**Extermination 8.1**

**The Port of Lost Souls**

*In hindsight, the ruling elites of Commorragh were arrogant, stupid, overconfident, and unprepared for a direct assault against the Dark City.*

*Unfortunately, as much as I want to insult them for their short-sightedness during the last few thousand cycles, there’s no use denying their overconfidence was solidly supported by many ‘unshakeable’ facts.*

*The first, and without contest most important, was the truth that no enemy in a million cycles had ever managed to breach an important Gate of the Webway without Aeldari help. Granted that was not a total guarantee of safety as sometimes bored Admirals diverted the course of greenskin hordes into the middle of several Webway cities for the sake of amusement, but it ensured that, no matter the foe, the warriors of the nobility would massacre the enemy sooner or later.*

*And once the source of the invasion was identified, the Webway Gates making the invasion possible would be closed and the attackers cut off and surrounded, ready to be neutralised and strapped into the Haemunculi’s uncountable torture devices.*

*Of course, that assumed complicity with important players in the heart of Commorragh itself. More likely, the potential invaders would be slaughtered and captured long before they ever reached the main arteries of the Webway. Hundreds of thousands of warriors from the Red, White and Blue Suns patrolled the quickest routes to the Dark City. The Dynasts were rumoured to have pacts with Mandrakes, six full Masques of Harlequin, and many, many fleets of slaver-raiders for this sole purpose. Reaching Commorragh without being in chains was impossible.*

*Everyone in Commorragh knew that.*

*There were always whispers heard in the cages of the slave markets, of course. Most of them came from the Mon-keigh, but each race captured sometimes dreamt a liberation force would come to end their torment and bring just revenge upon all Aeldari.*

*But cycle after cycle, they stopped praying for revenge and screamed in the penumbra. No retribution force or large raiding fleet ever manifested. And even if it did, what good would it have done?*

*To attack Commorragh directly, one had to break through the defences of the three great harbours of the Dark City. The invaders would have to bring enough firepower to defeat three gigantic sub-realms larger than many planets, and crowded with mercenaries and torture-cruisers.*

*Their names were infamous both inside and outside the Webway. They were Port Shard, Port Carmine, and of course the greatest and largest Aeldari shipyard of the galaxy, the Port of Lost Souls.*

*No one, including the Yllithian and Kraillach Dynasts, had ever been able to devise a plan able to take the Port without suffering casualties in the billions.*

*For the Port of Lost Souls was ruled with an iron fist by Dynast Maestros Xelian, Ultimate High Archon of the Red Sun.*

*The Dynasty of the Red Sun was the most powerful force inside and outside the Webway. In the shipyards of the port waited over two hundred and sixty battleships and more than one thousand and two hundred cruisers, supported by approximately ten thousand lighter craft.*

*And that was just the fast-reaction force. There were more warships waiting at Port Shard and Port Carmine one Gate away. But should they prove insufficient, the Dynasty of the Red Sun had thousands, if not tens of thousands of ships ready to be recalled across the Webway and uncountable pacts and dark commands to force every ambitious captain to come to the defence of the port.*

*These were just the ships. The Red Sun relied heavily on two of the most powerful Wych Cults of the era, the Wych Cults of the Impaled and the Jade Dagger. Maestros Xelian had bought the allegiance of the Haemunculi of the Everspiral and many other flesh-crafters with trillions of slaves.*

*The Princedom of the Broken Sigil and its cruel master, Admiral of Terror Nothraq Xerathis, were theirs thanks to an ancient alliance of darkness and suffering.*

*Hundreds of spires were garrisoned by more than forty million warriors of the Red Sun. These crimson-clad killers were rumoured to have more than a billion mercenaries of all races under their command.*

*And they could always transfer in more to reinforce the Port of Lost Souls. Discounting the two other Dynasts, the Citadel of Utar’ragh was only one Gate away, and the Corespur Red Guard and other army reinforcements would only need to pass through two to join the battle.*

*It was little wonder no one took the possibility of an invasion of Commorragh seriously. The expert murderers among the Red Sun were used for raids outside of the Webway, not to guard against an assault that would never come. The armies stationed at the Port were young and untested; their primary function was to crush the slave rebellions regularly erupting across the markets, pens and cages of the Dark City’s greatest harbour.*

*This was Aeldari arrogance at its finest and its worst.*

*In reports based on thousands of cycles-old information, the Dynasty of the Red Sun agreed unanimously that should such an unlikely attack occur, they would get a warning equivalent to ten ‘Mon-keigh hours’ to prepare their fleets and raiding-capture forces. It was deemed to be largely sufficient for every captain and Admiral of Commorragh to ready his or her ship and join the bloodbath.*

*Of course, this plan had never been tested in real conditions. Commorragh was impossible to invade, so why waste time training warriors and precious assets for something that would never come? No Dynast, Prince, or Admiral wanted to use the forces he or she kept to murder his or her enemies in reserve.*

*And so we were completely unprepared, for when the ‘impossible’ invasion happened, there was no warning from a Harlequin Masque, no retreating raider force bearing the news of a defeat, no skirmish on one of the main Webway arteries.*

*We did not have thousands of heartbeats. We did not have long cycles to prepare. We were out of time.*

*The battle our leaders and our entire culture had convinced themselves would never happen was real and started before the call to arms was sounded in the heart of the Webway.*

*The humans, I’m told, have given plenty of names to the battle.*

*But for the survivors of our race, we have only one.*

*I am Aurelia Malys, and I fought during the Second Fall.*

*I was there when Maelsha’eil Dannan, the Angel of Death, tried to kill us all.*

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*The massive battle which raged on the surface of the Ork planetoid saw us fight many abominations in a landscape of wrecks, but the veterans of the Fay 20th weren’t troubled by the environment. The air wasn’t worse than on a polluted Hive World, and while we were surrounded by enemies, the xenos were brutish and loud as usual.*

*There was light. There was a sun, no matter how distant. There was an ‘up’ and a ‘down’, a ‘right’ and a ‘left’. And there were definitely no human civilians to care about. The greenskins had made sure of that. As such the battle fought in the stellar system which was going to be called Brockton had no problems of morality to think about.*

*Compared to Commorragh, the* Death Star *was a paradise.*

*Even before the* Enterprise *stormed into the Port of Lost Souls, we began to hear the screams of agony.*

*It should have been impossible. Yes, the Eldar Webway had air, but the number of voices required to be noticeable across metres of durasteel, adamantium and metallic alloys was absolutely horrifying.*

*Then we had our first glance at the Dark City. And we knew we had arrived in a realm where nothing good could possibly endure.*

*The monsters called it the Port of Lost Souls. It was a perfectly appropriate name.*

*It was like a gigantic space cavern, large enough to contain four planets the size of Nyx. It was a nightmare. As the guns of the battleships began to fire, we were bathed in crimson and other gloomy lights; the captive suns of this dimension could not properly illuminate the construction below them in anything but twilight and a realm of shadows.*

*The screams increased, and I watched as the gigantic shipyards were revealed. They were gigantic bridges and dockyards disposed scattered without any sort of logic or reason. There were dark spires and eldritch shapes growing in every direction.*

*This was a spectacle of damnation and the sins of an Empire which should have perished an eternity ago, were the galaxy a fair and just place. There were torture ships and slavers everywhere, the spikes, skulls and screaming visages everywhere mockingly revealing the allegiance of these twisted beings.*

*We had arrived in the heart of darkness. And from the lowliest private to the highest-ranked Archmagos, everyone understood in his bones, brain and stomach that this battle was going to be unlike any other.*

*There would be no mercy and no offers of surrender. How could there be when the very air seemed twisted and poisoned by the strange shadows? How could anyone consider turning his weapon away from the Eldar when the proof of their uncountable crimes was revealed in all its unholy glory?*

*The details of these twisting and gigantic spires dangling impossibly in a maze of black tendrils and chaotic architecture was difficult to concentrate upon. What was to be done about it, on the other hand, was simplicity itself.*

*The forces of Operation Caribbean had arrived at Commorragh. And when we watched this xenos harbour and the abominable things ruling it, we knew what we had to do.*

*The Port of Lost Souls, per His Most Holy Majesty’s will, was to be totally and completely annihilated.*

Extract from Memories of the Fay 20th and the 35th Millennium, by Wei Cao.

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“*The worst sin an Eldar can commit is to not torture enough*,” words attributed to Asdrubael Vect.

“*No, Mon-keigh, the best revenge isn’t to live saintly, it’s living to crucify all your enemies and bathe in their entrails*,” words attributed to the Succubus known as the Bloody Baroness.

“*There is a natural hierarchy to this galaxy, Vect. But you’re so close to the bottom I won’t bother explaining it to you*,” words attributed to Dynast Maestros Xelian.

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**The Warp**

Thought for the Day: Success is measured in blood; yours or the enemy’s.

The Empyrean was never silent or calm.

At its ‘best’ moments – and the definition of ‘best’ in the Sea of Souls did not conform to any species’ definition – there were an infinity of wars waged between each of the Four. Slaaneshi hordes fought Bloodthirsters over lakes of blood and purple fire. Blue-winged reptiles flung continent-shattering spells at the armies of plague and rot.

The Immaterium was eternally at war with itself, and had been since the last battles of the War in Heaven. Disorder and atrocities were permanent features of it; the only question was how much of their forces each self-proclaimed Chaos God had committed against the other three at any moment.

In the past, present and future, there was only war and a ruckus that would have raised the dead if the concept of it managed to find some foundation in this tormented dimension. Between the roars of pure rage from the Bloodthirsters and the shrieks of the Keepers of Secrets, the average infantry creature in this never-ending conflict stood about as much chance to notice something significant as a greenskin did of understanding the concept of peace.

Consequently, when nine hundred and ninety-nine Lords of Change suddenly stopped cackling and supporting their infernal plots, it was some of the titanic entities dominating the darkness of the Empyrean which could not help but take notice. If this wasn’t enough, suddenly the forces of the Architect were fighting less ferociously, their strength waning.

The Blood God, seated on his Skull Throne was the first to discover the mistake of Tzeentch. For a single heartbeat, Khorne, Lord of Rage, Taker of Skulls, First and Last Master of Battles, stayed silent.

It may have taken a second or an eternity. Such was the nature of the Warp. But as Bloodthirsters and eight hundred eighty-eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight hosts of Blood and Carnage mustered in front of the Brass Citadel, Khorne’s inaction came to an end.

The God began to roar in laughter. So powerful was the sound that it collapsed five volcanoes of its realm. Magma erupted on half of the plains, and the fighting tripled in intensity for survival’s sake in the next moments. Several Daemon Worlds crumbled under the renewed fury of the Bloodletters and Flesh Hounds. On stalwart Cadia itself a million men and women woke up screaming as their dreams were haunted by skies of fire and oceans of corpses.

Khorne did not give a command or spoke to his most powerful Bloodthirsters. The challenge had been received, acknowledged...and accepted.

Tzeentch remained silent.

Nurgle, an entity older than a million species, was far less amused than the Taker of Skulls. Already the despair of the Aeldari was feeding its hunger, the countless deaths echoing through the Plague Garden. Aeldari souls were precious to the Lord of Decay, but the despair, delusions and denial they embraced in their last minutes of life were nothing compared to the intensity lost in battle. Worse, though many flies and vectors of plague were active by the fault of Tzeentch, these tiny agents weren’t under his control. The Plague Father emptied his cauldron vigorously and prepared a new one.

The armies of the Changer of the Ways continued their retreat. Indeed, if any mortal officer would have been able to observe the battlefields and not lose his or her mind, they would have described the deployment of Tzeentch’s forces either as a rout or a very panicky retreat.

And then Slaanesh discovered the issues the Shadowpoint had created.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

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

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Like every Space Marine, Gavreel had heard rumours about Commorragh during the Great Crusade. According to the most reliable whispers, the Dark City was the last vestige of the past Eldar civilisation. The rest of the information had however been widely thought to be propaganda. Screams which were heard across distances greater than those separating two telluric planets? An architecture twisting and mutating like a horrid disease? An eternal realm of agony living in a twilight of shadows and crimson light? Of course, no one had ever thought the location was anything but a lair of xenos slavers – the continuous raids were evidence enough – but in absence of visual proof, it was best not to succumb to exaggeration over and over again.

But as the screams echoed like a litany of damnation and the *Enterprise* emerged in the Port of Lost Souls, Gavreel regretted having dismissed the ‘exaggerated rumours’ as the reality was revealed to all humans in the fleet.

Commorragh turned out to be exactly what the worst rumours had warned that it was. It was a pit of depravity and cruelty which whould have never been allowed to stand were it located outside the Webway.

Dark spires and shipyards appeared everywhere on the auspexes and auguries, surrounded by millions of slave pens and things which should never have been imagined, much less built.

Realms of evil were not supposed to exist. But Commorragh was obviously one.

