruction-Overlord paused as more than a hundred battleships, three hundred or so cruisers and thousands of escorts, surrounded by a cloud of tens of thousands of light attack craft, flashed into existence in the Port of Lost Souls.

“Engage the enemy,” the senior Necron Overlord ordered grimly.

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Taylor Hebert**

“Apparently, they can learn,” Taylor said quietly as she saw the results of the long-range Nova bombardment show up on her personal hololith. “What a pity.”

It would have been nice if the arrogant Eldar – though maybe that was an euphemism to use these two words together – had failed to adapt after their mistakes had cost them most of Commorragh, but alas, someone out there had clearly watched the last space carnage. And this xenos Admiral had sent the crippled hulks first to serve as torpedo sponges.

Between the *Enterprise*, the *Furnace of the Machine*, the *Vulkan’s Wrath*, and the other battleships, the human fleets had destroyed ninety percent of this vanguard. The Necrons had accounted for the ten remaining percent, inflicting a nightmarish death to whatever crew had stayed in these doomed wrecks with shining-green disintegrating weapons.

Unfortunately, this had allowed the Eldar warships to finish the minefield and really deploy their fleet this time. The parahuman General said ‘really’ because the first time, it was just tens of thousands of decoys broadcasting a fleet-sized hololithic decoy.

“The minefields are nearly gone, and our long-ranged arsenal will need more minutes than we have to reload and concentrate a volley like the one we fired,” Wolfgang said, a twitch of his lip betraying their frustration. “They suckered me,” the blonde-haired boy admitted. “Now we have no choice but to go with a conventional fleet engagement.”

Yes, this was true, but then of all the opinions which had been expressed, there wasn’t exactly one which had tried to imagine a different course of action.

“A general battle was unavoidable anyway,” the insect-mistress replied after a couple of seconds, removing any hint of criticism from her tone. “The Nemesis-Hunter cannon of the *Enterprise* is a formidable weapon, and the other Mechanicus and Astartes long-guns could have inflicted severe casualties, but I doubt we could have stopped them.”

The vid-screens on the main bridge of her flagship made all too clear the Eldar armada challenging them was an order of magnitude more powerful than the one which had attacked before the Dolmen Seal of the Necrons activated.

The minefields and the Nova Cannons could have slowed the enemy and bled it heavily, but stopping it? Despite not being a Navy tactician, even she could say it would have been unlikely.

And they couldn’t yet fire the main guns of the Blackstone Fortress. Lisa the Mothra – Leet and Dennis had insisted on the ‘normal’ species name – was using her energy-transfer psychic ability to turn more and more the black crystal at the centre of the fortress into a golden hue, but it was taking time.

*Sugar-Flower-Perfume-Perfume-Fruit-Sugar-Sugar-Flower-Sugar-Fruit-Sugar!*

Images and sounds of content arrived through the liaison-mastery Taylor had over Lisa. Incidentally, the name may have been prophetic: the titanic-sized flying insect was simply unable to be quiet, much like a certain Thinker parahuman. And the ego of the female super-moth wasn’t exactly tiny either. The psychic skills of this species altered with Bacta were clearly limited to the golden orb energy-transfer and a direct connection with her, but somehow the female moth could sense how much the souls having eyes to see were in awe. And Lisa had no qualms asking for the food and the other luxuries of life one ambitious insect wanted to gorge itself with.

*Sugar-flower! Fruit-Chocolate-Strawberry! Flower-Citrus-Perfume!*

Thank whatever powers helped her stay sane Taylor was not going to have to keep this moth around her forever. As far as she had been able to ascertain, the super-moth was far too slow and its wingspan was too huge to be any other thing than a VLT: Very Large Target, though certain artillerists had also employed the term TTYCM; the acronym stood for The Target You Can’t Miss.

“The Blackstone Fortress is not ready to fire, First Secretary,” the parahuman General told him, “fight and crush the enemy fleet. I will warn you when the *Will of Eternity* is ready.”

“Understood,” the young man showed a roguish smile, “after all, we need to teach our long-eared friends a new lesson, since they seem to have assimilated the previous one. All fleet will execute Delta-One...now!”

The auspexes and augur arrays began to be parasite by what was evidently high-level electronic counter-measures, and the Biel-Tan and Commorragh ships charged in two separate formations, the former being stronger with seventy battleships or so, the other being slightly weaker with ‘only’ sixty battleships. There were approximately three hundred cruisers, and the cogitators were still trying to calculate how many escorts, starfighters, bombers and other lighter craft were there.

It was a gigantic fleet, one that even with her Space Marines reinforcements, the Caribbean depleted squadrons couldn’t have faced without more Navy formations. But these formations were there, in the form of two Battlefleets, and if the numbers were against them, the tonnage and the firepower weren’t that imbalanced. Eldar ships had small crews and whatever armour they used was not built for an open confrontation with the Imperial line of battle.

They could win this. It was going to be bloody, but they could do it...because they had to. They wouldn’t be granted another chance if this scheme failed. And for all the sacrifices, the deaths, the blood, and the lives and the souls the Army Group had not been able to save.

The *Vulkan’s Wrath* led the centre of the battle-line. No one had dared voicing a complaint when the Salamanders’ Fleet-master had asked for the honour of leading the fleet, and the Battle-Barge had some of the most powerful void shields and armour among the capital ships to endure the main weapons of the enemy. On the left, the *Immortal Emperor* was leading the Ultima 70th Battlefleet, and the *Lord of the Stars* was doing the same for the Tempestus warships.

And the order arrived. The same order which had set fire to this sub-realm what felt like an eternity ago for humans, but for chronometric displays less than five days.

“Open fire!”

**Battle-Barge *Jaghatai’s Pride***

**Chapter Master Hibou Khan**

The destroyer *Rhodium’s Heart* was the first Imperial ship to die. Part of Explorator Flotilla Delta-Two and sworn to the Forge-World of Metallica, the small warship had been part of the first wave of reinforcements which reached Commorragh.

It received over twenty torpedoes which had been destined to the far larger *Vulkan’s Wrath*. There was no time for evacuation via escape pod or any emergency measures. The Mechanicus ship suddenly exploded in a brilliant halo of light, and seconds after its debris began to fall down in a rain of fire and debris.

Two xenos frigates and over thirty bombers had already been wiped out by the retaliation of the Salamanders Battle-Barge, and more died moments later.

The Great Khan of the Horde of Jaghatai watched impassively the spectacle.

“They will wait for us in the great steppes of light,” the Chapter Master commented with a respectful nod.

Then the real first wave of the Eldar fleet arrived in range, and the true carnage began. The xenos had known they would not have the surprise after exhausting most of their decoy and jamming sorcery minutes ago, and they went for quantity to break through, sending hundreds of escorts and thousands of small craft against the central Imperial sub-fleet.

Obviously, dozens of destroyers and frigates intercepted, and the hololith and the augur screens became whirlwinds of fires and death, torpedoes, lances, plasma and macro-shells going everywhere and provoking countless deaths. The cruiser *Machine Myrmidon* saw a third of its armament demolished and three of the heavy frigates escorting it were nothing but flaming wrecks about to be executed by the monsters coming straight at them.

“They are definitely focusing on this part of the fleet, Great Khan,” the Captain of the *Star Hunter* spoke.

“Then we will have to discourage them,” Hibou replied with a hunter’s smile. “Contact First Secretary Bach and General Hebert, and inform them that unless I receive counter-orders in the next thirty seconds, we will execute Separation-1 and Falcon-2.”

“Message transmitted, Great Khan.”

As exciting it was to be part of the battle-line fighting such a large naval battle, the warships he had brought there would not be playing to their strengths if they stayed hiding behind the citadel-like Arks Mechanicus and the other heavy battleships the Caribbean fleet had rallied under a single flag.

“Separation-1 is approved. The *Enterprise* wishes us good hunting.”

The Lord of Chogoris smiled. The more time he spent around the woman who had met the Primarch of the Imperial Fists, the more he liked her. Unlike too many tight-lipped, pure-blooded Admirals, the golden-armoured ‘parahuman’ knew where the priorities of the battlefield truly laid, and didn’t spend dozens of hours impressing cohorts of followers with her wits. Orders arrived fast and clear to understand.

Hibou and the rest of his Chapter might be a little biased here. Maybe. The guardsmen and guardswomen had confirmed beyond doubt Lord Dorn had raced away to rescue the Khan, and this confirmation had assuaged doubts and fears their father would never come back to them before the stars grew cold. And since one of their new tanks had also been named for the Warhawk, it would be rude to not respect the accomplishments and the successes this young General had won in the Emperor’s name.

“Separation-1 begins!”

And the floor under his feet slightly trembled as all the ships he had brought with him in this Xenos Hunt left the battle-line in an arrow-shaped formation to plunge like birds of prey upon their Eldar targets.

Without the precision the Horde of Jaghatai trained for thousands of hours in simulations and in realspace, this could have easily led to disaster, but here the move was accomplished flawlessly. Eldar ships which tried to exploit their departure faced the guns of the battleship *Judgement* and the torpedoes of the Black Templars’ ships.

“Falcon-2, execute!”

Increasing their acceleration, the Jaghatai’s Pride and the Star Hunter forewent caution and went straight into the heart of one of the Eldar squadrons, killing over five cruisers and forty escorts before the xenos gunners had the time to reload their pulsar weapons. Hundreds of starfighters rearmed in their bays died with them. But this had not been their goal. Their goal was the precious battleships behind them, waiting out of range.

Fragile battleships which had now realised their mistake and tried to manoeuvre out of their range like scarred tundra antelopes, but they were too late. Two battle-barges, six strike cruisers, and fifteen escorts delivered the wrath of Chogoris and the long retribution thousands of years of raids deserved.

Five xenos battleships were butchered, though two of his escorts perished and the Strike Cruiser *Legacy of Khum Kharta* had its void shields battered down and hundreds of fatalities as acid-like ammunition drowned several compartments.

Acceptable losses, for the first blood-cut given to the enemy major capital warships.

“We are going for Buzzard-3.”

“Great Khan, we have a new problem...”

For a single second, Hibou Khan’s eyes failed in incomprehension as he saw a gigantic pink...thing rise in the burning skies of Commorragh.

But only for a single second. His experience told him quickly what this unnatural thing was, even if he had not listened to the reports of the Astartes who had fought and bled at Zel’harst.

“Daemons. This is a daemonic tide. Raise all Gellar Fields. Raise all Gellar Fields now! Contact all flagships and tell them to do the same!”

He was satisfied his crewmen and his Captains obeyed immediately without asking for a repeat of his commands. Then again, many of them were veterans who had fought half of their life against the heretical pirates of the Maelstrom.

“This is going to hit badly our energy output, Great Khan,” his tactical officer informed him. “Gellar Fields are not supposed to stay active at the same time the Void Shields are operating.”

“I know, but it isn’t like we have the choice.” The Chapter Master made a gesture in direction of the flying Warp abominations which were massing to assault both humans and their enemies. “If we were speaking about one or two daemons, we may have been able to risk it, but what’s coming is something else.”

Fortunately, this risk had been anticipated, and soon enough the rest of the Imperial warships, from the Ark sot the smallest destroyers, had their Gellar Fields active too.

“Zadyin Arga, prepare yourselves, the Arch-Enemy is coming.” Against the sorcery of Ruin, the Astartes foreigners called ‘Stormseers’ were his best warriors to prevent Chaos from holding ground aboard his ships if the Gellar Fields flickered out. “Engines, reduce our acceleration by half a percent, we must reform to present a united front against these Warp horrors.”

It was not going to be pleasant, Hibou could already tell. The Gellar Fields of his two largest ships could withstand this disgusting pink sorcery, but the *Legacy* was already wounded, and his escorts were not built for something like this. It was...

“Great Khan, the Fast Battleship *Inflexible* has just broken in half! Our left flank is in disarray!”

**Battleship *Son of Victory***

**Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal**

Twenty minutes.

It had taken twenty minutes of battle to have the awful confirmation the concept of ‘Fast Battleship’ defended by von Kisher and his friends was the flawed idea their doctrinal enemies had warned every Navy officer to be.

The *Inflexible* had been the first to die. It shouldn’t have. The fire of the three xenos battleships and four cruisers was somewhat dangerous, yes, but the void shields had been holding...until they didn’t and suddenly the nine kilometres-long ‘Fast Battleship’ had broken in half, with the ship’s rear becoming a nova of gas, water and some things that at some point must have been plasteel and ceramite about twenty seconds before.

It could have been a fluke. It could have been a xenos ace firing one of the luckiest heretical shots ever before dying in a blaze of damnation and suffering. Stranger things had happened in the long and distinguished history of the Imperial Navy.

And if someone really believed this, Oskar had a planet in the Eye of Terror to sell them.

Three minutes after the first disaster, it had been the turn of the *Indomitable* to be pulverised, though at least it had taken two xenos battleships with it in its dying throes.

And now it was the turn of the *Indefatigable*.

For all his faults, von Kisher had chosen a skilled captain. The man – or the woman – in command of the hull which had become by default the leading capital warship of the Ultima 70th Battlefleet had understood that, with both the warships ahead and behind it gone, continuing the line engagement was a death sentence. The capital warship built in the shipyards of Kar Duniash changed course brutally, rammed a xenos cruiser and broke said hull in half, and went on the attack like the White Scars sub-fleet had done in the first phase.

It was brave. It was worthy of the tradition of His Most Holy Majesty’s Navy. It was not enough.

There were over twenty battleships to meet this charge, and twice the number of cruisers. The *Indefatigable* had a single Dictator-class and four Cobra destroyers. What followed was a bloody moment of destruction and carnage the likes which should exist only in the holo-vids. Thousands of weapons went into action, and the space battlefield was shaken by so many explosions the auspexes pointed in this direction were blinded for over ten seconds.

And when the hololithic consoles updated again, the *Indefatigable* and all its escorts were gone. Another fast battleship had been removed from the order of battle, and the fact three more Eldar battleships were mission-killed was not exactly a consolation.

The coordination and the discipline of the Ultima 70th Battlefleet was shot to the Warp and more.

“There is something wrong with these fast battleships,” his chief of staff remarked.

“Yes,” the Bakka-born Admiral coldly replied. “They are the wrong ships for the wrong battle. At least we know what the enemy Admiral is going to do now.”

“Engage all its reserves on our left flank, and destroy von Kisher’s fleet piece by piece before enveloping us and finishing the job?”

Oskar smiled. The joy of having competent subordinates: you didn’t have to explain the simplest of tactics.

“It’s simple. It’s easy. And it’s going to be difficult for us to prevent it.”

