Teaser 29 May 2020

**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 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 stands 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 factions.*

*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 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 fleet 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 destroy two or three to one of us 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 is infused with, it can acquire properties most space-faring civilisations would find magical. For example, once a sorcerer pours raw chaotic energy into the black substance, they obtain a material oozing corruption the few servants of Ruin aware of its existence call 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 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 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 nothing but 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 was given the time to fire, an Anathema-beam would be created.

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 after considerable losses, and such a mighty blow might very well threaten its very existence.

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 were aghast 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 their 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.

“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 an 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 escorts 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 *Flamewrought*, 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 *Flamewrought* 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 line, and the Battle-Barge had some of the most powerful void shields and armour to endure the main batteries 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 *Flamewrought*. 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.

These were 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 take the risk.”

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. 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!”