“Orders, Chosen of the Omnissiah?” asked Archmagos Thayer Sagami.

“Slaughter the biggest fleet ahead of us,” Taylor Hebert replied with the coldest tone Gavreel had ever heard her use. “Be careful not to damage the captured Astartes Strike Cruiser.”

“Nemesis-Hunter cannon loaded with thrice-blessed ammunition and ready,” announced another Tech-Priest.

“Open fire!”

Mere seconds later, the Port of Lost Souls began to burn.

**Aurelia Malys**

Hours later, Aurelia would realise how lucky she had been. The battleship *Dark Heart* had, quite clearly, been spared by virtue of being too close to the Mon-keigh starship to bombard without risking friendly fire.

But under the shock of surprise, the only thing she felt was pure unbridled terror as a gigantic firestorm engulfed the Xelian fleet.

Battleships and cruisers, assault boats and fighters, bombers and slaver-frigates, they all died together. None of the Shadowfields or Mimic Engines had been activated. The hundreds of warships of the Dynasty of the Red Sun had their guns pointed at the Cult of the Black Heart, and they died as more and more Mon-keigh warships opened fire and joined the slaughter.

It was not a battle, Aurelia realised after the first moments of horror. It was just an execution, and the few ships who tried to turn around were targeted with priority.

The first disaster did not take long to start. The battleship *Invincible Tyranny* broke in half and rammed the Bastion of Cruel Spite.

Then the ammunition stocks of the Bastion detonated.

It was like a pyre of darkness and light had been lit. The shockwave hit the *Dark Heart* severely, as alarms began to shriek and the odour of smoke arrived at her senses. But the battleship was the lucky one. All around the Bastion, slave pens and shipyards were thrown everywhere, disintegrated, or in the process of burning with substances that had certainly once been part of Haemunculi labs.

Shipyards were falling apart and letting half-completed hulls fall down onto the constructions below them. Spires were torn apart. Barracks and markets were wiped out in an instant.

Everything was burning. More and more Mon-keigh warships were arriving and launching their complements of fighters.

And neither the anti-air guns nor the fleet were firing back.

That was the worst part. No one was firing back.

“TREASON!” The word screamed by Dynast Xelian turned every head in his direction, away from the disaster. “YOU HAVE BETRAYED YOUR RACE, VECT!”

Malys wasn’t so sure. For a couple of heartbeats, there had been a shadow of genuine surprise on Vect’s features, and even now his expression hardly radiated confidence.

“Treason? You have the gall to accuse me of treason?” Hatred flowed in the words like venom in the blood of a slave. “You are the master of the Port of Lost Souls, aren’t you? You control the Webway Gates entering and exiting it! In fact, I find the coincidence particularly troubling!”

“TREASON!”

“DEATH TO THE RED SUN!”

“Apologise or...”

“I am done apologising to you and your band of useless parasites!” Vect drew his sword and charged Xelian. The Dynast and his rival clashed, and Aurelia rushed away as the Red Sun captains and the Black Heart reavers began to kill each other.

In less time than it took to say it, the two forces aboard the battleship were slaughtering each other, and to her dismay Aurelia heard many commanders bark orders into their personal links to the Corespur and the city itself.

The Mon-keigh warships were destroying the Port, but Vect and Xelian had just decided to begin a civil war here and now.

And in an instant, Aurelia knew what she had to do. Seizing the dead hand of a recently fallen Black Heart captain, the young slave unlocked her collar and the agony-devices on her body.

Aurelia Malys was free...and she began to run towards the evacuation pods. Let them slaughter each other, she was going to flee while there was still time.

**Ensign Freya Brasidas**

As the catapult launched them from the carrier, Freya knew she had made the right decision joining the Aeronautica Imperialis. There were monsters in the stars, and by the will of the God-Emperor, they were going to kill billions of them and free the galaxy from their taint!

“This is White Leader! Follow me in!”

The Thunderbolts plunged into the shipyards in a perfect attack formation and the two nose-mounted Lascannons delivered their shots into the flanks of immobile battleships, cruisers and other capital ships. Hellfire missiles of the Black Squadron on their right illuminated a dark platform covered with thousands of starfighters.

It was nothing but a gigantic slaughter.

And Freya was perfectly fine with that. Two large frigates died under her fire, and then they had finished their first round of attack. They sprayed the running xenos with shells from the nose-mounted Autocannons.

“White Lance, you see the big ovoid things? I think they are fuel depots.”

“I’m taking care of them, White Leader!”

Two seconds later, the structure was pulverised, but when it began to break it was torrents of acid, not promethium, which began to fall on the xenos’ heads and bodies. It was extremely weird being able to hear their screams though.

White Squadron fired everything they had, supported by two capital ships of the cogboys and three destroyers of the Navy.

After a few minutes, Freya stopped thinking about the damage they inflicted upon the monsters. There was too much destruction and fire. The gigantic xenos shipyards were burning or falling apart in catastrophic explosions, sending more docks and bridges into the dark pits of the abyss.

Finally, they ran out of ammunition and withdrew back to the carrier to rearm.

Before concentrating on the landing manoeuvre, Freya watched as the Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado* fired a complete salvo at what had been a spiked spire on which tens of thousands of xenos were trying to reach their warships.

Plasma, torpedoes, lasers, and dozens of other extremely advanced weapons fired at once, and in less than three seconds, there were no more tower, xenos or warships, save cripples which were breaking apart, hulks ravaged by black flames, and a ruin where nothing could possibly survive.

“Err...White Leader?” the voice of Kurt Nils was heard on the vox. “Are we all aces now?”

The chuckles of their squadron commander were impossible to mistake for anything else.

“You have to shoot down flying fighters or a functioning starship for the kill to be valid, White Dagger! But don’t worry, the battle is far from over...”

**Chapter Master Pontiac Dupleix**

The Eldar vermin had been taken completely by surprise. Pontiac Dupleix had to admit he’d had his doubts when the plan was formulated, but for the moment it worked, and it worked splendidly.

The loathsome xenos were all armed with heretical splinter, chemical, or filament weaponry. And so far all of them were completely useless for penetrating the Mark VII power armours of the Iron Drakes as they cleaned up the hangar bays of the Dark Eldar battleship.

“I will petition the Mechanicus for more of these Volkite weapons,” Captain James Mons stated as the guns transformed the resistance of the crimson-armoured Eldar into ashes and green flames.

“And I will support the move,” the Chapter Master answered while killing five more of the shadowy creatures with his Caliver. Volkite weapons had progressively disappeared from the armouries after the Great Heresy, and the Iron Drakes, being no Chapter of the Second Founding, had been unable to secure more than a couple of precious samples until their arrival in the Nyx Sector.

To be sure, the Nyx Mechanicus still had a limited production rate. Dupleix had not been allowed to read the quotas, but he doubted it was more than a couple of hundred Calivers, Blasters and Chargers per year, combined.

Still, against half-naked maniacs and drug-addicted monsters like the Eldar they were fighting, Volkite weaponry was extremely efficient.

“Onwards, brothers,” Dupleix didn’t shout; these horrid beasts weren’t worth it. “Objective C is on this battleship, and I don’t want to explain to Lady Weaver how we were forced to chase it across half of Commorragh!”

To be more accurate, it was one part of Objective C, for the Eldar had some cloning and resurrection technology to stack the odds in its favour. But the orders had come from the Emperor Himself, and no record would be able to claim that the Iron Drakes had failed the Master of Mankind in this battle.

Asdrubael Vect’s execution had been decreed, and the Adeptus Astartes would pursue the foul xenos until they were able to present its ashes on a platter.

“It looks like the xenos have begun to fight before our arrival,” one of the Terminators of the 1st Company mumbled as with every level of the dark compartments they climbed, they found more and more corpses without firing a shot. The corpses were still roasted in Volkite fire. Dupleix was not going to take any chances.

It took less than ten minutes to pulverise the walls and shoddy xenos defences, and reach what the Eldar no doubt considered the bridge of their battleship.

Or at least what had been one a few hours ago. Now the term slaughterhouse was more appropriate. There were dead crimson and dark-armoured xenos everywhere. Clearly, they had killed each other in fury while their fleet burned around them. It was xenos stupidity at its finest; not that he was going to complain. They had a lot to do and time was limited. If the Eldar leaders wanted to make their duty easier, so be it.

Unfortunately, as the corpses began to burn in a very satisfying inferno, a slow, deliberate clap was heard.

On the dark throne of the bridge, a xenos shape became visible.

“You arrive too late, Mon-keigh,” the creature said. “Dynast Maestros Xelian has already used his Mandrake allies to return to Utar’ragh.”

The dark lips twisted into the most arrogant sneer Dupleix had ever seen on any living being, human or not.

“I suppose it was too much to count on lesser species to rid me of him.”

Ninety-plus bolters and Volkite weapons had the black-armoured Eldar dead to rights.

“But if you want me to reveal one of his secret fortresses, I suppose...”

“Your supposition is wrong,” Dupleix interrupted him. “We do not care about Xelian, Asdrubael Vect. We have come to kill you.”

The foul xenos laughed and the sound was truly deranged, full of malice and hate. A bloody sword was raised.

“If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine. I will return, and I will exterminate you. Nobody will be able to say your name, for the mere mention of it will be grounds for an eternity of torture, Mon-keigh.”

“Arrogant, like all your fellow abominations. Fire!” At least five shots missed, as the Eldar seemingly teleported halfway across the room, but there was no conceivable way to avoid all Volkite blasts and bolter shells.

Two seconds later, their target was beginning to die in green flames.

“I...WILL...RETURN...”

“And we will be ready to kill you once more, xenos.”

**Captain Corr Phoecus**

Fire was the greatest and noblest purifier in existence. The Eldar lair of horrors was going to need a lot of it before it could be considered pure by reasonable standards. Corr couldn’t say he liked how many slaves were perishing under this heavy bombardment, but...they couldn’t save the poor souls below them. Even if the *Forgehammer* had not been disabled by the xenos’ haywire ordnance, there would have been zero chance he could have ordered a drop assault in the middle of this warzone.

Eighty-plus Space Marines – the entire complement of the *Forgehammer* – would not register as a small distraction, that much couldn’t be denied. But even if they succeeded, how would he ferry thousands of liberated slaves in the middle of this cataclysmic war? The shipyards, even those not under the fire of Imperial warships, were incredibly unstable, and every second that passed saw many bridges and tendril-like dark catwalks explode and send the xenos and the slaves on them directly into the abysses of Commorragh.

Salamanders were supposed to be the protectors of humanity, but they weren’t supposed to be reckless. And at this very moment, taking a Thunderhawk to go rescue slaves from the fires burning the Eldar shipyards would definitely be reckless and suicidal.

If he tried and happened to survive it, Corr was sure Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn would remove his captainship of the 2nd Company the moment they met again.

The scarred veteran of the Nocturnan Chapter smiled thinly. Until – he checked his chronometer – thirty-five minutes ago, he and the rest of the 2nd Company had been convinced their only chance of rescue lied with the salvation fleet their brothers were busy gathering on their way to the Desaderian Gulf. A fleet, that, despite his friend Hestion’s best efforts to present things in a positive light, was not yet assembled, and completely unprepared to break through the vigilant defences of the Webway. And since it was unlikely the loathsome xenos were going to open a Gate when the Chapter Master arrived to claim vengeance, there had been a very real possibility every Salamander in the *Forgehammer* was going to die.

Instead, it seemed they were saved, and by a fleet which looked like a loose coalition of everything that sailed the stars in the Emperor’s name. Adeptus Mechanicus, Space Marines, Imperial Navy, and even Frateris Templar...one did not often see this kind of fleet coalition outside a fully sanctioned Crusade.

They were going to live, and for all that Space Marines didn’t know fear, Phoecus was honest enough to admit internally he felt relief at the realization he wasn’t going to enter the annals of the Chapter as the Captain who had lost the *Forgehammer*, the best elements of 2nd Company, and the genetic-legacy of Vulkan to the perfidious xenos of Commorragh.

Energy and metal pulsed again. The myriad of Tech-Priests working on the flanks had removed some of the devices keeping the Strike Cruiser disabled.

“Fifty of the haywire bombs have been removed,” his Techmarine brother announced. “Vox-communications are once again available. I estimate all power will be restored in roughly fifteen minutes. I unfortunately will need to recalibrate the weapons and properly verify the reawakening of many of the mighty machine-spirits of the *Forgehammer* before this venerable Strike Cruiser is ready to join battle again.”

“Do your best, brother,” Corr replied. “As much as my heart burns to avenge the humiliation of our capture, our allies seem to have the situation well in hand.”

Plenty of his brothers of the 2nd Company smiled after he finished his sentence. There had been plenty of dark opinions muttered about why the Eldar forces had captured the *Forgehammer*. But by Vulkan’s hammer, whatever the xenos had thought would happen, it was certainly not that they would be incinerated by an Imperial fleet.