The Ultima 70th Battlefleet on a data-slate had been extremely strong, with seven fast battleships and two battlecruisers, and dozens of other capital ships. But now it had lost two of its biggest warships, four cruisers, five light cruisers, seven frigates, fifteen destroyers, and more were dying every minute. Worse, the partial jamming of the communications and the...questionable naval skills of August von Kisher had completely disorganised the survivors.

As it stood, the rearguard of the battle-line had adapted and regrouped into what looked a multi-layered formation with twenty-plus destroyers, five frigates and two light cruisers forming an outer ‘shell’ for the inner sphere of five cruisers, the two battlecruisers and the lone fast battleship *Lion*.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Battlefleet was dispersed, hammered by the xenos bombardments, and each volley saw more and more warships explode or suffer critical damage. The *Invincible*, the *Implacable* and the *Immortal Emperor* were each fighting on their own, and while they hurt the Biel-Tan warships a lot, it wasn’t enough. They were losing too many ships for the kills they inflicted to the long-ears.

“If there’s something left of the 70th after this battle, the rearguard commander will deserve a medal.”

“And a certain ‘genius’ will deserve a court-martial, Admiral?”

Oskar rolled his heterochromatic eyes. While court-martialling someone who had screwed-up was a long honoured ‘tradition’, the higher in rank the officer, the more complex and political the case was. And Admiral of Admiral August von Kisher’s seniority implied he had the connections to make a court-martial a clusterfuck of grandiose proportions. And first they had to survive this battle.

“The Biel-Tan warships are coming back on a 9-2-7 course, Admiral.”

“It was to be expected,” he acknowledged in a thoughtful voice. “They don’t want us to regroup with one of the other fleets now that our left flank is broken. But it is going to cost them.”

Right at this moment, his four battleships were intact; the *Aquila Eternal* was the most damaged, and what it had received was really cosmetic damage. It would probably need a new painting job once this affair was over.

“Our destroyers and starfighter screen have suffered significant losses, Admiral.”

‘Significant’ was perhaps not the most accurate description. ‘Crippling’ might be more appropriate. But to declare this where everyone could hear would be a morale-crusher and the men and women under his command deserved better than this.

“I know. And as long as the daemons continue to come, our losses are going to be catastrophic with each new wave striking us.”

Battleships like his *Son of Victory* or the Space Marine Battle-Barges could fight with their Void Shields and their Gellar Fields active at the same time without impeding too much their battle-efficiency. But the lighter the warship, the less it had energy to divert to those vital systems. And starfighters, bombers, and all other light attack craft had nothing to protect themselves.

“But as long as the Eldar continue to send us starfighters by the thousands, we need our light attack squadrons’ support.”

“These xenos are insane,” muttered a man somewhere on the bridge.

“More like they have decided to take us with them in death if it’s the last thing they ever do,” the young Admiral corrected. The tactics employed by the perfidious long-ears betrayed their desperation, but they were too elaborate and well-timed to be utterly crazy.

Alas.

“The daemonic aerial fleet which bypassed us while we were fighting the Eldar is attacking the shields of the Blackstone Fortress,” the auspex-master informed him with a smile on his lips. “They are not having much success.”

“Let’s pray they continue to do so,” Oskar said curtly. “The Custodes in command there has emptied the Fortress of all its garrison and naval assets. I can understand why he did it. But if the enemy manages to breach the shields and land some ground forces on it, our efforts to dislodge them will likely be hideously expensive in lives.”

“The Eldar fleet will be in our range again in fifteen seconds.”

“This time, wait until I give the order to use the Nova Cannon.” The damned xenos tricksters had been able to nullify the first Nova bombardment, but on his father’s sword, there wouldn’t be a repeat. “Priority target are the three blue-green battleships.”

It was by design that most of the images on the observation bays weren’t transmitted anywhere to the crews anymore. In a normal battle, it would have bolstered the spirits of the crew. But not today.

Today, the burning void was contaminated by the odious presence of the Arch-Enemy. The pink creatures were everywhere, nightmares of heresy and servants of the Ruinous Powers in essence and treachery. The lances and the torpedoes were exchanged by the thousands, and as Commorragh burned again in a storm of fission bombs and macro-weaponry, the monsters were throwing themselves by the millions against the Gellar Fields. Each time a ship was boarded, the vox had to be disconnected in urgency, as the screams of agony rose in impossible manners hinting at the fate worse than death these abominations had in store for all humanity.

“Fire the Nova Cannon! Rapid fire on all main batteries! Cruisers, remove these nuisances of escorts from my sight!”

He had let the Eldar fire first. Usually, it would have been a large mistake, but in the first minutes of this battle he had noticed the defensive measures of the Eldar were good as long as they didn’t do something else at the same time.

Having a small crew was maybe cost-efficient, but there was a reason there were hundreds of thousands souls aboard an average battleship, and it wasn’t just for having one’s ego stroked when you arrived in the landing bay.

The three Eldar battleships quickly died under the fire of its four most powerful warships. But all feelings of joy he may have felt deserted him as the litany of losses began to be recited.

“The Lunar-class *Rio’s Bravery* lost with all hands and its co-divisionary the *Centauri’s Paladin* engines are getting critical. The *Gazelle’s Sprint* and the *Saurian’s Purpose* are broken and can’t be considered in fighting condition. Our light cruisers have been mangled...”

Oskar von Reuenthal grimaced and began to bark new orders to reorganise his decimated line of battle.

**Battle-Barge *Vulkan’s Wrath***

**Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr**

The Forgefather had never fought a space battle like this one. Then again, it was likely most of the humans and xenos present in the area could say the same thing.

“The Eldar boarders have been exterminated,” Vulkan N’Varr reported to his Chapter Master as he returned on the bridge of the *Vulkan’s Wrath*. “Our Librarians are confident the new protection they’re shielding us with will be able to prevent them from trying the same sneak-infiltration again.”

Normally, the former Captain would be confident any xenos enemy out there would abandon boarding assaults after the long-ears sent were wiped out, but the Eldar had proven anything but reasonable since this fight had begun. Maybe it had to do with the presence of the Blackstone Fortress, or maybe it was the Warp seeping into their hulls. The Forgefather personally was ready to bet on the latter. There was a reason the warships of the Imperium kept their Gellar Fields active at full power.

“The Ultima 70th military potential is gone,” Captain Phoecus told him as the Regent of Nocturne focused on the battle with the Fleet-master. The Captain had transferred to the *Vulkan’s Wrath* as the *Forgehammer* still experienced regular system failures and engine problems. “The *Immortal Emperor* has just exploded, and thirteen out of seventeen cruisers are destroyed. We don’t think the *Implacable* is going to survive for long, and the screen of the *Invincible* has been decimated. The rearguard of the Navy Battlefleet is trying to link up with us, but-”

But the amount of space between the two sub-fleets was crawling with Eldar warships and daemon clouds, yes.

The *Vulkan’s Wrath* shook and many dots flashed out of existence on the hololith. Groans and curses were heard as more loyal starships died. This time it was the destroyers of their screen which had taken the brunt of a massive torpedo attack. Of the nineteen they had started this battle with, there were now four Cobras left, and all were damaged.

Plus they had also lost several escorts which had rallied to them after their capital ships were gone.

“Frateris Destroyer *Holy Thunderbolt*, destroyed. Navy Corvette *Prince of Pelicans*, destroyed.”

And the list of doomed hulls continued, sinister litany which hinted at tens of thousands of fatalities, and unavoidably hundreds of thousands more wounded. The Grand Cruiser *Indomitable Resolution* was towed towards the Eversprings Gate by two damaged Blood Angels Strike Cruisers, half of its weapons outright destroyed and most of its lower bridges charnel houses. No one was able to tell if Vice-Admiral von Schafer was still alive inside the hull. The Battlegroup which had formed around this flagship was no better off. Most of the Hoplite-class destroyers had become cosmic dust or were trying desperately to keep up with the *Indomitable Resolution* as they bled air, bodies and vital components.

“The long-ears are coming back. They are going for a close-range torpedo attack with their cruisers this time.”

There was no horror in the Chapter Master’s voice, just grim acceptance. After what felt like hours of carnage, the amount of carnage lessened the sight of suicidal tactics. And it was suicide, no doubt about it. The Eldar cruisers were more combustible than the fast battleships busy dying on the left flank, and the Caribbean capital warships were an unbroken wall.

“They are concentrating on the *Valiant Machine* and the *Guardian of Forges*!”

“They are going after the battleships equipped with the new type of Nova cannons,” Phoecus remarked grimly.

This sadly made sense, since the *Enterprise* was surrounded by the three Arks Mechanicus and thus too heavily defended. But the two battleships Archmagos Cawl had arrived with his *Iron Revenant* were ahead with the *Vulkan’s Wrath*, and now they were going to be hammered violently.

As always since the bloodbath commenced, even the eyes of the Space Marines weren’t good enough to follow the mutual slaughter humans and xenos inflicted to each other. The *Vulkan’s Wrath* shook violently again, alarms blared and reports of casualties streamed in by the auxiliary controls. The bombardment cannons of the *Vulkan’s Wrath*’s prow were going to need weeks of repairs at the very least.

The thirty-plus Eldar cruisers exploded one after another in violent stars which gave brilliant ephemeral suns to Commorragh. But they took with them the Victory-class *Guardian of Forges* in death, quantities of escorts, and the Strike Cruisers *Griffon Founding* and *Silver Banner*. The *Defender of Nocturne* left brutally the battle-line, its starboard flank opened in an ugly and near-fatal wound. The Light Cruiser *Sirius* was dying, and the *Loyal Investigator* was racing to its side, trying to save its personnel.

Each second, each minute, a million acts of bravery were done and the heart of Vulkan N’Varr wept at the sacrifices of so many brave souls being lost in service of humanity. A Black Templar ship was firing and placing itself in harm’s range to give time to the Novamarine warship time to repair its engines. Frateris Templar destroyers erected a shield of plasteel, electronics and blood to protect the Battle-Barge *Sanguinius’ Light*.

“The Eldar are down to sixty battleships!”

“And they will soon have fewer than this number!” swore Ta’Phor Hezonn. “For Vulkan!”

The *Vulkan’s Wrath* proved it was worthy of the name as it incinerated over thirty light craft and another battleship painted in the colour of blood.

“The *Implacable* has broken in half. The *Invincible* is-“

The crew of the fast battleships had not deserved to fight under this idiot, but at least August von Kisher gave them a death which was not shameful.

Burning, a third of its weapons torn apart, Void Shields gone and Gellar Fields failing, the fast battleship broke into the Eldar formations pursued by a horde of daemons and pulverised cruiser after cruiser. Compartments were burning, it was venting plasma, burning debris and the dying men and women charged to sail it through the stars. It was dying blow after blow, crippled beyond redemption. It was a terrible agony of a thousand cuts, but Vulkan N’Varr watched. It was the least he could do.

The *Invincible*, slowing but still fast to show acceleration worthy of light cruisers, charged a last time and rammed a battleship of Biel-Tan.

The resulting explosion wiped out the two warships and everything nearby from this universe.

**Thunderbolt *White Lance***

**Third Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

This was insanity. Were they supposed to fight a piracy suppression operation, or a Black Crusade with some xenos playing auxiliaries?

“This is Orange-3, they are behind me! They are- **SURRENDER! SURRENDER TO**-“

“Orange-3 is corrupted.” A cold voice sounding very Commissar-like cut the communication. “Give him the Emperor’s Mercy.”

Freya changed course and launched her last Hellstrike missile without looking. Going to the rescue of a fellow pilot was one thing. Shooting down your temporary wingman as he had been corrupted by the fell powers of the Warp...it left a very bad taste in her mouth. If only this was the first and last time she had to do this. If only.

Her *White Lance* avoided a gigantic blue beam of energy and the young Lieutenant shook her head. She had to focus on her own survival. Everything else could wait. Her Thunderbolt was now alone.

“Orange-3 is destroyed. Ammunition levels at twenty-three percent. Requesting permission to disengage and return to the carrier.”

“Acknowledged, *White Lance*. You have permission to disengage.”

Freya didn’t know if some pilots of the White-Orange-Blue-Green new squadron had survived or not, and she had a feeling she wasn’t going to discover it in the shadow of the Blackstone Fortress.

It was total war in the skies of Commorragh. There were daemons everywhere, horrible things with tentacles, claws and pincers trying to grab starfighters and bombers, and inflict upon them things that shouldn’t exist.

If she wasn’t wide awake, a nightmare would have been a reasonable explanation. There were Imperial warships dying in droves, their disabled wrecks slowly or quickly falling down and taking with them half of the Dark City into the abyss. Platforms which had survived the first days of war were annihilated when starships crashed into them at thousands of kilometres per hours. Eldar flyers gunned at everything and everyone, sometimes even the wrecks of their fellow xenos ships.

The first battles they had fought in the Port of Lost Souls had been nothing compared to this apocalypse. Eyes hurt when you watched some of the...things, the flying abominations of evil. There were vaguely humanoid, you just *knew* with a glance these weren’t humans or xenos; that was something far worse.

May the God-Emperor save them from these monsters. Was this what the Golden Throne was keeping at bay every hour of the day and night? This was heresy and horror...

Two swift turns and the Third Lieutenant left the close proximity of the Blackstone Fortress to join the very relative safety of the Caribbean battle-line. Immediately three Eldar attack craft tried to jump on her, but they realised a bit late in the hazy environment they were bombers and she had a fighter. One looping to destabilise them, two feints to keep off the black torpedoes out of her tail and her Autocannons found their mark in the cuirass of her xenos’ enemies. Once again, at the first round of ammunition striking true, the reaper-looking flyers suffered a series of catastrophic malfunctions culminating in their fiery destruction.

Three more victories to her name...and Freya couldn’t care less. She had won so many since her hundredth confirmed victorious duel that by now, it was not even something to brag about in the mess hall of the officers. And honestly, the only pilots who had less than thirty victories now were those of the two Battlefleets which had arrived late to the party.

“*White Lance*, delay your landing. There is a new wave of Arch-Enemy projections and one Eldar light cruiser between you and *The Great Quest*.”

“Negative.” Freya answered. “I’m nearly out of fuel and ammunition.” Both were your death on a battlefield. In the Port of Lost Souls, it was worse than that.

Someone muttered an unintelligible sentence at the other end of the vox, but the Nyx-born pilot didn’t understand it. Mere seconds later, a ship imploded in front of her, something which looked like a gigantic incinerator gun set fire to everything so close she swore she could smell the promethium, and the flak continued to fire tens of thousands rounds.

Her Thunderbolt made sounds that made her soul shivers. The turbo booster engines spluttered and coughed. The runic lights of the cockpit went by the dozens from orange to red. A large amount of smoke rose from under the left wing, a black omen which couldn’t signify anything good.