At least Corr Phoecus hoped so. If these xenos had deliberately let the Adeptus Mechanicus and other Space Marines enter the Webway unopposed, they had reached a degree of insanity that no Arch-Traitor could compare to.

“By our best estimates, they have destroyed or crippled more than ten percent of the shipyards already,” Sergeant Xuv’sar K’Gosi commented as the hololith was slowly reconfigured and began to give them the data on the judgement delivered on the Eldar. “Prudent or not, our figures are of...more than one hundred and ninety battleships destroyed and thrice that number in cruisers.”

The burning eyes of the old veteran turned to the pyrotechnic devastation as one cruiser was propelled by a gravitic weapon right into what looked to be a dockyard assembling ship parts.

“The damages caused to infrastructure, supplies, and experienced workers are already going to be absolutely awful for the xenos,” continued the Sergeant. “The long-ears are arrogant, but I don’t think they will be able to repair that in a mere few years!”

“Let’s stay prudent,” Corr warned, and the Salamanders on the bridge nodded. “The xenos have been caught completely off-guard, but we can’t dismiss the thousands of Gates we are seeing from here. Eldar, as Xuv’sar said, are incredibly arrogant. But by now they must be aware they can’t possibly repel our allies with what they have. And we know there are other Ports in the Webway. I think we can safely assume our enemies are screaming for reinforcements right now.”

Hestion was communicating psychically with the other Librarians by the Chapter Master’s side to inform him of the last strategic changes, but whatever happened, the Astartes rescue fleet would likely not arrive in time to crush this second wave. Then again, the Imperial fleet was not small...

The hololith flickered at that moment, but Phoecus was somewhat surprised when the image of a woman in golden armour appeared, not that of an Astartes Captain or Chapter Master.

The sparkles and the interferences on the screen were uncommon and strange. Salamanders prided themselves on producing the best technology available, and the *Forgehammer* had been overhauled fifty years ago, so those golden flashes shouldn’t be there. Phoecus put it aside for now. There were more important things to discuss.

“I am General Taylor Hebert, commander of the Caribbean fleets and armies currently attacking the city of Commorragh.” The last word was not uttered like the Eldar had deliberately tried to provoke them days ago, but like the woman was about to spit on a xenos’ corpse. The Salamanders’ Captain approved. “Am I addressing the captain of the Strike Cruiser *Forgehammer*?”

“You are,” Corr confirmed. “On behalf of the sons of Vulkan, I give you my sincerest thanks for your brave rescue and intervention. You arrival couldn’t have been better timed.”

The General smiled – and he could not help but notice that the power armour was truly of excellent quality, Auramite and other high-grade metals had been involved in this superb work – before shaking her head.

“I won’t refuse the thanks, though I will admit the reason we accepted such an infernal rhythm of attack to reach Commorragh the moment we did was due to the orders conveyed by the Adeptus Custodes.”

The Adeptus Custodes? That was...not usual. As far as the sons of Nocturne had been able to ascertain, the Watchers of the Throne had not campaigned outside of Segmentum Solar in the last millennium.

“I see.” Corr Phoecus took a deep breath. “How can the Salamanders Chapter assist you in accomplishing the goals of His Majesty?”

“The psykers on my flagship tell me you emit a psychic beacon and are in contact with the rest of your Chapter. Assuming this is true, can you divert your forces to the entrance of the Eversprings Gates in the Pavia System?”

“Certainly,” the commanding officer of the 2nd Company answered. “I require the coordinates of this system for Librarian Hestion. We have little information about Pavia save that it is a pirate haven.”

It was something that had evidently changed, if the Imperial fleet had come from there in strength.

Spatial coordinates were exchanged and confirmed. Hestion acknowledged before beginning to transmit once more.

“Until Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn and our cousins of the Silver Skulls and Howling Griffons, arrive, our hammers and flames are at your service. Which squadron do you want us to join?”

The female General – who seemed a bit young for her exalted rank now that Corr thought about it – cleared her throat.

“I would be honoured if you could send a few of your brothers aboard my battleship, Captain. We have recovered two artefacts with the insignia of your chapter at Pavia. One is a Fellblade Tank named the *Obsidian Chariot* and the other is a type of large flamer-gauntlet...”

Phoecus stared dumbfounded. Surely his ears were failing him...it couldn’t be...

Xuv’sar K’Gosi was faster to assimilate what astonishing news had been given to them.

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES!”

**General Taylor Hebert**

Taylor winced as the hololithic communication ended. Her poor ears...who knew the Salamanders could be so loud in their happiness?

“Maybe I should have waited until the end of the battle...” the insect-mistress whispered.

“Maybe,” Gamaliel agreed. “But at least this way the rest of the Salamanders Chapter will have plenty of motivation to rush to Pavia. And let’s look at it this way, we just got the best confirmation these objects are indeed weapons forged during the Great Crusade.”

The Herald of Sanguinius’ lips twitched into a thin smile.

“Just be careful when the Salamanders come to congratulate you. You’re not a Space Marine, and their hugs can break bones.”

Weaver fixed the Dawnbreaker Guard to see if he was joking, but she wasn’t able to read the Blood Angels’ expression. Surely he was joking, right?

After a second, the General of the Imperial Guard decided this particular issue could very well wait until after the end of the current battle.

“Wolfgang,” She turned back to her naval advisor. “How fares the destruction of the Port of Lost Souls?”

“For the moment, remarkably well,” the young blonde-haired man replied. “The quadrants we have destroyed contained the overwhelming majority of the Eldar capital ships which would have been able to fight back if given time. While we have destroyed or crippled beyond any hope of repair around twenty-five percent of the Port’s infrastructure, the majority of the warships we caught at high anchor were battle-operational. Ten-plus cruisers managed to flee through their Gates before entering our range, but we have wiped out the two hundred-plus battleships of the Port of Lost Souls, and their cruisers and fighter escorts are being incinerated by our bombardments as we speak.”

The lists flashing in red confirmed this implacable tale of destruction. These were numbers almost beyond comprehension. Operation Caribbean had less than twenty battleships no matter how you counted, and Battlefleet Nyx’s Admirals would have dreamed to have five in their possession to defend the Sector.

Two hundred battleships represented a gigantic amount of industry, manpower, and resources, even if the monstrous xenos’ hulls were lighter and more nimble than their human equivalents. But their enemies had also lost over eight hundred cruisers of all types, and likely more than twenty thousand lighter craft. And the damage to the infrastructure and their specialised workers in the shipyards had to be catastrophic by any xenos standard.

They had not really entered the areas focused purely on construction, the residential areas, or the large things the Eldar used as their equivalents of space elevators to move slaves and huge quantities of materials between starships and Commorragh proper. The Port of Lost Souls, when it came down to it, was a large monstrosity which had long since escaped every rule its original architects may have imposed it.

“But?”

“But the level of enemy communications has skyrocketed several times in the last five minutes, my Lady,” Wolfgang admitted. “Given that the large Gates leading to the other Ports and the sub-harbours of Commorragh have stopped sending piecemeal fighters and their fragile craft against our battleline, I fear the real counterattack is going to begin in the next ten minutes.”

Taylor watched the chronometric displays. They indicated one hour and two minutes.

This was far more than anyone had ever dreamed of being granted against an opponent as fast as the Eldar, and asking for more would be greedy and ungrateful.

“I suppose you want to reform the fleet formation?”

“Yes, my Lady. Variant Beta I think is the most adequate for our current needs.”

“We are going to get close to the Gates leading to Port Carmine.”

Her advisor immediately nodded.

“Yes, but we have ways to deal with them,” the First Naval Secretary reminded her.

The female parahuman didn’t like hearing that. And damn it, in the last hours there had been a lot of orders and instructions she hadn’t liked at all. But ultimately, the General was forced to relent.

“Do it.”

The Port of Lost Souls was burning, and who knew how many innocents whose only crime was being slaves of the Eldar of Commorragh burned with it.

She had wanted to save them. Oh God, how she had wanted to save them! But there hadn’t been a way. Taylor had read the possible numbers of Eldar waiting for them in these dark spires. The Imperial guardsmen and the Mechanicus Skitarii would have faced millions of entrenched aliens, and assuming they won, they would have been crippled, unable to attack further...and they didn’t have a tenth of the transport capacity to evacuate the slaves.

Beyond the edge of her power, Taylor felt something pulse. Something she had long denied...and something that sooner or later, she was going to have to face.

One Eldar for thirty slaves; that was the theoretical ratio the Custodes had provided when giving his orders. This was something she would remember for the rest of her life. The Caribbean fleet had killed millions of Eldar, yes, but she, Taylor Hebert, had likely killed more humans than any dictator or warmonger parahuman warlord in Earth Bet’s history; hundreds of millions or even billions, the count had long since spiralled out of control.

“We have hundreds of enemy warships emerging from the Gates leading to inner Commorragh, my Lady. Judging by the crimson colour and the emissions, most of them seem to belong to the owners of these shipyards.”

Taylor again rose from her seat. The element of surprise was gone for her fleet, now the real battle was going to begin, and judging by the number of battleships the auspexes of the *Enterprise* were registering it was going to get ugly, even with the trap they had planned.

“Forty battleships, plus twice that many cruisers...” and the cloud of fighters, bombers and attack craft surrounding them was incredibly large. There were at least ten thousand of them, all faster and more agile than human fighters. “Archmagos, call Destruction-Overlord Sitkah. We may benefit from a few reinforcements to deal with this wave.”

“By your command!”

**Admiral of Terror Nothraq Xerathis**

Nothraq Xerathis was not angry when the *Messenger of Terror* arrived at the Port of Lost Souls. ‘Angry’ was far too weak a word to describe his feelings. He was utterly, volcanically, furious. His rage had reached summits the member of the Princedom of the Broken Sigil didn’t even know he could reach.

The sight of the Port of Lost Souls ravaged by spire-sized infernos and starship-sized explosions was sufficient to increase his loathing twofold.

This was the most disastrous day in the history of the Aeldari race since the Fall, and the fact Mon-keigh ships were guilty of this was burning like the mark of a red-hot brand in his heart and lungs.

Mon-keigh. The Port of Lost Souls was burning because of *Mon-keigh*.

Millions of heads were going to roll for this, and if he didn’t win his battle immediately, his own was going to be included on the mountain of skulls.

“What’s the status on the other fleets?” He barked to the useless replacements he had been forced to accept aboard after Dynast Xelian had massacred most of his staff and four other Admirals.

“Duke-Admiral Phrell Vorl-Xoelanth and Archon-Marquis Vorpex Qu are on their way, Grand Admiral of Terror and Agony.”

“How many cruisers do they have between the two of them?” Nothraq asked, never turning his eyes away from the Mon-keigh warships.

“More than two hundred, your Supreme Magnificence,” That was about half of what he had expected. Where were the others? “They are arriving from Port Shard.”

“Where are the fleets of Port Carmine?” the Xerathis fleet-commander shouted, seizing the nearest slave and strangling him with his bare hands. “The Mon-keigh ships are offering their throats to their Gates! Do they need a written invitation?”

“Reports...are a bit sparse, Mighty Sovereign of the Void and the Webway. But it seems there are many Cults rising for the usurper in the shipyards....”

The Admiral sworn to the Xelian Dynast decapitated the messenger in a fit of rage, and three more slaves in the next seconds for good measure.

Vect. This disaster had Vect’s fingerprints all over it.

It was that mongrel and his Cult raiding in the Desaderian region which had attracted the attention of the Mon-keigh brutes. It was because of Vect’s betrayal there was heavy fighting between many Cults, Noble Houses and millions of mercenaries in High and Low Commorragh. And now the vat-spawn was blocking their fleets while the Port of Lost Souls burned.

Wherever the ex-slave was going to appear again, Nothraq was going to find him, crucify him on the prow of his flagship, and make sure he stayed alive for millions of cycles!

“Tell the Duke-Admiral and the Archon-Marquis to form on my left and right, respectively” he ordered as hundreds of ships from Port Shard and more distant sub-realms like Pandaimon, Dynor and Mandacklur were joining his fleet. “We are going to massacre these Mon-keigh ships and make sure they regret their defiance until the end of times. They want to attack Commorragh? They are going to remain our guests for all eternity!”

By the bowels of the abyss, this was going to be bloody. His favourite tactics were all but useless here: he could not let the Mon-keigh bombardment continue and stall until his hit-and-run attacks crippled their battleships. He had to go straight for their throat. With so many Xelian and other important nobles’ warships under his command, he had the numerical superiority. But the Mon-keigh ships were brutish and heavily armoured. Breaking their formation was going to be death for the first ships to enter their range.

“Attack the heart of the primates in Ynesth-Torment. I want the maximum acceleration of our engines. Shadowfields to maximum distortion effect.”

The Admiral of Terror’s fury had not abated, but he couldn’t help but feel a brief flicker of dark joy at the sight of the thousands, no the tens of thousands, of fighters, bombers, cruisers, and battleships racing out of the Webway Gates. This was one of the greatest armadas the Aeldari species had ever gathered for a war on a single command, and it was his...maybe he would be able to use the future victory to overthrow Xelian, the old fossil had been hurt by Vect and...

“Mighty and Magnificent Admiral! Movement from the compromised Gate!”

Nothraq Xerathis raised an eyebrow. So the Mon-keigh had kept some forces in reserve. Clever for their lesser minds, but hardly something to be concerned about given the incredible numerical advantage he had on his side.

“Who knows, they may think to trap us!” there was plenty of laughter and hisses of approval on the *Messenger of Terror*’s command sections.

And then every smile and expression of mockery died.

For the gigantic battleship which had just emerged into the Port of Lost Souls was not a Mon-keigh vessel.

It did not belong to any sort of opponent the Aeldari routinely fought in their raids.

It was crescent-shaped and shining in foreboding green techno-illumination. A pyramid shape was used as a command-bridge and the very green symbols carved on the hull seemed to spread fear and despair.

It couldn’t be here. It shouldn’t be here. They were a threat of the past, but they had disappeared or were sleeping, waiting for orders that would never come.

They were a dead race. They were the betrayers of the War in Heaven.

And yet as the first battleship advanced, a second emerged from the Gate. And then a third.

“YNGIR! YNGIR’S SLAVES IN THE WEBWAY!”

“Change course! Change course! Forget the Mon-keigh! Forget the Mon-keigh!”

“Priority message to Dynast Xelian! Yngir battleships have allied with the Mon-keigh! Alert all Webway commanders and fleets!”

“Power surge! Nova-scale power surge from the first Yngir’s slaves’ battleship!”

Nothraq Xerathis in an instant understood they were doomed. They had raced to attack the Mon-keigh ships in front of them and that fleet still stood intact, free to kill them. But today, they were the grave-diggers. It was the Yngir’s slaves which were going to play the part of the executioner’s blade.

“Fire everything we have,” the Admiral of Terror commanded, knowing it was likely the last order he would ever give. “We will not go to She-Who-Thirsts alone.”

And then for a beautiful short moment, every warship of the three different fleets fired.

The Port of Lost Souls’ very space suddenly seemed crowded and small as millions of torpedoes and every type of macro-armament ever imagined by three different races was unleashed in a deluge of hatred and war.

Nothraq Xerathis’ participation in the battle ended after thirty-one seconds. His Dark Rose-class battleship detonated two seconds later.

**Aurelia Malys**

“Shaimesh’s putrid breath...”

Aurelia almost regretted having fled the battleship *Dark Heart*. Almost.

The warship had vanished a long time ago in a formidable explosion when the Mon-keigh warriors had rammed it into the Black Hekatii Shipyards.

Along with, probably, all proof one Aurelia Malys had been a slave.

The prospect should have filled her with joy and happiness.

At the moment, Khaine be her witness, it was a bit difficult to enjoy her newfound liberty.

Her evacuation ticket had crashed into the Long Pain slave market, and not only was there a general slave insurrection, there were ships of the Dynasts falling from the red skies!

“What by the Horned One’s bowels is happening?” shouted one of the Red Sun’s guards before being seized by an enraged crowd and torn apart.

Aurelia stayed in the shadows and didn’t intervene, only crossing the grand market’s alley when the yellow-skinned aliens had departed to search for vengeance elsewhere.

“Surely there must be a way to escape this damned sub-realm...”

Above her head, the skies continued to burn in red and green lights, Aeldari ships died, and the screams of torture and despair were silenced in their thousands...

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

Taylor had never been cheerfulness incarnated, but the merciless expression she now showed to the world would have terrified an Eldar if they had been in range to see it.

“How bad are our losses?” the Basileia-General asked as the results of the five minutes of holocaust were suddenly a bit easier to analyze.

“They are definitely not good,” he was forced to report. “Our two Hecate-class Heavy Cruisers, the *Tethys’ Wrath* and the *Gears of Creation*, are gone. Technically, I suppose we could try to salvage whatever metal is left, but since the flaming debris is currently raining on the Eldar shipyards, I don’t think we are going to get a lot of volunteers for that. The Oberon-class battleship *Venerable* has over half of its crew dead and most of its armament is gone. We are going to have to tow it back to Pavia immediately or it won’t survive the next round of fighting. The Pandora-class Carrier *Strike Theorem* has broken in half and we’re busy searching for survivors. And the Discovery-class *Discovery of the Ancients* went nova. No survivors for that warship.”

It could have definitely been worse if the enemy hadn’t tried to shift its attention to the Necrons, but it definitely didn’t meet any definition of good. The torturer-Eldar had charged straight in the teeth of their weapons and at mere thousands of kilometres, the battle had been extremely ugly. The *Enterprise* was for the moment undamaged, but it was one of the few ships which could boast that.

“We have lost eight destroyers. Five Mechanicus, two Navy, and one from the Frateris Templar. Two hundred starfighters and seven hundred fighter-bombers have perished, though nearly all the survivors of our attack wings are now aces.”

The battle had been a Darwinian process where those who remembered the correct lessons and fought together lived, and the lone eagles died alone under an endless wave of murderous xenos.

“The Necrons?”

“One of their battleships and two of their strange cruisers are going to be counted as total losses,” the time-stopping parahuman affirmed. “The metal regeneration of their hulls is extremely impressive, but like everything it has limits. I don’t know how many exotic weapons the Eldar used against the lead crescent-ship, but it was too many. We will have to see if they want to tow it back to Pavia too...and if the hull’s integrity can handle the strain.”

For a moment, the insect-mistress stayed silent, eyes closed. Given the circumstances, Dennis didn’t envy her abilities, whether the insect mastery or the ‘gift’ of the golden aura.

It was bad enough to see it with human eyes. The Port of Lost Souls had not been pleasant when they arrived...but now it was more or less Hell’s antechamber. There were Eldar ships ramming each other or falling down on the shipyards every second, depots of ammunition and flares of black light erupting everywhere.

At least the screams of the tortured could no longer be heard.

This was a gigantic bloodbath, and Clockblocker didn’t doubt millions of humans had died due to their battle. The worst part was that he couldn’t convince himself this was a bad thing. As more and more reports and images arrived in front of him, horror and evil had taken a new meaning. Bloodweaver and Sliscus had been very small-scale and low-level compared to the average cruelty of the Masters of Commorragh.

“We have broken the first counterattack, my Lady,” Wolfgang said in as much of a neutral tone as he could manage. “Unfortunately, I fear we rang the bell and more xenos fleets will be recalled to deal with us.”

“I completely agree.” Weaver opened her eyes, and while they didn’t burn with power he wasn’t sure the merciless determination was any better. She shrugged. “It was a given that we would never be able to hold the Port of Lost Souls – or any Webway harbour for that matter – with the forces we have on hand. War Plan Pearl Harbour called for strategic and tactical surprise, it didn’t call for a miracle. The Necrons’ alliance will increase the fleet threshold the Eldar will have to send against us to defeat our warships massively, but it doesn’t change the paradigm.”

Personally, Dennis thought that after the wave of annihilation humanity had unleashed here, the ghosts of the Japanese Admirals were going to wish they had been allowed to call their operation War Plan Commorragh. He couldn’t disagree with the rest of what had been said, though.

“In this case, my Lady, I think it’s time to break the warships assembling in Port Carmine before they’re in a position to strike us in the rear.” Wolfgang spoke, rather courageously in his opinion. It was obvious their great leader had no wish to give the order.

There were a couple of seconds of silence, and then...

“Very well, we will follow your plan. Call the Inquisition battleship *Judgement*.”

Was this always how it began? Doing the wrong thing for the absolutely right reasons? Dennis could have shouted no, given a passionate speech on doing what was right, not what was easy.

The problem was that it was not easy. It was probably one of the few possibilities which would allow the Imperium to accomplish a few of the key goals ordered by the Custodes. The fleet had already taken heavy losses, and it was going to take more and more with every Eldar fleet that would arrive with murder in its eyes.

“Tell the Inquisitors they have my personal blessing to begin the Exterminatus attack on Port Carmine.”

**Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper**

Learning the Ordo Excorium of the Inquisition had been studying the possibility of delivering an Exterminatus inside the Webway for decades had been anything but a surprise.

The Eldar Webway was a labyrinth of dimensions where the light of the Emperor never shone. Eldar, along with thousands of other xenos species, mutants, daemons, traitors, heretics, pirates and plenty of other apostates lived in it.

Rafaela Harper would have been more concerned, to say the truth, if the Ordo Excorium hadn’t studied the possibility in the first place. It would have been undeniable proof of serious incompetence.

But like every Ordo, the Ordo Excorium had stopped at the preliminary stage. No sizeable force loyal to His Most Holy Majesty of Holy Terra had been able to invade the Webway and stay alive and out of the Eldar prisons for more than a few minutes. There were rumours of Inquisitors who had managed to escape the maze on their own, but Rafaela and most of the Inquisitors she had met during her career didn’t trust them. The fact many of the ‘courageous explorators’ had outright cooperated with the Eldar was generally enough to send them straight to the pyre.

“She took long enough,” Cleopatra Coral stated. Rafaela didn’t need to ask who the ‘she’ her colleague had mentioned was.

“I don’t think the General has any issue killing xenos by the millions,” the Lady Inquisitor told the veiled Inquisitor with mild rebuke in her voice. “I think she had the hope – a hope shared by many guardsmen and personnel in this fleet, I will remind you – that we were going to smash apart every resistance in one battle and free billions of Imperial citizens these monsters have enslaved.”

This hope had lasted exactly for the amount of time the Eldar needed to launch their first terrible counter-attack.

To be honest – and she preferred not to be – even Rafaela and many of her retinue had been shocked by the ferocity and the magnitude of the fleet mustered to crush them. An entire fleet had been caught at anchor and destroyed in the Port of Lost Souls. To be reminded the Eldar had an even larger one – albeit likely one less trained and coordinated – in position merely one hour away to intercept them had been a very sobering realisation.

The fact that the cost of victory may have been an agonising one if they had not had the Necrons on their side made it even harder to swallow.

“We have to face reality, no matter how unpleasant it may be,” Cleopatra declared as the red skull announcing an imminent Exterminatus flashed on hundreds of three-dimensional displays. “We will not be able to hold Commorragh. And whatever goals the Custodes and Lady Weaver have kept to themselves, I can only pray they will not overestimate the strength of the forces available.”

The two female Inquisitors and Pedro de Moray made a pause in their conversation as the servo-skulls relayed the recording of the servitors and the Inquisitorial personnel preparing the planet-killer devices.

Cyclonic Torpedoes had been proposed, but ultimately rejected, as the shockwaves’ effects on the Gates and the integrity of the Webway were deemed too risky.

Virus Bombs had been ruled out from the very beginning. There was no way to tell how far the virus would spread.

And, since they had no Phosphex-type weapons in the *Judgement*’s stores, this left the Atmospheric Incinerator torpedoes.

Five of them were readied in the torpedo tubes of the Inquisitorial battleship.

“In fealty to the God-Emperor, our undying Lord, and by the Grace of the Golden Throne,” Cleopatra spoke loudly for the Inquisitorial archives, “I declare Exterminatus upon the xenos shipyards of Port Carmine. I hereby sign the death sentence of a billion xenos and the poor souls they have enslaved. May the God-Emperor protect the true faithful and punish the heretics.”

The torpedoes were fired and passed through the Gates. One immediately exploded against the hull of a battleship which about to rush into the Port of Lost Souls. The four others did not.

Ten seconds later, all oxygen had been ignited in the sub-realm of Port Carmine.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Hidden Blade**

**Ninety-three hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

There were some Dynasts and undisputed leaders of Commorragh who believed dying was the greatest sensation of pain they’d ever be blessed to partake in. Asdrubael Vect disagreed with them. Dying was numbing and cold, and the reason he had so many contingency plans was to ensure he stayed in that state for as little time as was strictly necessary.

And really, dying was for amateurs. If you were killed, it was because someone, somewhere, had managed to outmanoeuvre you.

The Supreme Lord of the Cult of the Black Heart – the very organisation he had hoped to proclaim the Great Kabal of Commorragh in a few cycles – gritted his teeth, for the humiliation of being incinerated was still very fresh and very painful in his mind.

On normal occasions, he would have ranted, and promised unending agony to these lesser parasites to everyone around him.

But given the circumstances of his death and the minor issue that he had not been resurrected in one of his ‘secret’ bases in the Port of Lost Souls, Port Carmine, or Low Commorragh, the Black Heart’s leader merely murmured some appreciative phrases to the Haemonculus who had overseen the procedure before letting his servants don him in one of his best black armours.

“Commorragh is under a Code Khaine-Dandra,” one of his captains kneeled in front of him. “Xelian and their ilk have declared you a traitor, Lord.”