*The Great Quest* came into view at last, but Freya had no time for a sigh of relief or some funny remark. She was fighting against her own machine now, and she knew she was going to lose. The armour and every part of her loyal Thunderbolt were making heartbreaking noises, and more and more red lights lit.

There was an enormous explosion and something shook the *White Lance* like it was a toy in the palm of a God. Her world was ton in fire and debris. Her control of her machine slipped further. Somehow, by a miracle of the God-Emperor, she managed to position herself at the correct height for an entry in the starfighter hangar. Not even a miracle was sufficient to prevent her from crash-landing in the seconds after.

Everything was pain after that.

Before losing consciousness, she believed she saw some golden light in the corner of her eye.

But it had to be her imagination and soon, she knew no more.

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Taylor Hebert**

Before the first shot of the Battle of Pavia had been fired, Taylor had hoped to use the ground and naval forces for more than a single operation. The prospect of travelling to Terrathens, while small, had not been totally impossible, and in the contrary case, there were plenty of possibilities for the kind of military strength at her disposal.

Obviously, this wasn’t going to happen. Not after Commorragh. Army Group Caribbean had suffered horrible casualties and while a solid core of guardsmen and equipment had been saved, the three field armies were in no state to conduct another campaign, not even if she reinforced them with the debris of the Desaderian Field Army. And the casualties for them were likely going not to be over. A lot of people had been fighting the Warp abominations, and this left marks in the soul which were more dangerous than any physical injuries.

The state of the fleet was likely to be worse after this battle than the casualties the Imperial Guard had received carving itself a path into the city of Commorragh. It was already bad when she returned to the Port of Lost Souls, but now the losses were coming in the hundreds of thousands per ten minutes.

“We have lost the *Four-Dimensional Matrix*,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami recited in a metallic voice where a very human fury was piercing through. “And I don’t think the *Euclidean Algorithm* will hold for long-“

Dozens of consoles flashed with red and black lights, and sirens of battlefield damage began to be heard. The *Enterprise* shook like it had been caught between a celestial hammer and a very big anvil.

“The *Euclidean Algorithm* is gone,” the single Brother of the Red left on her bridge announced grimly. “We have lost one of the Plasma Projectors for good and the auto-loader behind it has been shredded.”

“How the hell did the Eldar bypass the void shield’s protection?” Wolfgang asked astonished. “We have two layers still active there!”

“Unknown, First Secretary,” the Archmagos admitted. “Analysing the emissions, this looks like a new type of pulsar weapon one of the Eldar battleships just fired.”

“They can’t have it in large quantities,” otherwise they would have used it far earlier and with far more ferocity.” The number of destroyed Eldar warships was a lot higher than hers, and unlike the Imperium, there weren’t going to be replenished anytime soon.

“Agreed. We destroyed the ship which fired this new weapon, but we will stay on alert to see if other capital warships of the xenos are equipped with them.”

The battle continued. Beams of energy in blue, black, red and green colour set aflame and caused untold devastation to Commorragh and all the warships present within it. The Necron battleships were faring somewhat better with their impressive self-regeneration capabilities, but three of them had nonetheless died since the beginning of this nightmarish bloodbath.

“Chosen of the Omnissiah, the *Titanium’s Core* is in difficulty. Should I redirect the Ancalagon Dragon Armours to give it support?”

The Tech-Priest was obviously looking both at her and Wolfgang, since she was more of a passenger than an Admiral in this slaughter. Most of her duties in this battle were coordinating the anti-boarding teams of insects hunting the rare long-ears somehow teleporting inside the Enterprise, and overseeing the efforts of her super-moth transforming a black crystal into a golden one.

“Yes. Do it,” the General replied after receiving a positive nod from her First Secretary.

There were still nine Ancalagon-class units operational, and they were far more resilient to all the dangers swarming into the Port of Lost Souls. The pilots of these machines could survive where the Thunderbolts died in droves...and she really wanted to avoid losing another battleship after what had happened to the battle-line of Admiral von Kisher.

*Sugar-Peach-Citrus-Fruit-Perfume! Sugar! Sugar!*

The smile must have been quite expressive on her face, for Gamaliel asked a ‘My Lady’ an instant later.

“The Blackstone Fortress is ready to begin its preliminary firing procedure.” In the heart of the ancient battle-station, the tattletale-mouthed insect had accomplished her purpose: a brilliant golden crystal was now beginning to transmute its surroundings in golden light. “We can stop our close-range protection; its shields should be able to handle the Eldar survivors and the daemons for a couple of minutes.”

“By your command, My Lady.”

“And transmit to all our captains the order to raise Gellar Fields and Void shields to maximum power at the expense of our weapons. The power behind the blast is likely going to be...significant.”

**Battleship *Empire Reborn***

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

Faer and every Farseer aboard the *Empire Reborn* felt it long before his sensor operators had the chance to signal the news to him.

It was like an abyss had been opened beyond the veil of reality and the Empyrean was swallowed into a single location.

There were bolts of blue and purple lightning. Faer screamed as the pressure grew untenable on his ears and in his head. Everywhere and nowhere, he heard a trillion screams shriek in torment.

And suddenly it stopped as brutally as it had begun.

“Stop them! Stop them from firing or we are-“

“High Farseer, we have not the firepower to finish breaking the shields of the Talisman of Vaul!”

The commanding officer of the Commorragh expeditionary force watched from the screens and his heart sobbed in pain. Barely ten battleships and fifteen cruisers surrounded the *Empire Reborn*, and most of them were so badly damaged their destructive potential was much diminished.

“I don’t care how you achieve this but stop them! Fire! Fire at will!”

There was an immense column of light. Pure golden light charged on every facet of the Talisman. Psychic energy coalesced, more than ten thousand Farseers could have ever generated in a single ritual.

The Ocean screamed and shrieked in fury.

The servants of She-Who-Thirsts slammed into the light and were extinguished in pyres of golden light. Ships, Mon-keigh or Asuryani, abandoned their organisation and fled the centre of the battlefield.

The cannon pointing at the Zel’harst tunnel-Gates glowed. The obsidian shade of the ancient Aeldari weapon swirled and changed, with gold and red seemingly fighting each other. Strange humanoid winged figures materialised and engaged the fight with the predators of the Primordial Annihilator.

The psychic pressure came back and doubled in intensity.

Faer screamed, begging long-dead Gods for salvation and mercy.

The Port of Lost Souls exploded in golden fire.

It was like ten thousand suns of gold had been concentrated in a single ray.

It was like the End of Times had come for everyone.

The Legions of Excess closer to the ray were banished from this reality, for some of them eternally.

The screams of the Drukhari, who unlike Asuryani had no spirit stones to serve as spiritual shields, were heard on every psychic and non-psychic domain.

The golden beam grew larger and then hit the Gates the Mon-keigh had used for their invasion this cycle.

There was a world-killing shockwave. And the entire fleet was like fleeting leaves in the middle of the greatest storm of this Age.

“Isha saves us...”

The Port of Lost Souls was set afire in golden flames.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Aelindrach**

**Eighteen minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Kheradruakh the Decapitator**

“We are the Chosen of darkness! The mongrels of Excess are not wanted here!”

Kheradruakh roared in triumph as several handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts fell to his blade. The lesser life-forms of Commorragh may be prey to the Power of Excess, but here in Aelindrach, even the Primordial Annihilator held no sway.

Aelindrach was the supreme realm of darkness. It was the pure realm of night visionary Aeldari had shaped of their nightmares, and it was the true way Drukhari could escape the claws of the Doom.

This was not to say He Who Hunts Heads was satisfied with the situation. The massive Disjunctions had forced him to leave his lair and participate in the countless shadowy ambushes with the other Mandrakes to prevent the daemons from gaining footholds into the sub-realm.

And those who had tried to use some of the most secret passages leading to the citadels and the ports had returned with tales of primate infestation, daemonic corruption, and untold devastation. When they returned. Mandrakes were the next evolutionary step of the Aeldari, but Kheradruakh was not going to pretend they were immortal. Until the grand apotheosis, they were only part-shadows and could be vanquished. It was only after his sacred and meticulous ritual was accomplished that he would be able to shed this weakness and truly become the Master of Shadows, the King of the Night, the Hunter of Darkness. And both the Webway and the galaxy out there would tremble at his arrival.

“Down with the Dynasts. They have failed. Down with the Queen of Knives. She doesn’t care about us. We do not care about Asdrubael Vect and his pitiful plots! We do not care about Commorragh! We only care about becoming the next Gods of the Night and Shadows!”

“Kheradruakh!”

“KHERADRUAKH!”

“THE DECAPITATOR!”

“AELINDRACH AND KHERADRUAKH!”

The Daemonettes were in full retreat now. They had tried their best and failed. Soon he would be able to return to his skull hunt. He had already claimed two worthy skulls today.

What was this light on the other end of the Gate?

“AAARRRRRGGHGHGGHGHGHGHGHGH!”

Kheradruakh screamed in agony when the first ray of light banished the shadows of Aelindrach. It was too dolorous. It was too painful. It was everything he stood against!”

“THE LIGHT! STOP THE LIGHT!”

But there was nothing he could do. The light was arriving from every direction and it did burn. It was burning them! It burned! Evil light! The hunter of hunters prayed fifty different deities in the next five minutes.

No God answered his prayers, and Kheradruakh died, burned to death by the power of the golden light.

His last breath preceded the utter annihilation of Aelindrach by merely thirty seconds.

The realm of shadows and night was no more, and its inhabitants shared its fate.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Seventeen minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Khaine’s Gate**

Slaanesh was under attack the moment it went through the avenues of its palace to go through Khaine’s Gate, and it went worse after that.

Traps leading to hyper-cages prisons suddenly found themselves barring the way of the Dark Prince, while anomalies no race had the madness to invent even once were unleashed against its daemonic procession.

And finally, one foot quickly followed by the entire body of the youngest Chaos God manifested in the heart of the Webway.

Like many deeds and disasters which had happened during the invasion of Commorragh, it should have been impossible.

An entity sufficiently powerful to be acknowledged as a God should not have been able to materialise without making implode said sub-realm by its very presence. But Khaine’s Gate had long been corrupted by the Immaterium by this point, and She-Who-Thirsts had an unfair advantage unlike the other Three, a secret which had been almost been erased by the cataclysm of the Fall.

To complete the ritual which would truly see the birth of her God, Arch-Priestess Morathi had required very special ‘ingredients’. Those had been the life of her newborn granddaughter, an innocent babe untainted by Excess or the long decadence of the Aeldari Empire, and sixty-five other newborn children, kept in time-anomalies until the moment to sacrifice them.

The fallen Aeldari court had murdered innocence itself, and by their actions damned their species for all eternity. But the body of the last Uldanesh child of the imperial line had not been consumed like the other sixty-five. It was still there in the Palace of Slaanesh, ready as a last resort to be used as a divine receptacle.

As such, it was not terribly surprising that the appearance of the Avatar of Slaanesh which materialised in Khaine’s Gate looked like a teenage version of Morathi with pink hairs and long purple wings.

At this moment, Slaanesh, an entity whose exact gender had always been something very problematic to determine – something which had cause enormous headaches to the Inquisition and its own cultists – was definitely a ‘she’.

She was Slaanesh.

And she was awaited.

“**So the coward returns**,” the pink lips whispered in a sound that caused nightmare in the psyche of several highly-psychic species. “**I have not the time to entertain you, clown**.”

“You will not reach the Port of Lost Souls,” declared Cegorach, God of Folly, Protector of the Harlequins and Guardian of the Webway. “You will have to fight me first.”

“**That should not take long**,” hissed Slaanesh, the vision of dark beauty slightly altering to reveal fangs in her mouth that no Aeldari had ever obtained naturally. “**How much of your precious Harlequins have you already sacrificed to reach me, I wonder**?”

The Great Harlequin stayed unmovable as clouds of pink sorcery fed the entity which was in part its greatest opponent and in part its legacy. A legacy of absolute failure, it went without saying.

“Too many,” the Laughing God admitted freely.

“**Then they will be surely satisfied to know their souls have been sacrificed in vain**,” the Doom of the Aeldari snarled as a psychic tornado was conjured over her head. “**Die fool**!”

The attack was nearly irresistible and likely overkill for an entity not relying on martial skill like Cegorach.

Which was why She-Who-Thirsts had a surprise, another one after the events of Commorragh, when the God of the Harlequins summoned a sword in its hand and managed to deflect the attack against several Gates on its right, demolishing them in a rain of crystals.

“I forgot to tell you,” and despite the mask, every living creature would have guessed the smirk on the lips of the Aeldari God. “I have not come to this confrontation unprepared. Let me present you Laisa’drakh, the Deception of Emotions.”

“**It will not save you**!” the rage of the Chaos Goddess provoked earthquakes and calamities with each word uttered. “**Neither the ninety-eighth Sword of Vaul nor any Aeldari blade can save you**!”

“Who said I was the one in need of salvation?”

Too late the Dark Princess understood the nature of the threat. A pink shield of energy was summoned, but not fast enough.

Cegorach was safe, thanks to the unique properties of the Sword of Vaul and the unique nature conferred to the Aeldari Gods by the Old Ones. Slaanesh had no such protection.

The golden fires of the Blackstone Fortress struck She-Who-Thirsts with a mighty blow of pure Anathema energy, and for the first time since apotheosis, Slaanesh suffered and shrieked in pain.

Across the galaxy, every Drukhari, Exodite, Harlequin, and Asuryani who was asleep woke up screaming.

The Aeldari-looking deity fell to her knees, her torso opened and consumed in golden flames.

“For my people.”

Cegorach jumped, and impaled his arch-nemesis on Laisa’drakh with all his strength. For an ephemeral heartbeat, the Laughing God dared to hope the impossible had been accomplished.

But the eyelids which had closed reopened to reveal irisless pupils darker than the abysses of the Warp.

“**Your people are dead bodies walking, they just have failed to realise it**,” Slaanesh answered, using one of her arms to deliver a blow which saw Cegorach thrown against the twisting walls of Khaine’s Gate. “**But don’t worry, foolish clown, I am going to make sure you and their souls will share the same fate**!”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Sixteen minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity***

**The Last Sentinel**

If the former Captain-General had had a doubt the fires had been insufficient to put down the Power of Chaotic Excess for good, the colossal blast of pink energy which struck the Fortress would have been ample confirmation.

“Shields down to ten percent,” coughed X-Iota once a Silent Sister had helped him go back on his feet after the entire structure had stopped rolling. “The damage is extensive on Warp Cannon A-1, and is not repairable with the means at our disposal. The psychic grid on Section-A is suffering critical failures. The energy of the blessed Omnissiah is pouring into realspace and interacting in curious ways. Three minor Noctilith crystals pulverised. Psych-resistance cohesion critical in three sections.”