“Of course they did,” Asdrubael hissed in pain as several drugs were injected into his system. “Have they at least managed to repel the Mon-keigh invasion?”

“They have not,” the messenger licked his lips in obvious fear, “Lord...the Mon-keigh warships received Yngir reinforcements in the middle of the battle. The fleets of Phrell Vorl-Xoelanth, Nothraq Xerathis, and Vorpex Qu have been completely wiped out.”

This...this was a surprise. Rectification: it was another very unpleasant surprise. Most of the plans he had crafted had not included the possibility of the old horrors of the War in Heaven ever waking up. He was going to have to prepare a lot of new contingencies for the immediate and long-term future. At least he had his answer on how the Mon-keigh scouts had found the Eversprings Gate. They’d been told to, by something far more powerful and dangerous than their pitiful Empire.

“The shipyards?” One of the reasons he had planned for the ‘invasion’ to take place in Corespur was that little industry of importance or any of the great slave-factories or Haemunculi labs were there.

“Port Carmine has been incinerated and at least four fleets have been lost with it, Lord,” Vect internally screamed. That was a mindboggling amount of assets, material, supporters, and infrastructure he had just lost. The sub-realm was not that large, but it had a high population density. The death count had to be over a billion, and that was likely to be a fairly generous estimation. “The Mon-keigh and Yngir’s attack on the Port of Lost Souls continues, with the occasional long-range bombardments against Port Shard from the metal creatures.”

“How much of the Port of Lost Souls remains intact?” he asked in exasperation, preparing himself for the worst.

The Supreme Lord of the Black Heart was not disappointed.

“The Vileth shipyards and its defences stand strong, the Lhilitu flesh-markets have been spared for the time being, and the three Xelian fortresses defending the access to the Utar’ragh tunnel-Gates are undamaged.”

“And?” Vect pressed as the last pieces of his armour were donned and he stood without ceremony. The Vileth shipyards were large certainly –though focused nearly entirely on assembling hulls and processing the materials coming from every part of the Webway – but they didn’t provide more than one percent of the total shipbuilding capacity of the Port.

The Lhilitu flesh-markets had a roughly similar importance in the purchase and selling of slaves. They couldn’t be disregarded, but they hardly represented the largest and most defended areas of the Port of Lost Souls.

“My Lord?”

By the powerless bones of their dead Gods, how far had Xelian and the others allowed the disaster to spread while he was dead?

Asdrubael Vect stormed out of the Haemunculi chambers, and each device showing the events happening outside surpassed his most pessimistic assumptions.

He saw shipyards deprived of power colliding or straight up imploding in luminescent explosions.

He saw green rays of death shatter bridges and docks, killing millions of Dynast soldiers.

He saw battleships going down in flames and millions of slaves go on a rampage and kill their masters.

He saw Wyches of renowned standing slaughter their way to their corsair-type escorts...and fail as the Mon-keigh bombardment wiped out their bodies and sent their souls to She-Who-Thirsts.

It was a total, monumental, unrecoverable, unmitigated disaster.

It was going to take thousands of cycles to return to a fraction of the productivity the Port of Lost Souls had taken for granted before the invasion.

This was obviously very, very bad. With fewer warships, the raids to acquire more and more slaves would decrease in number. With fewer slaves, there would be more tensions as the Lords of Commorragh had to turn to other sources to sustain their usual hobbies of pain and suffering. Consequently, inter-House and inter-Cult conflicts would rise, allowing the Mon-keigh Empire and other races to grow stronger and defend better against potential raiders. And unavoidably it would result in another cycle with fewer warships...

Even the worst scenarios he had envisaged for a failure of his coup were falling short of reality. Because it was not merely the future of the still unborn Kabal of the Black Heart at stake. It was the destiny of the *Eladrith Ynneath*, which were to be known to the prey species as the *Dark Eldar*.

This was a moment of terrible and glorious change...and his race was utterly failing.

“How do we react, my Lord?” asked one of his Admirals as he stormed into the headquarters he had buried in the depths of the Hidden Blade sub-realm.

“Prepare our armies for an invasion of Low Commorragh immediately,” Asdrubael Vect tersely answered. “And close the Gates between Sec Maegra and Middle Darkness as soon as this conversation is over.”

It was not over. Oh no, the battle was not over. The Black Heart was going to let Mon-keigh, Yngir, and Dynasts slaughter each other before finishing off whoever emerged as the winner. The three Ports of the Dark City were doomed, that much was unavoidable.

“I swore a vow,” the former slave murmured. “I will rule over Commorragh.”

*Or I will make sure it perishes with my ambitions*.

He didn’t voice the second part. There were things even his followers didn’t need to know.

“Begin to recall all the forces we have left in the south-eastern region, close the portals in the Desaderian Gulf, and establish a priority communication with our favourite Incubi temples...”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Ninety hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

“That was the last wave of fighters, my Lady,” Taylor acknowledged the message before grimacing as one of the Hoplite-class destroyers guarding the *Enterprise* fell out of formation, its compartments opened and several sections of its hull burning in black flames.

Less than one minute later, after about a third of escape pods were launched, the warship of the Imperial Navy finished its extremely short career in a burning black spire. The resulting explosion removed both from existence.

“This is the sixth Hoplite-class we have lost,” and all the others were damaged to varying degrees.

“It can’t be helped,” Wolfgang told her. “The reason they are a target of choice for the pirates is because they are able to massacre every counterattack attempt of their bombers in a few seconds. Every time the Hoplites were moved to the rear to rearm, our other escorts fared considerably worse.”

The massive list of red names indicating destroyed warships fully supported this view. Every name represented tens of thousands of casualties.

The Mechanicus had lost one of their Calculus-class Light Cruisers, two out of three of their Heavy Frigates, and eleven Frigates that would no longer serve their Archmagi and their Forge-Worlds. Titan-Fleet Defensor had lost two Cobra-class Destroyers and the Lunar-class Cruiser *Counter-Retribution* had been so battered it had been towed to Pavia.

The Imperial Navy had taken the brunt of some insane weapons of twisting gravity and dark light, and three auxiliaries, one Corvette, and the Cruiser *Adamantium Prow* had been shredded by more nightmarish weapons that should not be physically possible.

One thousand and two hundred starfighters of all types had been mission-killed. Two thousand and five hundred Aeronautica and Mechanicus atmospheric fighters, but especially those belonging to the latter, had fallen for the Imperium.

The Space Marines of the Angels Sanguine Chapter were alive, but had to transfer to the Iron Drakes Battle-Barge after their Strike Cruiser *Grail of Angels* was towed back to Pavia. The Shrine-class *New Shrine* of the Frateris Templar had died valiantly defending the rear from a suicidal charge of a mercenary alien fleet. The Inquisition was going to need three replacement Frigates after their extermination of the survivors of Port Carmine.

So many deaths. So many people lost. So many men and women who had sworn to obey her orders and who had died.

God, it was hard.

“This was their last great gesture of defiance,” Gamaliel said confidently. “The xenos have lost their fighters’ launching platforms here, and certainly have to retain the survivors for the defence of the rest of their critical realms.”

“Yes,” Jeremiah Isley agreed with the tone of someone about to deliver bad news. “But given the intensity and the lack of proper tactics the Eldar used to try to stop us from destroying the infrastructure of the Port, the importance of Commorragh for these monsters has been more than confirmed. The Eldar leaders hidden in the darkness of Commorragh must have summoned all their fleets back to Commorragh the moment they realised their forces weren’t going to be sufficient to force us to retreat.”

“And they aren’t going to congratulate us for the makeover we gave their shipyards and torture-towers,” Dennis remarked with a thin smile.

Taylor snorted. Personally, she felt the fiery atmosphere was far preferable to the screams of agony and twilight which had welcomed them upon their entrance, but somehow the insect-mistress doubted the Eldar were going to share this opinion.

The Port of Lost Souls, as far as naked eye and electronics could tell, was a war-torn ruin. Thousands of black spires had been broken, or would break once whatever advanced technology keeping them in one piece failed and dragged the rotted structure into oblivion. The gigantic shipyards, so massive they would have been considered serious threats by Terra and Mars, were burning or destroyed.

Blue, black and red flames were fed by a never-ending supply of bodies, strange fuel, and thousands of types of industrial waste.

Thousands of hull carcasses were providing an artificial asteroid bombardment, generating more disasters and extensive, massive damage.

“Lord Custodes, is the destruction unleashed on the Port of Lost Souls sufficient to meet the goals of Objective A?”

Objective A called for the destruction of the maximum amount of Eldar space infrastructure. The Emperor had ordered that the galactic-wide raids of these psychopathic aliens had to be stopped, and the easiest way to achieve it was to burn the Port of Lost Souls, Port Carmine, and Port Shard.

Since the Necron fleet had thrown the equivalent of several of the Imperium’s heavy Nova cannons’ bombardments at Port Shard, nothing bigger than a shuttle was going to be built in those shipyards anytime soon.

“It is,” the golden-armoured giant replied from the corner where he’d waited, a silent but eternally vigilant menace with his shield and spear.

Note to self: if she ever met the Emperor in person, ask for his permission to station Ancient Pierre and a few other Dreadnoughts in the Custodes Headquarters. It would certainly be an ‘interesting’ experience for all involved.

“Deploy the Lightning-dragonflies and the Bard-cicadas on the intact shipyard in front of us. My insects will keep the xenos busy until we have captured the slave market.”

These were two breeds she had only a limited number of and their reproduction methods were...complicated, but Taylor needed them now.

“Marshal Groener!”

“Yes, General!” The Cadian Marshal advanced and saluted.

“It is time for the Imperial Guard to teach these xenos their behaviour is worth a death sentence. The 5th Division is to land and take the huge slave market next to the intact shipyards. And the Alamo 4th Penal Legion will form the core of the first wave.”

As much as she didn’t want to kill more of her troops, it was for casualty-heavy missions like this one the Penal Legions were created.

“Tell Major-General Wellington the attack must break through, whatever the cost. The rest of the 1st Field Army will be deployed behind him. If it turns into a battle of attrition, the xenos will win.” The female parahuman touched another rune-button and the hololithic representation of the commander of the 3rd Skitarii Legion, Archmagos Dominus Mu-Sever-400101, appeared in all his glory of metal and mechadendrites.

“The Legion stands ready to fulfil the grand design of the Omnissiah, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” the Adept of Ryza spoke in a voice of pistons, alloys, and hissing team.

“All coherent military resistance in the rest of the Port of Lost Souls is gone, Archmagos,” Taylor began, already regretting the order she was going to give before the words had passed her lips. “Pillage and find every piece of archeotech the treacherous monsters have stolen from humanity. If your Skitarii Maniples can save human slaves without significant casualties, they have my blessing to do so.”

The commander of Army Group Caribbean saw more black spires fall into the abyss below Commorragh.

“Kill every Eldar and xenos standing in your way.”

“Your will be done, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

If she survived this battle, Tziz promised herself she would check what the Saintly definition for ‘a little anti-piracy operation’ was. Hers had not included a general assault against one of the Alpha-class Eldar strongholds in the Webway dimension. Maybe the shocks of her capture had provoked a temporary amnesia for a few hours?

Well, now Tziz had her wits back and the temporary assessment was that her ex-target was ridiculously and gloriously insane. Commorragh was one of the rare locations, along with the Eye of Terror, where the Grand Master of the Officio never sent his agents without a super-majority of the High Twelve voting in favour of the move. That much had never been hidden to them during their Apprenticeship.

And yet, the forces of Operation Caribbean had attacked this realm of darkness and twilight.

More surprising, they were still alive after nine hours of carnage and destruction that had probably never been seen since the last Black Crusade plunged Cadia and the Sectors around the Cadian Gate into anarchy and despair.

But now the real challenge was about to begin.

Dispassionately, the woman now answering to the name of Gabriela Jordan noted the light anti-air purple and black energy blasts trying – and failing – to kill them.

A moment later, their lander crash-landed on something hard and the hatch instantly opened.

The Captain of the Alamo 4th Penal Legion jumped through the opening and killed a half-naked monster with her chainsword before shooting two Ogryn-sized abominations covered in scars and syringes in the head.

For a brief moment, Tziz saw the crowd of xenos warriors flinch at her sight. It didn’t last long, but the Assassinorum-trained Captain could almost feel the fear. These weren’t the elite forces of the Eldar. These weren’t even their average grunt. Judging by the lack of helmets and armours, the leaders of the long-ears had sent an army of conscripts and hastily-armed peasants defend this part of the Dark City.

And in the next seconds, hundreds of penal convicts rushed out of the landers. There was only one order she could possibly give.

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR! CHARGE!”

Baying and shouting the God-Emperor’s name, thousands of men and women ran to meet the enemy, and the Eldar masses answered with a charge of their own.

The Imperial Guard’s vanguard hit the xenos like a hammer, and they hit hard. The Alamo 4th Penal Legion included more than twenty thousand warriors who had been judged so violent they couldn’t be forgiven or rehabilitated anywhere other on the battlefield. Moreover, these Eldar were slow and clumsy.

A couple of seconds later, the butchery began. Chainsword in hand, Tziz cut her way through a crowd of screaming Eldar. It was against all her ideals and doctrines of attack. But her training guided her, and the goals were clear. If they were too slow, they died. And so each of her blows was intended to kill one enemy, and with each strike, a corpse was added to her tally. Lungs were shredded, bodies were decapitated, and many hearts were stabbed.

The orbital platform on which they had landed began to be coloured in blood and bodyparts. Fires spread as many pyromaniacs had managed somehow to get their hands on Flamers and charged again and again to reduce the xenos into ashes and burned corpses.

The entire atmosphere began to smell like every battlefield. And the 4th Penal Legion advanced, storming every barricade with screams to the God-Emperor and fanatical sermons shouted by the rare preacher and Commissar.

Commissar-Colonel Vulpahan was in the thick of the fighting too, though pointing out zones that weren’t plunged into total warfare was difficult enough.

But they pushed forwards, crushing skulls and dispersing the monsters in a storm of chainswords, lasers and bayonets. Wave after wave came at them, and they died one after another.

And then the enemy reinforcements stopped coming.

The last xenos conscripts died or outright fled the battlefield, only to be gunned down by their own side.

Tziz swore under her breath. Roughly four hundred metres away an entire army of crimson-armoured Eldar warriors were waiting in neat, disciplined lines, and one glance was enough for her to know that these xenos were the real challenge.

The glance she gave at her own regiment didn’t give her much hope that charging in screaming prayers was going to do any good. At least four or five thousand penal troops had died to grab this extremely short-lived victory.

They were so going to die, but orders were orders...

“I suppose a real Saint would send us some help...”

There was a loud flash and a powerful smell of ozone, and where only corpses of Eldar had lain, several gigantic centipedes were teleported in.

Immediately they charged, and the Alamo 4th screamed the battlecry of the Imperial Guard as more and more landers and transports flew over their heads to disgorge thousands of guardsmen.

The crimson armours of the Eldar brutally stopped their musical shrieks, as in the next seconds several bugs with sonic-based abilities began to blast their lines.

And in the ten next seconds, a Thunderhawk made a risky pass over their platform, delivering...a Dreadnought?

“DEATH TO THE XENOS! WITH ME BROTHERS!”

It was indeed a Dreadnought of the Adeptus Astartes, and the Venerable Ancient had a large tricorn hat certainly confiscated from the pirates of Pavia stuck to the stop of the machine.

“I AM FOUR THOUSAND YEARS OLD PENAL SCUM! WHAT IS YOUR EXCUSE FOR BEING SO SLOW?”

Needless to say, every penal convict fought harder.

Facing the pistol of a Commissar was one thing. Facing the disappointment of a Dreadnought promised to be much, much worse.

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*Aeldari of the Webway, heed my words.*

*I am Dynast Maestros Xelian, Ultimate Archon of the Red Sun.*

*Our realm is under attack.*

*By treachery and duplicity none of us could have imagined, some of our vat-grown traitors have decided to open an Ancient Gate and make an atrocity beyond words possible.*

*The Great Traitor Asdrubael Vect has opened the Eversprings Gate and now an abominable alliance of Yngir and Mon-keigh are assaulting the Port of Lost Souls.*

*I repeat, the metallic abominations and the brutes are fighting their way through the Port of Lost Souls as I speak.*

*Acting under my personal authority as Dynast of Commorragh, I decree a Khaine-Dandra alert to all Aeldari able and willing to fight.*

*Port Carmine has already been ravaged, and Port Shard has suffered heavily under very destructive bombardments. The enemy is now launching boarding parties to gain footholds over the surviving shipyards and fortresses.*

*This is no mere raid force. The Mon-keigh and Yngir want to conquer Commorragh and use it as a fortified base to track and destroy all our achievements and forces.*

*To all fleets and armies of Commorragh, you are hereby recalled to defend Commorragh.*

*Raids, vendettas and vengeance campaigns will have no importance if our home falls to the pillaging brutes and their lesser servants.*

*We are Aeldari. We can’t afford to lose the Heart of the Webway.*

*This is a Khaine-Dandra alert to all Aeldari warriors. Commorragh is under attack...*

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**Segmentum Obscurus**

**Scelus Sector**

**Craftworld Ulthwé**

**Ninety hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Farseer Eldrad Ulthran**

There had been over seven thousand possible disastrous outcomes Eldrad had imagined that could negatively impact the future of the Asuryani across this vast and luminous galaxy.

It was particularly galling a decisive attack on Commorragh was not one of them.

The humans...no, let’s put the blame where it belonged. The Great Liar and the Human Emperor had blindsided him, but the latter had decided the Aeldari could be sacrificed as a stepping stone in his long war against the Primordial Annihilator.

This was a very worrying sign. If the most powerful Seer of the younger race had let it be known that the Asuryani and all their cousins were to be purged wherever they were found, the Craftworlds were all in danger.

This had been the worst scenario he had been thinking about when the Yngir’s slaves began to appear in his visions.

And suddenly, the attack on Commorragh, that he had predicted to stop in the flames of the Port of Lost Souls, was no longer so idiotic in its scope.

The first-reaction fleets of Commorragh had perished in the inferno.

Across the galaxy, thousands of Farseers were waking up from sleep or meditation screaming, as the deaths of billions of Drukhari were reflected in the Empyrean.

“What game are the Mon-keigh brutes playing?” Farseer Anathroelle Starseeker had never been the greatest supporter of Eldar-Human cooperation, and evidently the events of the last cycle had not improved her opinion. “They ally with the Yngir’s soulless killers and kill billions of Drukhari! It is a provocation against all Aeldari!”

Eldrad did not like where this debate was going, and decided to stop it before it caused more damage.

“No. It is a provocation, but the target is She-Who-Thirsts.”

Starseeker opened her mouth to utter a vicious retort, but she closed it silently as she explored the threads and seriously considered the potential of killing so many Drukhari in a single battle.

“The Mon-keigh Seer has lost its mind,” a younger female Farseer Eldrad had not met in these halls before murmured. “She-Who-Thirsts is many things, but it is not sane and reasonable. Billions of souls in pain and suffering are feeding it at every moment in Commorragh and all the surrounding sub-realms. If our Doom is denied...”

It was not a bad description, Eldrad recognised. But it underestimated the magnitude of the plan. Entities like She-Who-Thirsts were feeding in the past, present, and future. It was in many ways unfair, but the Sea of Souls had no concept of time.

In this scenario, the balance of benefits and drawbacks changed. Thanks to the Shadowpoint, the attack on Commorragh was very much the ‘present’, and everything in the Warp after it would be subjected to its bloody results.

Eldrad had seen an uncountable number of futures where Commorragh and the Port of Lost Souls were allowed to grow out of control, expanding until they became larger than vast areas of space. If She-Who-Thirsts had tried to tap into these souls – and Eldrad was not going to bet the contrary – essential elements of the abomination’s power were at risk.

Billions, no trillions of souls, a never-ending amount of negative emotions fuelled by the most odious tortures and cruel punishments ever imagined by the sadistic minds of the Drukhari...all of it was going to vanish.

The future would be unwritten in the pyres of Commorragh.

The blow and the disjunction were going to be terrible.

Eldrad could already see the warning pulses and the rising cataclysm explosion coming.

No wonder the lone Seer trapped on his golden prison had accepted the risk.

This was going to change...everything.

“What are your orders, Honoured Farseer?”

“We seal each and every Webway Gate of importance, we warn our allies to prepare for the rising disaster, and we empower all our greatest psychic protections. There is going to be a Fall-level Disjunction at Commorragh, and we are going to be on the frontlines to experience it.”

Few Asuryani bothered studying the position in realspace where the sub-realms of the Drukhari were located. Eldrad had studied them, unlike many.

But it made perfect sense that Commorragh, for all its exits and main arteries, was situated in the depths below the region the humans called the Cadian Gate.

“Convince the Farseers of the Craftworlds we are not allied to that it is absolutely vital they ignore the calls of Xelian and his lieutenants. Any force the Asuryani will send to Commorragh is going to be devoured in the cataclysm to come.”

When Farseer Anathroelle Starseeker cleared her throat again fifty heartbeats later, he didn’t need to explore the future threads to know there was a major obstruction in the preparations.

“Biel-Tan is marching to war.”

It had been a long, long time since Eldrad had felt such a tide of dread trying to submerge his heart.

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Mumbai Sector**

**Pradesh**

**Ninety hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Colonel Raj Nagaraj**

One of the first things an officer of the Imperial Guard learned was that there was nothing more displeasing to the eyes of His Most Holy Majesty and the High Lords than to lose one of the worlds they were ordered to defend.

Raj Nagaraj was, to his great sorrow, the commanding officer who was going to lose Pradesh.

One might argue that it was not his fault. When the Pradesh Liberation Force had been organised, Raj was a Captain and so far down the hierarchy the very idea of him being in command of something more than a regiment or two had been laughable.

This had been before the squadrons in orbit had been massacred by an Eldar Battlefleet no one had seen coming, Pradesh High Command was murdered by perfidious xenos assassins, and one by one the regiments of the Imperial Guard were slaughtered by a storm of Eldar flyers and devastating tank-sniper combinations.

The good news was that the risk of him ever facing a court-martial was literally nonexistent at this point, judging by the colossal army of Eldar advancing on the Delhi plains.

He had thirty thousand-plus men, an armoured reserve of one hundred Russ, fifty stationary Earthshaker cannons, and an old fortress which had probably been state of the art when the Primarchs walked by the side of the God-Emperor.

The enemy had, according to the last figures provided by the command centre’s cogitators, mobilised some twenty-three thousand soldiers, but these were Eldar, and they had a lot of witches and other horrible sorcery to kill the men of the Mumbai Sector. They had also five large blasphemous machines of war which looked like the smaller versions of the Mechanicus’ Titan God-Engines.

“Well, at least it’s going to be quick,” the Colonel told the Commissar next to him. In a less desperate situation, Raj Nagaraj wouldn’t have risked it, as this would have been too close to a defeatist affirmation.

As things stood now though, the Grand Pradesh Liberation Force – or what was left of it – was about to be slaughtered. The white-green armoured xenos had proved during this campaign on countless occasions that the concept of taking prisoners had never been one they entertained. Soldiers and civilians were slaughtered all the same.

According to the rare data-files he had been authorised to read, they were facing the forces of an Eldar sub-faction called ‘Craftworld Biel-Tan’. One the Imperial tacticians of Tempestus had nicely and accurately described as ‘bloodthirsty anti-human warmongers’.

Raj had no problem believing it. Several times he and his officers in their series of retreats had been able to watch vids of tall Eldar gunning down children barely old enough to walk...and their cruel laughter as they did so had convinced him more than any sermon that the Eldar had to be exterminated from this galaxy. The less said about what they did to babes too young to speak and to old men unable to run away in time, the better.

“If they didn’t have those blasphemous giant machines, I would propose to get out of these walls and try an armoured flanking attack,” Raj said to the political officer. It would be utter suicide of course, given the complete aerial superiority enjoyed by the enemy. Their last Thunderbolt had been shot down two days ago.

“I would commend your fighting spirit,” everybody knew Commissars didn’t voice jokes, but this comment was as close to as it was possible to be. “But I’m afraid that they have those blasphemous witch-engines, and thus the point is moot.”

Horns rang in the distance. The treacherous Eldar shouted many belligerent encouragements and the sound of weapons being drawn from their scabbards was repeated a thousand times.

“I think Contingency Bakka-Two is our best bet,” the last Colonel of Pradesh said at last, watching the green, white, red and yellow ranks of the enemy vanishing and reappearing like extremely fast flashes over the battlefield.

“I am going to give the orders,” his last flag lieutenant saluted and rushed out of the command post.

“Let’s begin to fire the Earthshaker cannons. No need to save ammunition now.”

The xenos horns blared again. But this time there was a different sonority. It was not the sound they had heard so many times when Imperial forces fled for their lives. It sounded more...urgent. Urgent and angry.

“By the God-Emperor...”

The fighters and flying tanks were the first to turn around and disappear from the Delhi plains. But three or four seconds later, the infantry was boarding what had to be the xenos equivalent of flying transports.

One minute later, there were no more enemies in sight, nor ever an indication they had ever been there.

“Gone. They are...gone, just like that.”

“Colonel! Priority communication from High Command! The Eldar forces are retreating on all Sector fronts!”

Raj Nagaraj looked in the eyes of the Commissar and saw the same lack of understanding. Not that he was going to complain about being granted a reprieve and survival...but why?