The Magos was very thorough and in the next minute listed a quantity of anomalies and problems a lot of Tech-Priests of superior rank would have missed or scratched their heads in confusion.

“And this isn’t taking into account the fact we have failed the Omnissiah, Excess is still alive...”

“We have not failed,” replied calmly Valdor. “We are still alive.”

“Lord?”

“If the Power of Excess had not been terribly weakened by the fires of my liege, we would not be here to speak about it,” the First of the Custodians explained. “The shields would not be down to ten percent; this entire Blackstone Fortress would be nothing but orbital dust. That we are still in a state to assess the damage proves beyond doubt our Enemy has paid a heavy price to survive.”

The Power of Chaos was parasitic and abominable, but faced with the prospect of a Blackstone Fortress under Imperial control, the last thing the Arch-Enemy could afford was launching too weak an attack.

“That may be so,” protested the representative of the Cult Mechanicus, “but-“

“We still have three other Warp-cannons operational,” Valdor did not let the Magos voice new protestations.

Despite not having much flesh left anywhere, the veteran of the Great Crusade could see the red-robed humanoid pale in shock.

“Lord, the very fabric of reality in the Port of Lost Souls has been extremely weakened by our last shot. I’m already recording massive Disjunctions across all Commorragh! The sub-realms won’t survive another shot! And this Blackstone Fortress won’t be able to escape in time!”

“Magos, analyse the status of the J-Gate.” Constantin has seen the coils and most of the machinery supposed to power the exit being disintegrated minutes ago by hordes of daemons.

“Ah...”

“The Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity* will not leave Commorragh,” the golden-clad transhuman declared coldly. “All we can do is to ensure this loss is not in vain.”

Truthfully, the Emperor’s confident had always known the gigantic battle-station was to be sacrificed. Only perfect circumstances would allow a Blackstone Fortress to withdraw intact safely; and counting for perfection on a time-sensitive operation like this one was a fool’s errand.

“Reorient the Blackstone Fortress, Magos, and prepare to fire again with one of the undamaged Warp-cannons. Then once all the procedures are complete and the systems protected by your most complex ciphers, take our Thunderhawk and escape to one of the carriers with the Silent Sisterhood.”

“Lord, no matter how complex my protections are, the Ruinous Powers can and will attack the core of the Fortress first to prevent another shot being fired!” X-Iota vehemently disagreed.

“That’s why I’m going to guard it myself until the end.”

The mechadendrites went immobile before shaking violently and displaying erratic movements.

“No! My Lord, the Imperium needs you!”

“What the Imperium needs above all is time and some good leadership to prepare for the coming storm,” the old Custodian removed his helmet for the only third time in the last days, revealing his scarred and tired face. “I have taken too many wounds in the last millennium to be of use in life, Magos. But if my death can buy the Imperium a tiny hope of victory, then I’m more useful here.”

“You are not expendable...Captain-General.”

“I am expendable,” corrected the millennia-old warrior. “Only somewhat less so than the average guardsman.”

“Lord...”

“We can’t let the sacrifices of the Imperial Guard, the Adeptus Mechanicus and all the humans who bled and died for this game be in vain,” always the same argument and it never grew easier. “And my decision is final. Contact the *Enterprise* and inform them the great moth can return to one of their carriers if it has the endurance to.”

“Procedure begun per your orders,” X-Iota called with a hint of rebelliousness. “Programming of Final Shot ongoing. Time until Warp-cannon B-1 is in position...ten minutes and thirty seconds.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Khaine’s Gate**

**The Laughing God**

Cegorach was fast. The God of the Harlequins had to be, otherwise survival would never have been possible during the Fall.

The Asuryani loved to imagine that when the horrified Aeldari population, on the brink of annihilation, had summoned the Ancient Gods to save them, there had been a battle.

It was complete nonsense, of course.

Thousands of cycles before the final days of decadence, worship of Asuryan, Isha, Khaine, Lileath and all the other deities, great and low, had near-completely ceased. And without worship, Gods were nothing.

Instead of several trillions of followers, the true followers had been a few millions, and few of them were powerful enough to matter.

When Slaanesh was born, it was not a battle. It was just a one-sided humiliation punctuated by horrible deaths. Cegorach had fled early, and even then he had been nearly devoured.

And now the second round of this nightmare was upon him.

The Dark Princess withdrew the Sword of Vaul from her essence-flesh and threw it through the Gate leading to the Abyssal Wall, out of his reach.

Then the Chaos entity moved, an endless amount of corrupted blades surrounding it and accelerating to form a corona of swords and other daemonic weapons.

Cegorach saw a flash of pink and jumped, avoiding the blow which would have decapitated him.

The Great Harlequin was not fast enough however to avoid the twin pink bursts of lightning which pulsed from his enemy’s arms.

With what was left of his agility, the last free Aeldari God jumped again and managed to avoid a hundred psychic spears. But it had been a feint all along.

Faster than his divine eyes could follow, She-Who-Thirsts was already here, her implacable grip tightening around his throat.

“**This realm...this Webway...all the works and the souls of the Aeldari are MINE**!” And as Cegorach pushed to get free, he suddenly got his wish...only to be electrocuted by infernal pink lightning once more.

The Chief Guardian of the Black Library crashed hard against the corrupted ground, its essence in pain and his spirit trying desperately to fight back against the mental tortures of the Mistress of Dark Desires.

Somehow, in a last gesture of defiance, the God of Folly rose once more, in spite of every shred of its essence telling him to stop.

Facing him was an ocean of pink madness surrounding a levitating Aeldari body. The very air was poisoned and reality succumbed to the Warp. Immemorial laws were no more. Chaos was rising, horrifying elegance and sublime depravity united to damn the universe.

“**I am going to destroy Weaver, the Mon-keigh and all the Aeldari who refuse to kneel! YOU SHALL NOT STAND AGAINST ME**!”

Cegorach summoned of his normal blades. It was alas, like a lot of the mortal races said, the end of the road for him. He had a single chance to settle things right, and he had failed. The power of Chaos was simply too strong for him.

New daemons arrived and spherical structures crackling with energy prepared to fire.

“I deny you.” Weak words for what was likely going to be his epitaph on his gravestone, yes.

And then Cegorach heard someone yawn behind him. A familiar voice he had not heard in aeons was all the Laughing God needed to identify the newcomer.

“**You**.”

“I was searching for Malekith,” the Queen of Blades said in her usual tone of feigned disinterest, “but it appears the idiot managed to get himself banished before I could find him. And here is a worthy opponent for substitute.”

The First Sword-bearer narrowed her eyes and she sniffed haughtily.

“By the way, aren’t you a bit...weak to be the Doom of the Aeldari?”

“**I WILL KILL YOU. I WILL KILL YOU ALL**!”

“Thirteen heartbeats till the end,” the veteran of the War in Heaven replied.

And then Aeldari and God charged each other at an impossible speed.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Battleship *Standard Template Construct***

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

Before the ultimate battle began, Desmerius had estimated there was a 0.01% chance the Port of Lost Souls was going to be of any use for an Eldar faction in the next millennium. The efforts of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the Imperial Navy and the Imperial Guard, among others, had been very thorough. The shipyards had been demolished and the few which had escaped this fate were rigged to blow the moment a xenos set a foot upon them. The ammunition and fuel depots were gone. The slaves the monsters so relied upon to keep their civilisation ‘stable’ had been mercy-killed or freed. Warships had been sent ramming the things the dark masters of Commorragh had used as resurrection facilities. The forces of Operation Caribbean had done their best to turn the Port of Lost Souls into a field of ruin and devastation where nothing useful could be created. And the terrible space battle and the golden fire emanated by the Blackstone Fortress had done even more damage. This was the good news.

“Nine percent of our armament is utterly destroyed, and over thirty percent has suffered critical-level damage which will need a modern shipyard to repair.”

Lankovar didn’t acknowledge. His eyes were fixed on the tear into reality which was growing wider by the second.

There had been many terms employed to describe this type of phenomenon. But the most common one which found its way into Inquisitorial record was probably ‘Warp Rift’.

No official communication had voiced it on a high-level communication frequency, but the junior Archmagos born in Stygies XII knew what it was there.

The Blackstone Fortress’ shot had torn the veil between reality and spread golden psychic energy all over Commorragh. This was an act of defiance and a blast which had banished billions of daemons.

And for every action like this, there would be a reaction from the Arch-Enemy.

The Rift disgorged millions of new horrors. This time the hosts of the Damned weren’t limited to pink-coloured daemons. The creatures coming were red, blue, green, black, white and uglier colours the last psychic arrays could properly count.

And as dangerous as these abominations were, they were merely the heralds of something far worse.

It emerged from the abyss like an assassin dagger, swift and silent.

It was properly gigantic, and the moment it was seen, Desmerius Lankovar and all his subordinates knew for sure no Tech-Priest or human mind had ever participated in the completion of said warship. Its batteries and shape were shifting and mutating moment after moment. It was vaguely looking like a series of immense orbs juxtaposed to one another. But the long guns emerging from every hole left no doubt to this thing’s function.

It was a gigantic battleship, and it was eighteen kilometres long.

“Do we have something in our databases to identify this insult to the works of the Omnissiah?”

“Yes, Archmagos,” The answer came surprisingly quickly. “This is the *Maleficarum Aeternum*, daemonship last seen during the Third Black Crusade. It was believed destroyed above Cadia when the Space Wolves killed the leader of the Ruinous Host and sabotaged its engines and drives. Assuming the sons of Russ were correct in their assumptions, it was the flagship of a Daemon-Prince known as the Prince of Princes.”

“Evidently, the after-battle reports were a bit too optimistic,” or the Arch-Enemy had found a way to rebuild one close to identical in the centuries after this slaughterhouse.

“Yes, Archmagos.”

This was anything but what he wanted to hear, and the data received by his implants did not improve his mood. The damn thing was infamous for having ripped apart several of the heavy Starforts guarding the Cadian Gate during the grand attack it had co-organised with the Despoiler.

Maybe, if the fleets were intact, they could have fought this super-battleship and won the day. But every capital warship which had survived the butchery was heavily damaged, and the Arks Mechanicus, while in a better state than most, were going to die if they were sent unsupported against this heretical ship and its hordes of daemons.

“At least we haven’t to deal with the Eldar fleets anymore,” the long-eared xenos had not been banished like the monsters of the Ruinous Powers, but the effect had still been devastating for them. Their ships had stalled and saw most of their xenos tech-sorcery broken by the light of the Omnissiah, and the Adeptus Astartes had immediately capitalised, sending teleportation strike teams and crippling the last battleships and cruisers which had survived the holocaust down in the abysses.

The Eldar fleets were finished. A couple of battleships and some escorts were regrouping far away, but one or two battleships would be enough to deal with them if they tried to return and spend their lives in vain.

Unfortunately, there was no time to rejoice. There were more enemies coming, and most of them looked perfectly intact. The *Maleficarum Aeternum* was merely the first warship of a long list of misshaped things to come out of the massive Warp Rift.

“It looks like they really want us dead this time,” a Magos commented while compiling new battle-statistics. “Chances of destroying the super-battleship with the firepower we have left: 1.3%.”

“Then we will have to-“

“**TREMBLE FOR CHAOS COMES! LET THE GALAXY BURN**!”

It was not a corruption of their communication system. Whatever daemon was at the origin of this scream, it had just screamed to make itself heard.

“Reform our screen and ask for new orders from the *Enterprise*!”

But before an answer came, the *Maleficarum Aeternum* opened fire, and the loyal Adepts of the Omnissiah could only watch in horror as a heretical beam of black energy struck the engines of the crippled *Titanium’s Core*.

The Emperor-class battleship had restored some power to its void shields and was trying to catch back with the rest of the main fleet. It was not enough and as the fire of the super-battleship hit, its protections faltered and two seconds later, the Twenty-Fourth Fleet had lost one of its most powerful units.

It wasn’t the only loss. One Necron battleship which had been slowly losing altitude despite the efforts of the metallic tech-experts of its masters received all the attention of the super-battleship’s escorts. Its final death was neither peaceful nor easy.

And the tide of darkness hit the warships.

“They are trying to overpower our Gellar Fields!”

“Prepare to repel daemonic intruders!”

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

Sometimes it was a joy to know your superiors believed you had done a good job killing heretics, traitors, and xenos.

And then there were moments you cursed it with all your breath. Like, oh she didn’t know, when you were one of the rare Guard officers assigned to counter-boarding parties on a battleship and the alarms blared, notifying you the Gellar Fields were beginning to be overloaded by the daemons of the Warp.

Commorragh saw a lot of the latter situations and none of the former, if you weren’t able to guess.

The air was starting to feel wrong without a reason. Then it began to smell wrong. After that you heard the whispers and the laughter of evil things laughing at you and calling you by many names no one was supposed to know.

Prayers to the God-Emperor were spoken fervently everywhere. Everyone had seen the angels fighting the daemons when the Blackstone Fortress had fired. Everyone had felt in this instant the benediction of He-Who-Protected-Humanity on the Golden Throne. Everyone had known the instant the hordes of the Arch-Enemy were banished momentarily from the Port of Lost Souls. And now they awaited another miracle.

But the corrupted foulness of the Immaterium didn’t vanish this time. Claws, fangs and talons pierced the very baric of reality in the hangars. Cackles and shrieks no human mouth could have made resonated.

“They are coming,” a Priest in simple white toga who looked decidedly out of place between guardsmen in dark-blue carapace armour. “They are coming and we will wait them with chainswords in our hands and defiance on our lips! Like Saint Dorn on the eve of the Siege of Terra, swear men and women of the Imperium! Swear to kill all the heretics and the daemons!”

“WE SWEAR! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR! FOR THE LIVING SAINT!”

An enormous rippling sound and a chorus of infernal screams assaulted their ears and a horde of things with black tentacles and blue maws burst into reality.

“**DEATH! WE ARE DEATH AND WE COME FOR YOU**!”

“**DEATH TO THE ANATHEMA**!”

“**THE DARKNESS WILL DEVOUR THE LIGHT**!”

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

Lasguns had not the time to fire more than a large volley, but all their owners in this compartment were veterans of over three days of bloodbath in the realms of Commorragh. Each shot found its mark, and when the demons charge to fight at close-quarters, they were greeted by a wall of bayonets, chainswords and other blades. The ‘claymores’ of the Desaderians, so impractical against the Eldar, were devastating against these horrors.

“**YOUR PATHETIC LAST STAND WILL FAIL**!” Gabriella laughed when the daemon which had uttered this had one of the last Helspiders slash its blade-legs all over its torso before removing its body.