The xenos had been on the verge of total victory on this planet and the entire theatre.

Why had they chosen to retreat at the decisive climax of the campaign?

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Craftworld Biel-Tan**

**Ninety hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren**

“You are going to do WHAT?”

It should be noted that Filgonilth had seen some mad decisions been made by the High Farseers and the High Autarchs ruling his Craftworld.

Plenty of their orders couldn’t be said to have a trace of realism in them. And be it in hundreds or thousands of cycles, the future always mocked the Asuryani trying to guide their people to a ‘brighter’ future. Maiden Worlds won in triumphant victories had to be fought over in long and costly wars as a long-thought beaten enemy returned to take its vengeance. New fleets were built and launched into the stars, only to be ravaged in an endless series of space battles. Supplies of spirit stones which should have lasted for millions of cycles on a peaceful path were now consumed like dry leaves in a blazing fire.

The High Farseers and High Autarchs were killing Biel-Tan, one Asuryani soul at a time. And without the Goddess Isha to smile on them, the fertility of an Asuryani couple was low at best. Too many halls of the Craftworld had not welcomed the presence of a single new life for hundreds of cycles, and this vicious cycle was getting worse.

Until this cycle, Filgonilth Sirethmoren had mourned but decided the course taken was slow and would allow him to try to spread his message to the young generations. Biel-Tan was still powerful and intact; it was not going to fall to their traditional enemies because of a few defeats.

These plans were now in ashes, and as the future unravelled and the visions of disaster multiplied by the millions, the old Farseer could very well see the end coming for his home and their entire culture.

An end they completely deserved, it had to be said.

“The Mon-keigh abomination calling itself Weaver has gone too far. An attack against Commorragh is an attack against all Aeldari...”

“WHY?” It was a huge loss of control on his part, but this absurdity couldn’t stand. “Those damned Dark Ones are certainly no Asuryani, and they certainly do not fight for anything we believe in! By Isha and Lileath, their thrice-damned Incubi are breaking our spirit stones and revel in the act! Each of their actions, every torture, every perversion...they feed She-Who-Thirsts!”

A shiver went through the assembly of Farseers, and three younger representatives had the good grace to look ashamed. The others glared at him. Old and arrogant, they did not like to be reminded of one of the major points where their delusions couldn’t be ignored.

“You are out of order, *Farseer*,” High Farseer Machdavar replied, his blue-silver cloak matching a perfect complement to his blue-green helmet and the many, many protective runes weaved on his silver armour and his green command-focus sceptre. “The revival of the Aeldari Empire is at risk!”

“Yes!” Filgonilth hotly retorted. In a second, half of the assembly was in shock at his surprising answer. “The Aeldari Empire IS Commorragh! The Drukhari are the survivors of the Aeldari Empire! Are you so blind and ignorant you fail to recognise this fact, *High Farseer*? It was an Empire so depraved and so hideous it was swallowed whole by its own stupidity! And you want a revival? You want to make common cause with those monsters?”

“ENOUGH!” The High Farseer screamed, evidently not appreciating a few of the unpalatable truths his decisions had glossed over in the last hundreds of cycles being thrown in his face. “The decision has been taken and YOU are not a member of the High Council! You have no rights to challenge our decisions!”

“No right?” Had they descended so far that greenskins could laugh at them for their obvious stupidity? “You want to involve yourself in a third battle against an opponent who has already humiliated the armies of this Craftworld twice and has certainly not grown any less powerful, in case the news from Commorragh hasn’t enlightened you! And you want to give this human a third opportunity to hand us another defeat?”

“The forces defeated were small and not the true Swordwind! This time we are recalling all our principal forces from Fronts Diamond, Opal, Amethyst, Sapphire...” the list went on and on, and the old Farseer paled. This was four out of ten of every Asuryani currently mobilised in their armies and their fleets! “...and we will have the full support of Kher-Ys, Arach-Qin, and Nacretimeï. So you see, our victory is not only unavoidable, but we are going to inflict a punishment to these insolent primates so terrifying that they will remember it until their pathetic Empire crumbles to dust.”

Filgonilth had no more words for this insanity. Four Craftworlds. They had convinced four Craftworlds to go to their final doom, and given the instability reigning at Commorragh and the psychic pressure mounting around this pit of violence and savagery, every spirit stone would be impossible to recover and the Asuryani souls would be devoured by She-Who-Thirsts...or worse.

“Oh, and for your uncountable breaches of protocol, you are banished from Biel-Tan, Filgonilth.”

The elderly male turned away without a further word. He had to begin the evacuation of his supporters to Malan’tai while there was still time.

And Machdavar was going to lead the Swordwind to Commorragh. Many of the High Council went with him. Maybe once they suffered the very disaster he had predicted, some of the survivors would wake up and realise where their arrogance had led them.

Maybe.

**Acacia Expanse**

**Approximately sixty-one light-years from the Pavia System**

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

**Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr**

Nine times out of ten, Forgefather N’Varr was the member of the Pantheon Council whose enthusiasm had to be restrained by the Captains and their Chapter Master.

The Salamander had never let it go to his head. By its very nature, the Sacred Quest he had sworn to continue until triumph was achieved or death took him was extremely difficult, and great risks awaited the forces of the Salamanders which would go with him on every mission.

It was quite an ironic turn of events that two Artefacts of their great gene-sire were at stake and Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn was the most unreasonable Space Marine aboard the Rescue Fleet.

“How long until our translation into the Pavia System?” the Regent of Nocturne asked for the fifth time in the last hour.

N’Varr’s lips twitched and he gave his superior a semi-disapproving stared.

The answer had not changed in the last ten minutes. It would take at least five hours to reach the Mandeville point they had been given the coordinates of, and likely five more hours to reach the Webway Gate. And twenty minutes would be spent in transit from Pavia to Commorragh.

All in all, the Salamanders were still some eleven standard hours away from what might possibly be the most important battle of their Chapter’s existence.

“I apologise, brother,” Ta’Phor spoke with a softer voice after a couple of seconds. “My patience is failing me today.”

“I fear you’re not the only one, brother,” the Forgefather lightly commented and after exchanging stern expressions, the two sons of Vulkan chuckled.

The capture of the *Forgehammer* and Captain Phoecus’ 2nd Company had inflamed the hearts of every Salamander, and every brother of Nocturne who could possibly answer in time had expedited their duties and urged crew and Navigators to sail towards the Desaderian Gulf at maximum speed.

At best, they would have reached the place where the Strike Cruiser had been captured in five days, and there was no guarantee they would even be able to do more than hold a mourning vigil for the fallen. The Eldar scum were not in a habit of leaving their Gates open for Imperial invasion forces.

The announcement that the *Forgehammer* was free and fighting, and that allied forces were fighting in the Port of Lost Souls...the Chapter Master had to order the Captain of the 7th Company to stay and assume the duties of Nocturne’s defence until their return. Otherwise all the Salamanders Chapter Companies – and maybe a significant percentage of the Nocturne PDF – would have been committed, and damn the reserves.

The revelation that the *Gauntlet of the Forge* and the *Obsidian Chariot* had been found...well, let’s just say that none of his brothers were lacking in motivation and ardour.

“Good,” Ta’Phor Hezonn replied. “According to the latest astropathic response, my orders have managed to light a smith’s fire under the fat backsides of certain Lord Admirals. Two flotillas of destroyers are on their way to reinforce us at Pavia. This should give us between sixteen and twenty destroyers to guard our flanks when we begin to fight our way into the Webway.”

Vulkan N’Varr – traditionally every Forgefather relinquished his name to accept that of the Primarch the day he swore to dedicate his life to the Quest – nodded in agreement, but there was unfortunately a problem that wouldn’t be solved by destroyers.

“I would be more satisfied if we had carriers too,” he said frankly. “Every report of Librarian Hestion insists that the xenos scum are throwing tens of thousands of fighters and light craft to overwhelm our allies. And for all our might, this fleet was not assembled to fight fighters in such numbers.”

The Salamanders Rescue fleet was powerful, more powerful in fact than certain authorities of the Imperium would feel comfortable with, knowing the Regent of Prometheus was in command. It included the Battle-Barge *Vulkan’s Wrath*, the three Strike Cruisers *Ashmaster*, *Defender of Nocturne*, and *Black Dragon*, as well as the core of the 1st and 3rd Companies supported by elements of the 4th and the 5th.

These three hundred-plus Space Marines were reinforced by their cousins of the Howling Griffons, as the two forces had been purging heretics in the same campaign when the *Forgehammer* sent its distress call. One hundred and ten battle-brothers had been generously volunteered with two Strike Cruisers, the *Oath of Mancora* and the *Griffon Founding*. The Ultramarines-descended Silver Skulls had joined them for this honourable rescue, adding eighty-plus Space Marines and two of their Strike Cruisers, the *Dread Argent* and the *Silver Banner*.

But the greatest source of reinforcement had come from a very unexpected source. It seemed the fact so many Mechanicus ships were fighting for their lives at Commorragh had convinced a Lord of Mars to answer the reinforcement pleas of Nocturne.

Forgefather N’Varr couldn’t say he trusted all the motives which had led Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl to Nocturne, but the high-ranked Adept had come with an Ark Mechanicus of impressive size, the *Iron Revenant*, the Apocalypse-class Battleship *Valiant Machine*, and the Victory-class Battleship *Guardian of Forges*.

It was a battleline short on carriers, but considering the impressive – and exotic – armament one took for granted when the subject of discussion was the Adeptus Mechanicus, the Eldar pirates were not going to enjoy the experience before the macro-cannons and other super-batteries reduced them to ashes.

“We are going to have to fight without them,” the Chapter Master affirmed in a tone which didn’t allow any debate. “The closest Navy Battlegroup is some seventy hours away; most thought attacking the pirate bases of Pavia straight on were nothing but a vast elaborate suicide.”

Evidently, they had been wrong and some people were going to have their careers...changed. And the former Captain did not think promotions were going to be what Segmentum Command had in mind.

“There is a Flesh Tearers Strike Cruiser not too far behind us,” the Regent of Nocturne continued. “And we have sent a priority call with every Astropath we have, so it’s entirely possible there are forces coming we aren’t aware of. The Master Navigator informed me the storms are getting stronger in the Warp.”

“With this fleet, we will prevail.” They had to. For Vulkan. “Into the fires of battle...”

“...unto the anvil of war.”

\*\*\*\*

*Cousins!*

*The foul scheme of the eternally-cursed Eldar pirates has backfired on them! A great expeditionary force of loyal Imperial forces is fighting its way through the defences of Commorragh as we speak!*

*Yes, cousins. For the first time in the history of the Imperium, the opportunity to invade the lair of the perfidious long-ears has been given to us.*

*We can’t let an opportunity like this one pass. In accordance with the directives of our Primarch Vulkan and the former directives written during the Great Crusade, I, Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn, Regent of Nocturne, declare that a Case Spartacus exists.*

*Under my authority as Regent of Prometheus and Adeptus Astartes Chapter Master, I call every Space Marine in the regions of the Desaderian Gulf, Acacia Expanse, Myrmidon Cluster and Cobra Stars to converge on the Pavia System and use the Webway Gate under Imperial control there to invade the Dark City of Commorragh.*

*We at last have the chance to correct the error of the Great Crusade and exterminate these torturer scum, cousins. We can’t let it slip through our fingers. Billions of xenos heads are awaiting bolter rounds between their eyes, and in Vulkan’s name, we will start a fire they will be unable to extinguish for the rest of their tainted lives.*

*I will await you on top of the burning spires of Commorragh, or by the Emperor’s side.*

*Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn, Regent of Nocturne*

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**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

**Eighty-eight hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

Aeonid had fought his way across hundreds of xenos worlds, and he had long since arrived at the conclusion that the non-human life forms were like humanity in one aspect: there were beautiful settlements and ugly cities for every species.

But now that he had entered Commorragh, the temptation to amend his opinion was high. The Dark City of the Webway was, without any exaggeration, an abomination and only one level above the bloody altars that Horus and his treacherous dogs had erected in their daemonic campaigns against the worlds of the Emperor.

Everything Macragge and the Five Hundred Worlds had strived for had no place here. After seeing so much evil in his career, Aeonid Thiel was rather prudent with the word, but evil was indeed the only appropriate term for what the depraved monsters reigning over Commorragh did to humans and every other race they enslaved.

Everything in this realm of twilight and shadows was horrible and disgusting. The layout of the streets and alleys was tortured, erratic, and had no tactical or strategic reason to exist. A few hours of observation, and he could tell even the forces ruling over Commorragh had difficulties navigating this labyrinth. Spikes, poisonous barbs and toxic plants were everywhere. The cruellest instruments of torture were sold at every street corner, and slave overseers used them against the unending columns of prisoners they led from the factories to the torture chambers. It was an atmosphere of chaotic violence and bloody vengeance. It was the lair of a race which considered light aerial bombardment over residential slave zones to be something perfectly acceptable.