“You see?” the same Priest who had spoken shouted, chainsword black with whatever slimy substance the daemons had as a substitute for blood. “Lady Weaver is with us and these abominations can die! There is nothing to fear! THE EMPEROR PROTECTS!”

“THE EMPEROR PROTECTS!”

Navy volunteers raised their weapons in defiance along Guard veterans and red-robed Skitarii. Support crew who suddenly found themselves on the frontlines had taken arms with the debris of proud regiments. This was humanity united...and it did not prevent a new daemonic offensive from rolling in five seconds later.

“**DEATH**!” The things were tentacles and fangs, and unlike the pink abominations, seemed to obey no common theme. “**DEATH IS COMING FOR YOU**!”

The former Callidus Apprentice went again in the melee and the world quickly reduced itself to slaying an opponent as fast as possible to fight the next and thus stay alive. Her acrobatics were of great use, and for all the numerous questions she was going to receive if she survived, the main goal was surviving in the first place. One throat or the daemonic equivalent was torn apart. Legs or arms were cut. Eyes were stabbed. Gabriella threw grenades in the gaping maws.

This was a trial the second-in-command of the now destroyed Alamo Penal Legion would have preferred to be far away. Her body was already weakening; a few hours had not been enough to recover from all the strain the violent fighting had forced her to inflict it. Fortunately, there were reinforcements arriving, lead by a platoon or so of Astartes.

A second later, the Captain was sent flying by a tentacle she had never seen coming. Of course, her training kicked in, and where a normal guardsman would have been killed or waited to bash his head against the walls, Gabriella managed to change course and return on the ground more or less intact. The landing however was directly on top of an officer in power armour, and would get a neat zero if her teachers were here to mark it. Worse, the moment her body touched the hands of her ‘saviour’, she was suddenly paralysed and unable to move.

It didn’t last long, less than a minute for sure, but that way everyone could see her in this position, the man in power armour under her, and her on top ‘riding’ him. Even not being a Callidus who specialised on seduction, Gabriella could already wince at the storm of gossip and whispers a lot of men and women were going to spread before this battle was over.

And then, the former Apprentice realised her worries had been nonsensical compared to the reality.

“LORD DENNIS!” boomed a very loud blue-red Dreadnought. “HAVE YOU NO SHAME? THERE ARE DAEMONS OUT THERE TO FIGHT! YOU CAN FRATERNISE LATER WITH THE GUARD FEMALE OFFICERS!”

Gabriella, for all her training and indoctrination, knew her blushing at this moment had gotten out of control.

One thing was sure, however.

Gabriella was going to kill this Dreadnought, even if this was the last thing she did.

When the freezing effect dissipated, the assassin-turned-officer was swift in returning slaying daemons. The compliments of the Dreadnought, the God-Emperor save her, were unfortunately following her wherever she went.

“EXCELLENT MOTIVATION! KILLING COMES FIRST, THEN FRATERNIZATION!”

**Battleship *Empire Reborn***

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

“Re...report!” the High Farseer coughed after he finally managed to say the word.

“Two-fifths of our armament is destroyed,” an Autarch-Mariner answered before leaving his console to vomit blood and other disgusting fluids.

“Most of the pulsar weapons have been fried by the psychic blast fired by the Talisman of Vaul,” continued his replacement, a dark-eyed warrior who shivered and had his arms and body seized by spasms. “But it isn’t a problem anymore, I think.”

“And why is it so?” Faer asked weakly. His voice had been supposed to come out far stronger, but he felt ill. Ill physically, oh yes. But the worst part was the illness, the weakness battering his psyche and his spirit stone.

“Because we have no more arrays to target anything,” the Mariner made a sound which in these circumstances could be considered a shrug. “And honestly, our engines have received so much damage we will be forced to stay at Mon-keigh speeds.”

Faer shook his head and looked at the strategic displays, but there was no hope to be found there. A gigantic Warp Rift had opened, and the servants of the Primordial Annihilator were emerging in the Port of Lost Souls by the billions, trying to destroy the Talisman of Vaul before it fired again.

And the worst part? The predators and the daemonships which were materialising were not focusing on the Asuryani fleet, because there was no fleet anymore.

“We have...” the senior Autarch who was not currently in the healers’ hands coughed and placed a hand on his chest as pain seized him before continuing, “we have two battleships, and three cruisers which can be considered combat-capable if we stretch the definition of the word to its limits. All of the crews report massive casualties thanks to whatever method the Mon-keigh used to fire a golden psychic beam with the Talisman. We are transferring survivors from crippled ships to our...less crippled capital ships. This should give us some operable assets in a few heartbeats.”

The expeditionary force’s leader nodded as a new headache arrived and gave him the urge to sob in pain.

“We need...” damn it, why was it so difficult to think clearly? “We need to get out of here. Our fleet is near-entirely destroyed, and our ‘allies’ of Commorragh have suffered worse than us.”

In fact, his description was totally underestimating the magnitude of the disaster. Not a single ship hailing from Commorragh or any other sub-realm of the Webway had survived the golden tide. The Dark Ones, be they followers of the defunct Dynasts or independent Admirals, had not had a single spirit stone to protect their souls, and as a result the effect had been absolutely horrifying on their bodies and their souls.

“It is only a theory, but I think the Mon-keigh found the way to wound every Aeldari soul by scarring the Great Ocean with an Aspect of their Seer.”

“Evidence suggests you’re right, High Farseer,” agreed his subordinate. “But how could they know in advance it was going to work?”

Faer Machdavar coughed a long time before answering. The pain was getting worse in his chest and in his head.

“Someone among the primates must have studied the properties of the materials our ancestors built the Talismans,” the High Farseer spoke difficultly. “This changes...everything. The spirit stones’ very purpose is to protect our souls from She-Who-Thirsts’ embrace first, and the rest of the Primordial Annihilator second. The crystalline psychic matrixes are consequently most powerful against the Aspect of Excess and of limited utility against this new psychic onslaught.”

And unless he was completely wrong, what had smashed them apart was a particularly overpowering blast of Sacrifice. Their dark cousins, not having a bone of solidarity or friendship in their bodies, had their souls exposed to that...with predictably fatal consequences. His Asuryani had endured it better, thanks to the combination of spirit stones and their more prudent and dignified behaviour. It didn’t mean the survivors weren’t going to suffer the after-consequences of that for dozens of cycles...assuming they survived this battle.

“I think it is worse than this,” one of the last Warlocks intervened. “This...power of Sacrifice attacks the very connections Excess is using in its perpetual hunger to claim our souls. For the present, the connection is weak, but if the Talisman of Vaul continues it is going to leave a...mark on our souls.”

“Who cares?” mumbled an Exarch in green-white armour. “We all heard the scream of She-Who-Thirsts. The Mon-keigh golden attack hurt the old monster. I say we let them finish what they are trying to do...it’s not like we have the firepower to oppose them anymore,” he finished bitterly.

“I disagree,” the Warlock angrily retorted. “It’s bad enough our souls are marked for eternity because the folly of our ancestors force every generation of Asuryani to use spirit stones or have our souls devoured, but I won’t be psychically branded by a bunch of upstart primates!”

“Yes! Death to Weaver! We are fighting against an evil since thousands of cycles! We won’t accept a second one! We will die before accepting the Mon-keigh as our overlords!”

There was a flash on the bridge and Faer Machdavar had just the time to realise that while the Empire Reborn was trying to return to a battle-ready state, a Mon-keigh warship had apparently come into teleportation range.

There was no other explanation how over twenty of the large primates in white power armour were suddenly here.

“FOR THE KHAN AND FOR THE EMPEROR!”

The Asuryani tried to draw weapons and fire, but their reactions were too sluggish, too slow. The Mon-keigh brutes were ready for battle and offered them no opportunity to debate tactics or prepare.

Something heavy slammed into his body, and Faer was ejected from his seat. The world was disintegrating in splinters and energy weapons.

He should have felt more pain. There were blood and viscera everywhere. He saw an Exarch roll next to him, and a boot larger than his two fists crush it into something horrible.

He still didn’t feel anything. It was as the world dissolved more and more he saw the golden figures fight the pink essence of She-Who-Thirsts that Faer Machdavar felt at last an emotion, and it was horror, for there would be no bright future for his Craftworld.

And then something crushed him and the last Farseer of the Asuryani alive at Commorragh died.

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Colonel Tanya Sevrev**

The Squats, if Slayer Borek was a good representative of his abhuman sub-species, were excellent daemon-slayers. The orange-bearded warrior was death with his axe, absolutely fearless, and never faltered when the moment to throw himself into the melee came.

He had only one flaw.

The Squat’s notion of singing was so hard on everyone’s ears it was a torture in itself for everyone nearby, and yes, that included daemons and other abominations.

“AND AFTER THE TERRIBLE BAAAAATLE,” hollered the vociferating warrior, “THE GREAT CLAN RAN TO THE TAAAVERN WHERE THEIR ENEMIES WERE WAITING! BY AXE AND ALE THE GRUDGES WERE SEEEETLED! VIIIICTORY WAS OURS AND THE LAW OF GRIMNIR WAS ONCE AGAINST EEENFORCED!”

The great debate among the 20th was what doing the most damage to the Arch-Enemy, the axe blows or the song. But after a few minutes, the poll was unanimous.

“THE GREAT SMITH GROMNIR HAD A LOVER! WITHOUT RESPITE WITHOUT REST HE FED THE GREAT FIRES! HIS FORGE WAS GREAT AND MIGHTY WAS HIS HAMMER! AUTHENTIC AND MUSCLED HIS FIST STRUCK THE METAL!”

“I vote for the song.”

“Oh yes, the song.”

“You call that singing? Please force him to stop!”

“This should be included in the list of Exterminatus options. My poor ears...”

And as the heavily muscled abhuman paused before continuing his ‘musical performance’, the reaction of the daemons was rather...vocal.

“**KILL IT! STOP THIS NOISE**!”

“**DEATH! DEATH TO THE SQUAT**!

“**CRUSH HIS TEETH AND FILL HIS MOUTH WITH POISON**!”

“**IN THE NAME OF THE PANTHEON KILL THIS LOUDMOUTHED IDIOT**!”

The daemonic horde attacked Borek with renewed energy, which didn’t appear to do much apart from giving the laughing ‘Duardin’ more enemies for his axe to slay. Incidentally, Tanya wondered what sort of metal had been used to forge such a weapon. Most of the dejections and sorcery the monsters inflicted to their surroundings were generally corrosive or worse, and even power weapons could break depending the number of effects and the degree of carelessness of the human soldier facing them. Yet the Squat had never needed a replacement weapon from the Tech-Priests or some battlefield reparations, and his favourite axe was not looking different than when it had entered the battlefield.

“KEEP THEM AT DISTANCE!” The Fay guardsmen had lost hundreds of men and women in the fighting retreat like most of the regiments, they didn’t need to go down in a suicidal display of bravery to prove they were tough. “DON’T LET THEM ENTER THE ENGINARIUM COMPARTMENTS!”

“THE AXE WAS SINGING! THE HAMMER WAS WILD! THE SKY WAS MAGNIFICENT WHEN THE SIEGE OF NAGGAR-ZARAD RAGED! PICK AND AXE! HAMMER AND WALL! THE RAMPART IS CLOSE BUT THE ENEMY IS CLOSER!”

This was a torture, and this wasn’t exaggeration. How could anyone call this series of bellows ‘music’? Surely the Squats had to have some taste and if this ‘Slayer’ was here, it was because his singing was too horrible to be heard in polite company, right? Right?

Good news, the enemy was definitely on the retreat. The efficient counter-boarding disposition had prevented the invaders from spreading everywhere in the Enterprise and massacring everyone, though there were far too many dead bodies for her taste in the terrain they began to reconquer.

Bad news, Tanya would be the first to tell Lady Weaver it had been anything but an easy victory. The monsters were tenacious, fought until overwhelming firepower forced their destruction, and never hesitated killing a guardsman who made a mistake if it was the last thing they ever did.

“Onwards but stay prudent,” the blonde-haired officer ordered via the vox. “For the God-Emperor and Lady Weaver.”

Advancing methodically and eliminating the daemons to the last had the immediate effect of widening the distance between her vanguard and Borek. Unfortunately – unless it was fortunately, it depended on your opinion if the singing was a very good or very bad thing – they couldn’t afford to let infiltrators of the Arch-Enemy free to rampage across the ship. It was guaranteed priests of the Ecclesiarchy and the cogboys of the Mechanicus were going to purify everything and re-sanctify the corridors and the places which had been fought over, but there were civilians and many, many unarmed people aboard the flagship, and a daemon could spread a lot of misery and cause untold damage if left on its own devices.

This was the reason Tanya would offer to the Basileia days later when her superior asked her why she had not kept an eye on the Slayer Squat at all times.

For when the Colonel of the Fay 20th and her first dozen troopers of the 1st Company arrived in an auxiliary control room, they found Borek surrounded a respectable number of Tech-Priests. Next to them was a man with a very damaged power armour, and after a few seconds Tanya was able to recognise him. It was the parahuman known as ‘Leet’, and someone who was rarely spoken in positive terms around Lady Weaver.

Anyway, she had arrived in time to hear the end of the conversation between cogboys, axe warrior and the weird ‘Tinker’.

“Yes, Lord Borek, we were witnessed of your impressive slaying and the words which were uttered.”

“Affirmative. The life of the parahuman known as ‘Leet’ was saved thanks to you and the debt was acknowledged, albeit in a rather panicky manner.”

“Good!” The Duardin gave a poke which was probably powerful enough to make your sin turn blue without a military-grade protection. “Good! Nothing opposes then the swearing of a blood oath and this manling accompanying me to my glorious DOOM! Now rise up, and let’s begin writing the poem which will spread my story!”

Leet gave a remorseful glance to everyone, perhaps hoping someone would rise in his defence.

If it had been Lord Dennis, Tanya was certain she would have said something in his defence and perhaps tried to convince the muscled warrior that perhaps it was best to choose someone else for his quest of doom or to settle the debt in a less risky fashion.

But it wasn’t someone in high favour with the Basileia and certain comments about the Imperial Guard hadn’t been forgotten.

“Let’s continue the daemon-hunting, Fay 20th!” The Colonel joyously commanded. Something told her this particular source of problem wasn’t going to be one for the Nyx Sector in the next years...

**Battle-Barge *Honourable Shield***

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

“If this works, we will be considered geniuses. If this doesn’t work, we will be madmen.”

“According to my experience,” Aeonid said lightly, “in certain circumstances, a lot of Imperial tactics tends to make the limit between the two categories rather thin.”

Several Iron Drakes chuckled before returning to grim faces when information came from the bridge the Retribution-class *Lord of the Stars* was dying.

“This damn battle consumes capital ships like a bolter devours ammunition,” the Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens commented. None of the Astartes present disagreed.

“True. And since nobody has opened the subject, where in the name of the Golden Throne has the Arch-Enemy found the shipyards to build something like that?”

The ‘that’, of course, referred to the *Maleficarum Aeternum*, the super-battleship which had arrived from the growing Warp Rift and accelerated towards the Blackstone Fortress. To guess the intentions of the things commanding the damned hulk, you didn’t need to be competent or particularly imaginative.

“There have always been rumours the Traitor Legions weren’t the first to flee into the Eye to escape our just retribution,” the lone Flesh Tearer of their kill-team grumbled. “If true, the Maleficarum Aeternum may be one of the last ships of a race which surrendered to the Ruinous Powers.”

“I’d love that to be the case,” Jeremiah Isley replied in a dead serious voice. “So far, the four exercises of butchery and the countless campaigns of slaughter masterminded by the Black Crusades have seen no brand-new capital ships above cruiser tonnage. If the traitors have indeed the capacity to build super-battleships, the rapport of strength changes, and not in our favour.”

“But how realistic is this?” asked an Iron Drake. “I mean, I was part of the first negotiations sent to Nyx one year ago to begin preliminary negotiations on the building of new capital warships. I know how expensive and how a gigantic investment of resources a Battle-Barge represents. The Traitor Legions do not pay their slaves, but they certainly have to buy or seize the ceramite, the adamantium, the rare metals, and the technology from somewhere, and their raids from the Eye this millennium have been too scarce for that.”

“Or they’re living on existing reserve supplies,” proposed one of his battle-brothers. “When it comes down to it, we have little idea what’s really going on in this hellish realm.”

Something that was both a blessing and a curse, mused Aeonid. Blessing, because there were certain things even Astartes veterans were better not knowing where the madness of the Traitor Legions and their ‘masters’ were concerned. The Ultramarines Legion had marched in a sufficient number of planetary slaughters committed by the Chaos-tainted betrayers to acknowledge this reality. A curse, because save some esoteric deeds, the Imperium had been blind to the moves of the Enemy in mid-M31, and this state of affair did not appear to have changed since his departure.

“Shields are down on the *Maleficarum Aeternum*!”

“Teleportation!” barked the Heresy veteran. “NOW!”

One second, over thirty Space Marines were aboard the Battle-Barge *Honourable Shield* of the Iron Drakes Chapter. The next they were in the middle of a nightmare where daemonic engines, animated pistons, dark tendrils and corrupted things coexisted to give power to the super-battleship.

“**YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE COME HERE, DOGS OF THE FALSE-EMPEROR**!” shouted something that at some point may, insist on the may, have been an Iron Warrior Space Marine.

Aeonid took a step on the left. The tall armoured thing connected by what looked to be hundreds of chaotic mechadendrites, oily pipes and heretek machines had its eyes flash red in stupefaction.

Yes, the kill-team had not come alone to the enginarium of the *Maleficarum Aeternum*. They had also brought over three tons of Melta charges with them.

“**STOP THEM**!”

But the bolters, the flamers and the volkite weapons were already delivering long-delayed justice upon the traitors, the Heretek Tech-Priests, and xenos vaguely looking like slugs but with lots of prehensile tentacles.

Two Space Marines fell, but in twenty seconds their surroundings were clear of immediate enemy presence.

Then every member of the kill-team, Aeonid included seized as many melta charges as he could carry and began to emplace them on what looked like vital machines and critical systems.

“They are activating teleport-jammers, Chapter Master,” noted the other Heracles Warden apart from Isley recruited from this very risky mission.

“**PATHETIC WORMS**!” the daemonic roar came from everywhere at once. “**DID YOU THINK I HAD NOT ANTICIPATED YOUR INTENTIONS? I AM COMING TO BATHE IN YOUR BLOOD**!”

“Charming,” caustically retorted the Flesh Tearer.

“He’s going to be so disappointed,” Isley added, seizing one object tied to his belt. “I suppose this is the time to test this prototype of the ancient teleport homer Lady Dragon gave me, then.”

Aeonid had not the time to ask the Heracles Warden how reliable was this ‘prototype’ as daemons swarmed them before their surroundings dissolved into the aether and they were suddenly back aboard the *Honourable Shield*...with two Space Marines dead and one missing, and of course none of the melta charges.

But their mission was a success. When they arrived on the bridge to meet Chapter Master Dupleix after a quick decontamination procedure, they were greeted by the spectacle of the *Maleficarum Aeternum* being engulfed by explosions in its rear-sections, and with its engines dead, the advance of the Chaos juggernaut had slowed down to a crawl. It would not reach the Blackstone Fortress in time to alter the course of events.

But as always, this victory had been paid in blood and destroyed warships.

“The battleship *Lord of Stars* has exploded with all hands. Three frigates and four destroyers, one more cruiser confirmed self-destroyed to prevent the Arch-Enemy from using them against us...”

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Taylor Hebert**

After the arrival of the *Flamewrought* in Corespur, her battle against the Queen of Blades and several other things like the appearance of a Primarch believed long dead by the Imperium, Taylor had believed – reasonably in her humble opinion – the list of ‘big surprises’ was at last over.

Apparently, her skill as a General didn’t translate in predicting accurately the future.

That the Custodes who had given her the orders to invade Commorragh was of high-rank was a logical assumption. There were many tales and rumours about the Watchers of the Throne, but in most stories where they appeared they were bodyguards or councillors. They didn’t divert entire fleets from their original goals to attack well-defended xenos bases. So yes, it had been a given the Custodes was a high-ranking member of the Ten Thousand.

But never had she imagined the golden giant was the Captain-General himself. Nor that when he unveiled his identity, it would be to open communication with her to the *First* Captain-General, Constantin Valdor, a hero most the galaxy had believed to be dead for millennia.

Was her luck that bad or that good to put her in such interesting situations?

“Your team and my moth have arrived safely aboard *The Great Quest*, Lord,” the Fleet Carrier had a lot of empty space due to the Darwinian process her starfighters and Aeronautica pilots had gone through, and the two hundred-long wingspan of Lisa was not something every battleship could welcome in a click of fingers. “Please allow us to teleport you out of the Fortress!”

But the old Custodes shook negatively his head, as Taylor had already thought he would.

“There are plenty of Daemon-Princes coming, General. I can’t leave the heart of the matrix defenceless. And if the heart is destroyed, there will be no second shot and Excess will likely endure and continue the Eternal War.”

The visage of Constantin Valdor was not pleasant to look at. Maybe at some point, the forehead, the nose, and the jaw could have been considered noble. But this had been millennia ago, and since then terrible scars and age had marked his face in indelible ways.

And yet, the most impressive aspects of this ancient Custodes were his eyes. Despite the problems caused by psychic backlash and the unstable communication, they remained inflexible and unbeaten.

They hinted that the most dangerous General of the Emperor may not have been a Primarch, in the end.

“I can come to your rescue,” the insect-mistress proposed nonetheless. “I have gained some experience fighting the chief abominations of the Warp.”

“You are exhausted, and Chaos will have an easy victory if you do this,” it was not voiced like an insult, just as an iron-clad certainty. “No, my order stands. Give your fleet the general order to retreat through the Eversprings Gate. Save your surviving warships and live to fight another day.”

“By your command,” the communication ended on the other end, and the image was replaced by the *Will of Eternity* ending its slow reloading process and another Warp-cannon almost in position.

It was then the parahuman woman acknowledged the bridge of the Enterprise was as silent as a grave, or nearly so; there were some people crying with almost inaudible sobs.

“You heard the orders, First Secretary, Archmagos. Transmit the order to the entire fleet. Begin a general retreat through the Eversprings Gate. Dispatch first the escorts which have their engines still able to go to full military power. Contact also the Necrons; they are closer to us from the Gate, they can go first in order to avoid the traffic jams.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Yes, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

Deep inside, Taylor knew the Imperium had already won a great victory and was likely about to win one even more important in the next minutes.

Why then was it feeling like ashes?

**One minute before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity***

**The Last Sentinel**

Constantin had not to wait long for the Enemy to come.

The efforts of the Astartes and millions of men and women had given them pause, but the Enemy didn’t rely on beings forged with flesh and blood and born of mortals for this.

They were daemons. Parasites his liege had called them, and the word was appropriate even millennia later. Abominations, Neverborn, Damned, Liars, Monsters, Creatures of the Empyrean, Soul-Dregs, and Children of Chaos; as many names which could be rightly be used and yet somehow fail to encompass the enormity of the threat they represented.

“**DEATH! DEATH TO THE SERVANT OF THE ANATHEMA**!”

A Custodes rarely felt powerful emotions, but for them the First Captain-General had to stay serene and forget his hatred.

What use would it be to succumb to his anger and his loathing, ultimately? It was not like insults or loud arguments were going to hurt the daemons. It wasn’t like the things which were sent through by the Great Rift to prevent the plan from achieving complete success were sensible to logical arguments.

For all the notions of Change, Excess, War, and Decay, the Ruinous Powers were trapped in their roles. The possibility of supporting positive outcomes for the races of this galaxy was simply unconscionable to the Great Abominations. It was the nature of the Warp-born masses of emotions and psychic residues to be cruel, selfish, disparaging, corruptive, treacherous, destructive...and if it had to be summed-up in one word, *evil*.

The Neverborn glorified in it. They wanted humanity and every other race to acknowledge them as such, and they refused to be anything else, therefore assuring it was a self-fulfilling prophecy they would be cruel and vicious to everything and everyone supporting or opposing them.

Let the traitors and the deluded fools who worshipped them as Gods believe what they wanted before the time of judgement came. Chaos was not and would never be the answer they desired.

Constantin closed his eyes and struck.

When he opened them again, two daemons were impaled on the Apollonian Spear. Little more than shadows, they had believed their near-invisibility would prevent him from seeing them. They were wrong.

The Blackstone Fortress shook and the hordes came.

Their reduced numbers would likely have given him a smile, but there was no one to see it under his helmet. The Blackstone Fortress was charged with the Emperor’s power now, and this ‘golden disease’ was fatal for the denizens of the Empyrean. Sorcery could destroy Noctilith if the Four gave enough power to their servants, but once the substance was infused to inflict them agony and banishing pain for every single touch? The ancient battle-station and its power could no longer be sabotaged easily. Not without holding the heart.

The blade and the built-in bolter of the Apollonian Spear sang and decimated the ranks of the parasites. Thousands pressed on, and thousands died.

“**DESTROY THE CRYSTAL! I WILL DEAL WITH THE CUSTODIAN MYSELF**!”

The newcomer was tall, like most Daemon Princes. Like all the empyrean-born things which didn’t fit into the mould of Bloodthirsters, Lords of Change, Great Unclean Ones and Keepers of Secret, no Imperial investigator had been able to discover its origin and its true allegiance. Was it a Soul-Dreg forged by the Four in common purposes, or was it the aspect of some Fell Power which had not yet spread to the stars?

“You will not.”

“**I AM TALLOMIN, PRINCE OF PRINCES OF THE DARK SKIES**!”

Constantin Valdor admitted to himself he would not have wanted to fight this kind of opponent alone and unsupported if the real goal was to banish it to the Warp as fast as possible. The monster was close to eight metres-tall, and it was likely because a bigger size would have been a hindrance to move and fight. Everything was bestial, from the bloody hooves to the yellow-green fangs. It was largely covered in black fur and thousands of small blades were protruding from this corrupted coat, all almost certainly poisoned.

“And you are too late.”

Valdor threw the small vial containing a tear of his liege against the crystal.

A new sun was born in a place where the Eldar had tried to bring only endless darkness.

The light was devouring and all-encompassing.

And at last, more than four and a half millennia after swearing his oaths, Constantin Valdor’s duty ended.

**Mark of Commorragh**

**Strike Cruiser *Divine Will***

**Marshal Hermann Malberg**

The sight of the first shot fired by the Blackstone Fortress was not something he would forget anytime soon. The winged armies of the Arch-Enemy had been banished momentarily back to the Warp. The long-eared xenos had received their final come-uppance. The Port of Lost Souls had received the judgement of the God-Emperor.

But if one compared the first and the second blast of divine energy Hermann Malberg would swear on his honour and his life the former was a mere forest fire compared to the latter’s Exterminatus.

The Black Templar’s officer didn’t know the reason. Maybe the cannons hadn’t been primed to receive the power of His Divine Majesty’s fire? Or was for one reason or another the massive battle-station unable to fire at its full potential?

But as the battle-station glowed in pure, magnificent golden energy, Hermann knew that was going to happen was going to be beautiful...and harmful to the eyes.

“Captain,” the veteran Space Marine voxed the shipmaster, “I suggest beginning to shift all observation armaglass for a Code Nova. The power of His Most Divine Majesty is at work, and I fear our eyes will be unable to watch this miraculous event without going blind.”

“Suggestion acknowledged and accepted, Marshal. Armaglass darkened to prepare against nova-level emissions.”

It was more difficult to admire what was happening as the observation post’s protections went darker and darker.

It didn’t stop him from watching as millions of small golden dots rose from the abyss to surround the Blackstone Fortress.

Hermann tightened his fists as the space citadel’s golden shroud was attacked everywhere by an endless sea of daemons.

The column of light burst into existence, and more angels and warriors the God-Emperor had saved battled with the hordes of the Arch-Enemy. For a few seconds, the golden armies of the Master of Mankind fought the spawns of the Ruinous Powers.

The Blackstone Fortress fired.

There was a massive psychic blast.

There was also a chorus of screams which shook this part of Webway to its foundations.

But the golden beam materialised, powerful, merciless, and unblockable. The rift-things which stood somehow where the Zel’harst tunnel-Gates had been located received a concentration of light the likes had never been seen before in xenos’ history.

It was not over.

The two other Warp-cannons activated too. The top of the Blackstone Fortress began to burn in golden flames.

The slaves of the Arch-Enemy were disintegrated by the millions. The *Maleficarum Aeternum* and hundreds of warships brought here by the Damned disappeared, though whether they had been swallowed again by Warp Rifts or disintegrated by the flames was impossible to say at this distance.

Many of the flying monsters tried to flee, but the light caught them all. The Imperial ships swayed in the storm, but this was nothing compared to what they had endured before.

Hermann Malberg continued to watch the Blackstone Fortress. The Black Templar in him obviously didn’t like the liberties the Custodes and most of the Tech-Priests had taken to bring one battle-station which had clearly not been built by human hands.

But in this instant, as Commorragh imploded under the psychic pressure, Hermann recognised the Blackstone Fortress was burning like a second Astronomican.

“Time left until we enter the Eversprings Gate?”

“One hundred seconds, Marshal.”

“Good...” and it was truly good, the enemies of the God-Emperor were punished in a most thorough fashion. “His Will is done.”

There was so much light....so much brightness...and it felt right.

There was no doubt the God-Emperor was going to be victorious against the heretics. Humanity would never be defeated by the powers of Darkness.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Khaine’s Gate**

**Mark of Commorragh**

**The Laughing God**

It was not exaggeration to say Aenaria Eldanesh was the greatest blade-mistress the galaxy had ever seen in the last million of cycles. Obviously, it would have been most surprising if she wasn’t, since the sheer experience of fighting some of the more dangerous species, living and non-living, was granted her a repertoire of tactics and skills the majority of the warriors spread across this galaxy failed to recognise before growing old and tired.

This wasn’t to say, however, that the Queen of Blades was invincible. Aeldari and non-Aeldari had forgotten, but Cegorach hadn’t, that one of several reasons the then-young daughter of the Eldanesh Imperial Line had decided to devote everything to become the most dangerous sword-fighter around was the reality that in terms of psychic power, Aenaria Eldanesh wasn’t that powerful – by the standards of the first generations of Aeldari.

Indeed, it wasn’t hundreds of thousands cycles after the War in Heaven, when the standards of the diverse Loremasters’ Academies had begun their ineluctable descent into mediocrity and decadence, that the Queen of Blades had started being recognised as one of the foremost psychic-gifted Aeldari.

But the First Sword-bearer, for all her patience and skill, still lacked the subtlety and the talent of other younger psionic leaders. In a way, spending too much time on the Path of Blades had degraded her ability to use her abilities in aspects which did not held a significance to the severance of her enemies in two neat parts.

Therefore Cegorach wasn’t surprised that past the initial clash, Slaanesh took rapidly the initiative and forced the Queen of Blades on the defensive. She-Who-Thirsts had seen what had happened to several of its slave-servants and minor aspects of herself; she was not going to fight a sword duel with someone whose very existence resolved around it.

Aenaria was thus subjected to a terrible onslaught of pink lightning, poison clouds, curses, and sorcerous manipulation, and only thousands of faster-than-eye counters allowed her to stay alive.

It was far more than the Great Harlequin had hoped to gain. Judging by Slaanesh’s utterly enraged expression, it was also nicely upsetting his Pantheon’s Doom in a major way.

Stalling was all the Queen of Blades could do, but time, this precious commodity, was for the first time playing in their favour.

They felt the tremors coming long before they saw the light storm. Slaanesh uttered what had to be vile curses in a tongue no Harlequin had ever seen before.

“**I. AM. SLAANESH. I AM THE GODDESS OF EXCESS AND ALL AELDARI**!”

Cegorach watched silently as the maelstrom of order infused by sacrifice and countless principles of discipline and defiance engulfed everything. In this second, the God of Folly and Tales fully expected to be obliterated. There was no Sword of Vaul to let him evade the consequences of his gambit. Any Gate activation to escape would simply be a spark to begin his divine immolation.

But there was no pain, and the light hurricane coalescing in thousands of bird-like and golden winged warriors ignored him and Lelith Hesperax, and at this moment, the Great Harlequin understood the human Anathema was in control of this psychic blast. Cegorach was – relatively – safe.

Slaanesh was not.

The power behind the blow would not have been enough to seriously inconvenience the Dark Princess at the peak of her powers, but the wound inflicted by the first blade had not healed. Moreover, Cegorach could feel the deaths of the billions of tainted Drukhari who had sold their allegiance to the Mistress of Dark Desires. His connection to the realms of Commorragh was weak, but he couldn’t miss the surviving sub-realms imploding as Warp Rifts and Anathema light tore apart this very fabric of this plane of existence. There were all foundations Slaanesh had seized in ill-considered ways.

It all crumbled and exploded for her at the worst moment possible.

“**NNNNOOOOOOOOO**!”

She-Who-Thirsts lost her balance.

But she was a cruel deity. The past had been damaged. The future was in jeopardy.

It left the present.

As the light impaled it and endangered its life, Slaanesh’s despair became all too visible, and as it was assaulted by an aspect of Sacrifice, only real **Sacrifice** could keep death at bay.

And Slaanesh sacrificed.

An ocean of souls was summoned, and the Laughing God knew beyond doubt that right now, billions if not trillions of Slaaneshi worshippers had died in realspace and been soul-devoured to save their Goddess.

Slaanesh was on her knees.

“**I AM ALIVE**!” Slaanesh shouted. “**I AM ALIVE! IN THE END, KNOW YOU HAVE FAILED BECAUSE OF THE ANATHEMA’S WEAKNESS! HE DOES NOT BELIEVE HE IS A GOD, AND ONLY A TRUE GOD WOULD BE A MATCH FOR ME**!”

There was only one answer to give.

“Liar.”

The Queen of Blades threw him *Ala’ra*.

Cegorach jumped and impaled Slaanesh for the second time today. And this time, the Great Harlequin went with the blow with a far different purpose than killing in mind.

Because now with hindsight, he realised trying to slay in one blow Excess had been naive. Even after this immoral act of sacrifice – for what sort of God would be heartless to save his followers? – Slaanesh had still too many worshippers in the Warp Storms, too many assets ready to be discarded if it could save its existence.

But *Ala’ra* was a weapon which very purpose across the Aeldari saga had been to sever, to cut, no matter how resistant the target.

And so Cegorach cut in Slaanesh’s essence, and separated the six primordial essences of the Dark Princess.

Six was more than a fancy number. It was the true nature of the Dark Princess: Avidity, Gluttony, Carnality, Paramountcy, Vainglory, and of course Excess.

Pink and gold fought in a terrible clash of will and psychic oppression. Without the human’s help, Cegorach wouldn’t have been to hold.

And in a sound which was heard from the Eye to the Eastern Fringe, the pink essence of Slaanesh tore itself apart and dispersed in six pieces, leaving only a seemingly lifeless Aeldari body behind.

Cegorach was once again thrown away like a doll in the middle of a storm, but for once, he really didn’t care.

The six principles were severed from each other, and it would take another God to put them back together, something that, given the relationships between the no-longer-Four, was not going to happen.

The largest pink shadow tried to flee back through the Gate where the Palace of Slaanesh awaited, but immediately blood-red chains neutralised it and a gigantic entity Cegorach had no wish to challenge revealed itself.

“**AT LAST**!” And the voice was the triumphant tumult of war. “**AT LAST THIS IS MY TIME**!”

Cegorach threw back *Ala’ra* to Aenaria.

“It’s time to flee.” Winning against a weakened Dark Princess had been done by the skin of their teeth; there was no chance of doing significant damage to the God of War in their exhausted stage. The effects of the golden blast were fading wherever the red aura was growing.

“Yes,” as always, the Eldanesh blade-mistress was a great conversationalist. “Do you want me to take the Avatar’s body with us?”

Cegorach frowned. Now that Slaanesh had been banished from it, the wings and the other abnormal appendages had been removed, and the body he could observe was one of a relatively young Aeldari girl. Far older than it should have been at the moment of the First Fall, but younger than the duration between then and the Death of Slaanesh.

“Yes, carry it please,” it was a bit humiliating, but as each step caused him a lot of pain, the Queen of Blades was likely stronger than him until his essence recovered from the ordeal. “She is Aeldari and might be useful for my plans. I’m rather surprised you proposed, though, given your lineage.”

“Morathi will roll in her grave at the idea of me helping you saving her granddaughter’s life,” the red-haired Aeldari snorted.

“**BLOOD! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!” One Gate which had stayed inactive since the First Fall was activated, and both Queen and God fled as the last foundations of Commorragh were destroyed and Blood Legions attacked the last remnants of Excess.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**One minute after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Taylor Hebert**

The death of Commorragh was quite loud and impressive.

The Gates, large and small, exploded by group of four and fives in a symphony of destruction nothing could stop.

There were remains of Imperial and Eldar ships transformed into cascades of gold and obsidian which proceeded to wreck every piece of infrastructure which was still somehow standing. There were Warp Rifts, some larger than a planet opening and closing randomly, disgorging horrors only to make them disappear one second after.

Angels of shining gold fought blue, red and green abominations in a battle no human would have imagined a couple of hours ago. The laws of reality abandoned the reality as the Emperor’s power and the Ruinous Powers battled each other.

The universe seemed to tether on the edge as the veil between the sub-realms revealed the Dark City imploding one settlement after another, and increasing the magnitude of the devastation as Exterminatus-grade flames and failing suns were freed from their cages.

There was a heartbeat when nothing blew up.

It was only a pause for the triumphant finale. The Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity*, blazing like the very light of the Astronomican, was the next ancient artefact to die.

It was like all the energy left was conjured to form a new sun, an aster of order and terrible magnificence, and it began to fall into the abysses, despite new legions of abominations and Warp-born monsters to oppose it.

“Ten seconds to the Eversprings Gate, my Lady,” announced Wolfgang. The *Enterprise* was one of the last ships which would get through. Its batteries had been extremely useful preventing several Astartes Strike Cruisers and other damaged warships would not be left to the non-existent mercy of the Ruinous Powers.

“Delenda est Commorragh,” the parahuman of Earth Bet whispered.

The last vision they would have of the former Eldar Webway City was light and darkness fighting over it before planet-sized explosions extinguished everything.

**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Scelus Sector**

**Craftworld Ulthwé**

**Three minutes after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

Even by the standards the ruler of the Imperium had set during the galactic conquest which had united his race again after the Fall, the outcome of this Shadowpoint was absolutely awe-inspiring and proof that when they united their forces behind a common purpose, the humans could accomplish deeds able to shame the most gifted Asuryani.

Eldrad could admit it in the privacy of his thoughts. He wasn’t sure he would ever get the opportunity to say the same thing in public without losing a lot of influence and allies, however.

Commorragh was gone.

After the Talisman of Vaul had self-destructed in an overflow of Anathema-infused energy, the entire heart of the Webway had collapsed into the Warp. If Cegorach hadn’t used his Core Gate to close all the junctions, it was likely the entire labyrinthine dimension would have been destroyed. As it was, the consequences were ‘merely’ catastrophic for the Drukhari and everyone who had been using regularly or irregularly this nexus and the arteries close to it.

Forty major sub-realms, including the thirteen major ones in Commorragh, were wiped out without a hope of saving something. It should have been thirty-nine, but apparently the Laughing God had ‘forgotten’ to close the Gate leading to Pandaimon and thus this city had been destroyed too. If someone believed it was a coincidence after the Masque of the Iridescent Trick had been ambushed there a few cycles ago, the Ulthwé Farseer had a Maiden World or two to sell them.

Evidently, this meant tens of billions Drukhari deaths. The black-clad Asuryani’s psychic investigation was not so precise he could see how many of their dark cousins had survived, but by his most optimistic guess, it wasn’t looking good for them. The Queen of the Swarm and all her allies had joyously murdered everything in their path, not that he could much blame her given how murderous and sociopathic most of the Biel-Tan Aspect Warriors and Drukhari executioners had behaved.

Usually, the Dark City having received the fate it had so richly courted since the Fall would have been the information he had to give all his attention to.

Today, it was a secondary priority.

Slaanesh was dead. She-Who-Thirsts had met her end.

The more Eldrad watched the storms raging in the depths of the Great Ocean and the gigantic battles of the Primordial Annihilator, the more his doubts were fading and his conviction became absolute.

Slaanesh was dead.

To be sure, some parts of it were not completely annihilated. There was some minor part of Excess which had survived, but the Ruinous Power of Blood and War had attacked it the moment it tried to retreat from Khaine’s Gate. Left to its own devices, maybe this shard could have represented a danger, but it was not to be. Khorne had dragged it in chains to its Brass Citadel, and was already busy entombing it in a very secure prison.

Without souls to regenerate itself, the threads of the future where Excess managed to survive a few cycles weren’t legion. Excess would need a link to its past, an Avatar. But Cegorach had stolen it with the Queen of Knives – or should he say ‘Queen of Blades’? This secret was no longer one, after the First Sword-bearer revealed herself in such an explosive fashion in the middle of the Battle of Commorragh. So unless someone made a stupid mistake or tried to assault the indomitable defences of Khorne’s Citadel, Excess was going to die a slow and unremarked death like it deserved.

And since Excess was the very basis of She-Who-Thirsts’ existence, Slaanesh was truly gone and the four civilisations which had survived the Fall – or should he say ‘First Fall’? – were free from the ever-grasping maw of their nemesis.

Some Greater Daemons may survive and wage war on their own, but without an Aspect of the Primordial Annihilator, they could be opposed and defeated without investing the same amount of military resources they would have required before Commorragh.

Before Commorragh. Eldrad shivered internally at the magnitude of the destruction inflicted during the short and vicious military campaign. Yes, truly there would be a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ the destruction of the Dark City.

It was an historic moment.

It was also one full of danger, and Eldrad was not blind to the pit traps awaiting the Asuryani and their other cousins. For out of six Aspects of the Dark Princess, one was neutralised, possibly forever, but several among the five others had been...assimilated, for lack of any other accurate word, by the other Ruinous Powers.

Paramountcy had been devoured by the Great Liar, and Gluttony had been swallowed by the Grandfather of Pestilence, of this he was certain. This in turn gave these two facets of the Primordial Annihilator certain...claims on Asuryani and Drukhari souls.

And the way Avidity had disappeared gave him heavy suspicions the foremost candidate for the title of Fourth Chaos God had snatched it for its daemonic purposes. This was not good at all. For all their problems, Asuryani had a very stable society. Having Anarchy tempt his Craftworld was not something Eldrad wanted to see in his lifetime.

As for Carnality and Vainglory, the Ulthwé Farseer wasn’t able to see that far. He would have to be prudent and be on the lookout for them.

One of the many preoccupations for his stressed psyche as he tried to assess the huge ripples of the destruction of Commorragh. Four Craftworlds had been brought to their knees militarily, and there was no guarantee they were going to see a next cycle, especially in Biel-Tan’s case. The psychic beacon of the humans had seen its potency and illuminating range. The Eye where their Empire had once existed had lost a few thousand leagues, nothing vital compared to the fate of its creator, but the correlation was very clear. Across hundreds of battlefields, most Asuryani-human and Drukhari-human conflicts were now over one way or another. Certain raiding-parties had tried to bathe in the blood of millions when it had become clear they wouldn’t reach Commorragh in time to do any good, and plenty of the dark slavers had met their end when they failed to understand not retreating was a death sentence. The world Sliscus and some of his associated had used bio-weapons against at the entrance of the Eversprings Gate had been struck by an explosion of light, purging it with psychic power. The Empyrean was pure Chaos, as one of Four was gone, and plenty of things asleep for aeons were now wide awake and trying to challenge the established order.

And then there were the aftershocks of so many Drukhari and species having their slave-brand to She-Who-Thirsts severed without warning. Something Eldrad knew was going to be called the Mark of Commorragh.

And these were just the most important consequences. It was far from an exhaustive list.

Eldar stopped his meditation and opened his eyes. For today, this was enough. He had to deliver the news to Ulthwé as a whole, inform them She-Who-Thirsts, the Doom of the Aeldari, was dead.

“And then I’m going to get royally drunk. I’m sure no one will have anything to say against it today.”

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Two hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Space Hulk *Empire of Sin***

**General Taylor Hebert**

The Phaerakh and herself met in one of the rare sections of the Space Hulk which could still be considered structural safe. It was more to preserve appearances of neutrality than anything else, but appearances were important, especially for the Imperial authorities who would examine later the circumstances and the terms of this burgeoning diplomatic relationship.

The space sight was grandiose; the Eversprings Gate may have been closed permanently one hour and a few minutes ago, but the golden crystals shining with the Emperor’s power had been ejected across the system, providing a system-wide firework as unexpected as it was flamboyant. Before taking her Thunderhawk to this meeting, the Mechanicus Archmagi had told her the crystals of the substance some subordinates were calling ‘Aethergold’ was somehow purifying the atmosphere of Pavia from the bio-ravages the xenos had inflicted upon it.

The consequences were going to be huge, and Taylor tried very hard to not think about the millions of men and women already proclaiming this was a miracle, and the billions more who were going to follow once the news spread of it, which was not going to take long since the Empyrean had been battered by the light explosions and the Astropaths were now able to communicate to everyone they were ordered to.

But for the hours ahead, the religious and political consequences could wait. With the number of warships and other fleets on their way to this stellar system, it was best to sign the first Human Necron Mutual Defence Treaty before an idiot did something regrettable and spread trouble between the metallic xenos and humanity.

And to give credit where it was due, the few law-experts had worked hard in the hundred hours of the Commorragh invasion to give a document which satisfied both parties. The result was a document of ten articles and the equivalent of one hundred and sixty-three pages in the old A4 format, with three versions, one in High Gothic, one in Low Gothic, and one in the Necron tongue, which was apparently called ‘Noble Hierontyr’.

“We have received the provisional support of the Fabricator-General,” the General said formally, “as well as the accord of the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes,” which might be possibly more important to make certain high-ranked authorities consider the treaty valid. “I trust the reservations of the Nerushlatset Dynasty have been lifted?”

“They have,” replied Phaerakh Neferten as formally as the insect-mistress had spoken. Hearing the contrary would have been surprising and also heavily frustrating. “Herald, repeat the main articles for the record.”

Obediently, a Necron armoured in a sort of knight-like blue armour summed up the contents of the Mutual Defence Treaty. By Article One, the Imperium and the Necron Nerushlatset Dynasty – glyphs and recognition methods had been transferred in Imperial custody – were signing a non-aggression pact. The duration of this accord was of one hundred Terran years, renewable tacitly as many times as the signatories wished.

Article Two was what made the ‘Mutual Defence Treaty’ part: an attack upon the Imperial worlds of the Nyx Sector or the Nerushlatset planets during this period by an enemy belonging to a faction of the Eldar, Chaos, other Necron Dynasties, or traitor humans (the definition being extremely large by design) was an attack against all signatories and would be answered militarily as such.

Article Three and Four were about territorial claims. The Necrons ceded formally Brockton Quartus (Hellhound) and Pavia to the Imperium, while she in her persona of Basileia recognised Neferten’s claims on Brockton Quintus (Wilbourn). The Necron worlds in the Suebi Nebula north and east of the Nyx Sector were formally recognised as legitimate possessions of the Nerushlatset Dynasty – not that there was much problem with that as the immense majority had never been discovered by Imperial Rogue Traders and cartographers. An ambassadorial station would be built between Brockton Quartus and Brockton Quintus to host diplomatic meetings between the emissaries of both species. Neither signatory would station mobile forces with capital ships in the system, though orbital grids to defend fixed assets was authorised. And if the Imperium decided to begin mining operations on Brockton Quartus – something highly probable the moment a Tech-Priest had a method to exploit the mineral wealth without millions of deaths – the Necrons would have the trade rights to exchange Noctilith ore against other precious mineral resources.

Article Five was the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ Necron artefacts found by humanity and Human artefacts/relics/technologic samples found by Crypteks and the likes were to be returned to their legitimate owners as soon as practically possible. The sole and only exception tolerated was for the ‘Callidus C’Tan Blades’, under the reservation a Nerushlatset expert was allowed to examine her weapon for a few minutes.

Article Six was the formal oath neither she nor Neferten would engage diplomatic overtures with an Eldar individual or faction without the full accord of the other. Article Seven was for the conditions of future military cooperation. Article Eight established the protocols for fleet deployments in friendly territory.

Article Nine and Article Ten were about the Queen of Blades and Trazyn the Infinite – those two could take pride in the fact they had been able by their simple existence to amend an inter-species treaty. By it the Necron Overlords were authorise to participate in the grand arena fights if they wanted, and Taylor had to warn them when the Queen of Blades announced her imminent arrival. As for the thief, protocols and instructions were put on a material form, though how much good they were going to do, only the Emperor and the Archaeovist of Solemnace knew.

“The representative of the Nerushlatset Dynasty can sign.”

The object the Phaerakh used to place her green seal magically teleported in her hand, which was just...showing off. Note to herself, talk to Dragon and see if something similar could be done just for bragging rights.

“The representative of the Imperium and the Nyx Sector can sign.”

The wax Taylor used was blood-red, which given that the alliance had been forged in the blood of allies and enemies at Commorragh, was something worth remembering.

The official documents were distributed to their assistants and sealed into stasis fields and other methods to secure highly-sensitive documents.

Then the female leader of the Necron World Engine called a sort of miniature cube, from which appeared two smaller objects. One looked very much like it had been forged in the black alloy used for STCs, while the other was more like a sort of miniature holo-projector, ridiculously small for the power readings it was showing. It was the latter the Phaerakh pushed towards her first.

“The list of hostile Crownworlds I would like you to neutralise in priority,” Neferten explained, “I know you are not in a state to continue military operations after the casualties suffered at Commorragh, but this data should give you some indications where the systems are and what sort of armies and fleets you want to muster before striking. Further information can be delivered at future diplomatic negotiations.”

“I agree,” and she did on both points. The forces which had participated in the holocaust of Commorragh were in no state, mental or physical, to begin a new campaign. And the information was sure to be very useful. Wuhan had not been a true test; the defences there were obviously ruined by long neglect, sabotage, and Trazyn. She took the small holo-projector in her left hand. “And the exchange?”

This time Phaerakh Neferten did what for a Necron had to be an offended huff.

“It took me a lot of threats and arguments, but I’ve managed to convince Trazyn to release this piece of archeotech from his ‘extraordinary collections’. The fact you gave him two containers filled with primitive alien tech in the last hours allowed me to break a lot of his counter-arguments. So you will have this ‘STC template’, I believe you call it? The rest of what I was able to barter is transported to one of your cargo-ships making the artefacts’ transfers as we speak.”

“And the ‘rest’ include, if I may inquire?” Taylor asked politely.

“You don’t want it to be a surprise?” This time, the General of the Imperial Guard knew for sure the galaxy was against her. When even Necrons were beginning to tease her...

One by one, the Necrons teleported away from the *Empire of Sin*.

Five minutes later, Taylor received the news from a Tech-Priest losing his binary that one hundred and ninety-four Space Marines of the Salamanders Chapter thought lost during the Klovian Disaster in M33 were officially ‘hers’.

The golden-winged parahuman could already hear the ‘Vulkan Lives!’ from the *Vulkan’s Wrath*, and she was ten thousand kilometres away...

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Three hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Tribune Basil Macedonian**

Having stayed the near-entirety of his life in the Sol System, Basil was really unfamiliar with the landscape offering before his eyes. A warm sun shone in the middle of the blue sky and warmed the earth. Luxuriant green grass was everywhere, the likes which were rarely seen outside of the private gardens of some of the most important dignitaries of the Throneworld. Mountains are close, and the pure whiteness of the snow is clearly visible. But the greatest landmark is undoubtedly the powerful cascade, hundreds of metres tall, where limpid water falls in a thunderous rumble.

And yet for all its attractiveness, these surroundings are only secondary to the Tribune’s senses. His concentration and his mental focus are pointed towards the lone figure seated on a simple stone allowing the best view over the river in fury below.

“There was a proverb once,” the brown-cloaked man said conversationally, “that with a single rock in the right place at the right moment, the course of a great river could be changed. I long believed the future was no different.” There was a pause. “I was right, and the parasites were wrong.”

Basil doesn’t kneel anymore, he has after all been told to stand, but the urge is there.

“I won’t disagree with the possibility of changing the course of said river,” he says respectfully.

The man chuckled, his greying hair flowing in the gentle wind, and the faint smile revealing new deep wrinkles on his face.

“I hear a ‘but’ coming, Tribune.”

Wrinkled hands tighten around an old-fashioned tobacco pipe the likes no one is using anymore in the Imperial Palace.

“But the risks of such a course of action are extreme...your Majesty.”

“Of course they are extreme,” his liege says calmly. “We were already on the brink of defeat, after all.”

Had it been anyone else, Basil Macedonian would have been already on them, spear in hand. But as the words come from the only being he owes fealty to, he doesn’t move...and besides, the sentence is ringing true with a terrible finality.

“The civil war engineered the treacherous bastards of Colchis crippled humanity, and sooner or later Chaos would have grown too powerful for anyone to resist it. Give it six or seven millennium, and we would have lost. Whether the Great Devourer or any member of the Lost and the Damned would have personally killed me was always immaterial in the end. We needed to do something so decisive and extreme the Four would not see it coming...and though I didn’t intend to use it that way, Operation Spartacus was the best arrow at my disposal for the single chance we were always going to have.”

“I know we killed one of the Four,” the commander of the Watchers until the Captain-General came back from Pavia said prudently, “but you also engineered the rise of another one.”

“Chaos would have tried to elevate a fourth parasite in the fullness of time,” replied the exhausted-looking man with unshakable certainty. “This is not the first attempt they made after the original cosmic conflict. Excess was just the completion of a very long-term plan; Chaos aspires to extend its tentacles of corruption deep and wide and awake the eight-pointed star. At least the way I released the dark shard, we will increase the backstabbing and the antagonism between each faction of the Damned. And Anarchy has always been easier to fight outside the battlefield than Excess.”

“I bow to your greater experience of the Arch-Enemy, your Majesty.”

The brown-cloaked man chuckled again before staying silent for long minutes admiring the cascade and the projections of water.

“Are the five Blackstone Fortresses secured?”

“They are. All of them have received a cadre of the Silent Sisterhood and are in transit towards the locations you have ordered, sire.”

“Good,” a large cloud of smoke came out of the tobacco pipe. “Allowing them to fall in the hands of the Despoiler would have been the equivalent of cutting our own throat.”

“The Tech-Adepts of the Gothic Sector are particularly...loud in their demand for compensations.”

“They will get replacement Starforts,” a sigh came out of ancient lips. “And I suppose I am going to have to summon the Fabricator-General in the next days.”

“Only the Fabricator-General?”

“A lot of reasons why I can’t rule the Imperium have been removed, but many remain,” the Emperor confessed. “And I fear that with my general distaste of certain religious issues, I would cause more harm than good at this point. No, the Fabricator-General and the Mistress of the Astronomican will be all the High Lords I need, and the rest will keep ruling for now. The Ten Thousand and the Silent Sisterhood will be my blade for the next decades.”

The Tribune knew his reluctance must have been perfectly evident for his liege. The opinion of the Adeptus Custodes when it was question of the High Lords was best not mentioned in public records. It was likely a consequence of having to arrange certain tragic accidents when these ambitious powermongers became the very thing they were supposed to guard against...

“There will be questions asked, sire. Our implication with Taylor Hebert is not going to be a secret any longer.”

“Then I suppose it’s best to dissolve this ridiculous Edict of Restraint. One thousand Custodians and four thousand null silent sisters are more than sufficient here as long as the Enemy is contained in the Warp Storms. Your ranks have recovered since M31. It serves no purpose for one of our most powerful asset to wait here unless the Enemy launches an offensive to seize the Throneworld.”

This was going to generate a political firestorm next Council, no doubt about it. But Basil knew this was an order which was going to be passed, no matter the wishes of any member of the Senatorum Imperialis.

“I will relay your will to the High Lords.”

The pipe was lowered and the cloak partially fell down from the large shoulders of his liege.

“Bring me the parahuman Callidus here. It’s time for this psychopathic child and me to have a little conversation about her future.”

Basil Macedonian raised an eyebrow.

“Of course, my liege,” he answered dutifully. “A couple of Eyes have been monitoring her since she arrived at the Callidus Temple. We can lead her here in a matter of hours.”

Though he wasn’t going to pretend to understand why. The reports he had read on the insect-controlling parahuman proved how useful she was where the prosperity and the security of the Imperium was at stake. The same couldn’t be said about...well, yes, ‘psychopathic child’ was not undeserved.

“Unlike Taylor Hebert,” the Master of Mankind explained, “I can’t afford years before summoning her here. One way or another, Sophia Hess is going to be trouble.”

A pity they couldn’t send the shadow-shrouded apprentice assassin to Nyx. The Basileia there would certainly be a useful force to control her...if said insect-mistress left her alive after their first meeting.

“The sky...I had forgotten it could be so bright...”

No more orders being given, the Custodian cleared his throat.

“What now, sire?”

“Now, Tribune, we are going to continue to fight the Eternal War. And we will no longer rage against the dying of the light.”

And when the oniric lands began to fade away and the last words were whispered, the Tribune of the Adeptus Custodes was sure they weren’t addressed to him.

“I deny you. Humanity will be free.”

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**Extermination Countdown Complete**

**Three hours after the Mark of Commorragh**

**Uncorrupted Drukhari population in the Webway: approximately 24.6 billion**

**Corrupted Drukhari population in the Webway: 0**

**Asuryani killed during the Battle of Commorragh: 2.2 billion**

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**Author’s note**: Delenda Commorragh. Delenda Slaanesh. The Battle of Commorragh is going to leave quite a mark on this poor galaxy...and now that canon has been more or less destroyed thrown into a pyre, the future promises to be explosively glorious...

The (first) massive ripples will be shown in the two Interludes coming after this chapter.