Under the feeble light of shrouded suns, there were hundreds of thousands of people screaming in terrible symphonies. This part of the sub-realm may technically be a fortress with its immense black walls, starscraper-high defence towers, and massive formations of Night Lords-shade armoured warriors, but it was a gigantic kingdom of torture, poison and depravity.

And yet, there was a visible sign something out of the ordinary was happening.

Alley after alley, Aeonid had watched as the equivalent of Eldar sergeants press-ganged low-level Eldar and xenos outlaws, donned them in midnight-blue armours, pushed common splinter weapons into their hands, and forced them to march in a parody of military formations.

The massive macro-batteries on top of the walls were activated one by one. Many Eldar wearing black armours and a symbol akin to a fractured heart were openly murdered by elite kill-teams.

The signs were unmistakeable. War had come to Commorragh, and it was a threat sufficiently dangerous for the torturers-in-chief to mobilise a large tide of tens of thousands of warriors, who like a torrent were pushed towards tunnels the size of the Lion Gate.

The Ultramarines Captain had to steel himself several times to not begin a campaign of sabotage there and then. It would no doubt facilitate the task of potential allies – assuming the Imperium was responsible for this agitation – but he was only one Space Marine, and he could not fight against the hosts of Commorragh alone.

So he observed and stayed in the shadows, bypassing many defences where recently-conscripted Eldar listened to veteran guards and were told basic war tactics.

The deeper he descended into the entrails of this pit of pain and cruelty, the less he had to hide, but the encounters were far more dangerous too. There were some of the creatures called Mandrakes living in the shadows, psychopathic drug-addicted monsters whose race of birth was impossible to guess, half-naked Eldar in search of skulls and murder, beast-daemons, and fiends he didn’t want to put a name upon or think about for too long.

Several times he had to stop and ‘interrogate’ the prison-wardens of this underground city. Most were extremely uncooperative and were eliminated in less than five seconds, thrown into some boiling substances, acid baths, or predator-filled pools. Others were more useful, and received a relatively clean death.

Aeonid estimated it took him three hours to locate and reach the location hinted at by the murder-clown.

It was an antiquated prison cell with energy fields and the thousands of torture devices the sick freaks considered normal. The ten xenos guarding it were not exactly vigilant, and eight out of ten died before drawing a weapon. The last two were pushed on to sorcerous things burning in dark flames and quickly regretted not having suffered the same fate as the first fallen.

Deactivating shields and torture traps by the dozens, the Calth survivor hoped whatever afterlife awaited the clown was painful and terrible.

The prisoner had been tortured for a long time, and it had included mutilations, poisons, and several awful devices inserted into his flesh.

And yet the chained Space Marine slightly opened his eyes when the prison door opened.

His power armour had been cut apart piece after piece until practically nothing remained, but the pauldrons had been stuck to the wall, perhaps in another ugly joke only these dark creatures understood.

The white had almost disappeared under the blood and excrements, but the red lightning was still visible.

The prisoner was indeed a son of the Khan, a battle-brother of the White Scars.

“Brother...” the voice was weak and horribly abused. “Brother...you...came.”

Aeonid crushed two of the devices pumping poison into the Space Marine’s veins, internally wincing as the damage was assessed by his transhuman eyes.

“Don’t worry, brother,” the veteran Captain said quietly. “I am going to get you out of here...”

A weak cough slipped from the lips of the prisoner.

“It...is...too...late...the...sun...I...feel...light...light is coming.”

Aeonid held the other Space Marine, fervently wishing there was anything he could do to restore the health of the other Astartes, but he found nothing. He was not an Apothecary, but in the unlikely case he managed to find one in the next five seconds the enormity of the task was enough to make him cringe. The skin of the Space Marine was an enormous patchwork of scars, and not of the Chogoris ritual kind. Enormous lacerations and injuries could be seen everywhere, and there were hints the torturers had removed some organs to increase the suffering of their victim.

In hindsight, he had really killed the xenos far too quickly.

“The Primarch...the Elda-nesh...Black...Gate...save...the...Primarch...”

The breaths went erratic and at long last, an old warrior died with a smile on his lips.

Aeonid Thiel closed the eyes of the son of the Khan gently.

“You will be avenged, brother.” The Eldar torturers had accumulated a large debt, and it was going to be paid in full today. “For the Khan and for the Emperor.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port Shard**

**Eighty-eight hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Destruction-Overlord Sitkah**

If the Aeldari had fought like this during the War in Heaven, the Dynasties would have crushed them in the time it took them to go from the core of the galaxy to the rim. It was...impressive...in the aspect of ridiculousness anyway.

Some of the Drukhari went to war half-naked or with armours which were obviously not fit to protect anything save the arrogance of their hereditary enemies. There were castes which unleashed beasts and flesh-constructs in front of their ranks. Sitkah was not sure about their purpose: did they think the Necron phalanxes had something to fear from a venomous bite?

These weren’t the only troubling points the representative of the Glorious Phaerakh Neferten was going to study once this battle was over, far from it. There were species of winged Eldar – another of their awful mutations no doubt – trying to execute surprise attacks from above, when her ranks of mighty Obelisks and the Doom Scythes provided an anti-air barrage going through their armours as if they didn’t exist. More than seven out of ten Drukhari were armed with splinter weaponry. Splinter Weaponry! The noble metal the phalanxes had been bio-transferred into had never been vulnerable to this type of primitive ammunition. Against a heavily armoured opponent – and the humans fighting in the Port of Lost Souls had proved they had heavy armour equipping the Space Marines – practically the entire utilised arsenal of the long-ears was worse than useless.

Yes, it was undoubtedly very effective against naked people you had enslaved in the multitude of prisons the dark vermin built all over Commorragh, but against real opponents, it was disastrously weak and ineffective.

Sitkah didn’t need to run her engrams for a long period to know that one of the hypotheses she had formulated was confirmed: the Drukhari had not fought the Necrons in the last million years, or if they had, they had no one who remembered it.

“Deploy the Doomsday Arks,” the Overlord ordered to her First Nemesor. “The Drukhari are unable to contest our superiority in the air or on the ground. Their counterattacks are so weak I am ashamed they share some physical similarities with the Aeldari.”

“And there isn’t a single Seer or Warlock in their ranks,” added the Third Nemesor. “The thief’s information was right: the way they destroyed their Empire prevents them from using their Warp-fuelled abilities.”

“Their greatest advantage against the phalanxes is no more,” the Chrono-Cryptek chosen by the Phaerakh to accompany her agreed. “I have detected no sign of the nano-shredders, anti-Necrodermis shells, ultra-pulsars, or psychic curses which were common during the last days of the War. Is it really necessary to send the second wave of Immortals?”

“Yes, it is,” Sitkah replied curtly. “There have been little reinforcements since the humans began their ground assault at the Port of Lost Souls. But the communications of the Drukhari have been multiplied by twenty times. What scenario does it suggest?”

“They are waiting for their reinforcements,” the First Nemesor proposed. “They are stalling for time. And they must be waiting for the equivalent of many, many fleets; otherwise we would already be in the process of slaughtering them.”

“And they will likely arrive through the Port of Lost Souls,” the Necron commander of the Commorragh expedition added. “We can’t let our troops be delayed here when our allies may be under attack soon.”

The Destruction-Overlord contemplated the battlefield. She watched as lines of Warriors and Immortals decimated the silver-black armours of the Dynasty of the White Sun. She internally smiled as the Obelisks blasted thousands of light aircraft with their Spheres. There were so many kills the skies of Port Shard were burning green.

“Send in the second wave. Destroy the shipyards and their elite troops.”

Two point five seconds after the last word of her command was uttered, a phalanx of one million five hundred thousand Necron Warriors, supported by one thousand five hundred Immortals, was teleported on the frontlines of Port Shard.

At their sides were three hundred war machines, each of them a match for a thousand of the torture-devices the Drukhari opposed them with.

The Necron lines of the Nerushlatset Dynasty opened fire, and the Kraillach banners fell everywhere. Half-clad females and beast-tamers ran to meet the ancient phalanxes, realising their last chance of survival lay in combat at close-quarters now.

“Prepare the weapons of our battleships for a concentrated bombardment of the fuel and ammunition depots.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Eighty-seven hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Marshal Werner Groener**

When his commanding officer had told him she had studied past military history tactics to justify some of her moves, Werner had not opened his mouth to question her.

Now he regretted it. Where in the name of the God-Emperor did the female General find some of her ideas? The Cadian Marshal frequently read the issues of Tactica Imperialis and other strategic-oriented papers for high-ranked officers.

But if a Lord Commander Militant somewhere had said the correct disposition of artillery regiments was side by side, with barely enough space for the guardsmen to manoeuvre between the cannons, Werner had not been informed of it.

It was dangerous. Air strikes on their positions would cause a massacre of flesh and metal. It was as unsubtle as it was possible to be. More than ten thousand artillery pieces, including Basilisks, Manticores, Medusas, Colossus Bombards, and Griffons were lined up like on a parade ground in three lines. But it was not a parade ground. This was a corpse-filled battlefield, and the 5th Division had paid in blood, tears, and insane losses to clear it up.

All that counted at the moment was that the artillery was in position. Three hundred-plus artillery pieces per kilometre had been emplaced on every line with a rapidity and a celerity that would have been considered miraculous by any General.

Here in the burning inferno of Commorragh, it was considered the new norm. The slow and the incompetent guardsmen died. Only those who adapted and fought back lived.

“OPEN FIRE!” Lord Commissar Zuhev shouted. And the artillery of the Imperial Guard obeyed.

The 5th Division had been devastated to clear the landing zone necessary for the artillery emplacements. Major-General Leonard Wellington had been torn apart in his Salamander Command Vehicle leading a counter-charge against a battery of xenos guns spitting acid and dark light weaponry. Brigadier-General Tchavoksky of Petersburg had fallen in a duel against an eight-armed monster. The Alamo 4th Penal Legion had taken a crippling 91 percent casualties. The Nyx 873rd Reconnaissance, the Claire 2nd Penitent, the Petersburg 46th Infantry, and the Abraxar 61st Raiders had lost three-quarters of their effectives. The Nyx 641st Armoured was the only regiment which could be considered near an operational status, and one-third of their pre-invasion numbers were heavily injured or corpses.

This was forty-two thousand casualties, most of them unrecoverable, to clear a beachhead.

But at this moment, the artillerists of the Imperial Guard avenged their fallen comrades.

The Earthshaker 132mm cannons thundered, and a rain of shells fell onto the massive formations of crimson armours running to murder the lines of the 2nd and 4th Divisions. The Hydra Flak Tanks, all two hundred which had been prepared in time, locked onto their targets and went into action. High velocity rounds filled the air, giving fiery and explosive deaths to the thousands of xenos pirates which had gotten too close.

The no man’s land in front of the Imperial Guard became a vision of hell. There was no cover anymore; sapper and engineering battalions, supported by liberated slaves, had collapsed everything which might serve that role and thrown the rest into the unnatural chasm below the Dark City. The line infantry and the armoured regiments were ready to intercept the xenos well before they came into range to threaten the Basilisks.

The enemy came.

It was like Cadia on a day of Black Crusade, just with long-ears.

The xenos came like a horde of the Archenemy. Screaming and shouting, their bodies half-naked or pierced by horrible devices and contraptions, it was a spectacle of heresy and horror.

The shells ravaged their ranks. The bastion-breaching ammunition, the heavy bolters and their incendiary rounds, the Volkite Calivers wielded by the Space Marines, and of course the tens of thousands of lasguns stopped the offensive dead.

The Eldar infantry continued to rush towards them, taking a rate of casualties that would have made even a bloodthirsty Lord Militant pause. Crimson, dark blue, silver-black and black armours attacked without coordination, their cohesion broken by the precise volleys of the Nyxians and all the infantry of the Guard.

The no man’s land, less and less visible because of the smoke and debris, became a nightmarish cemetery where tens of thousands of Eldar and uncountable xenos came to die. There were reptiles with four arms, dog-like creatures, strange bird-like monsters, mutants, Kroot, and many, many more species.

Commorragh, it seemed, really was an important business place for the most violent and disreputable xenos mercenary companies of the entire galaxy.

The links they had forged with the Eldar of Commorragh were going to be their deaths. Spires and footbridges broke. The bombardment continued to massacre the xenos hordes pouring from the Vileth shipyards and the large tunnel Gates leading to Utar’ragh and Zel’harst.

The counteroffensive of the enemy didn’t falter or decrease so much as it entirely stopped after close to thirty minutes of artillery punishment.

“HOLD BOMBARDMENT! HOLD BOMBARDMENT!”

A fuel depot exploded in the distance, illuminating the darkened battlefield briefly.

“Oh by the Golden Throne...”

The sections separating the shipyards from the slave markets were covered in xenos corpses. There were mountains of dead; huge piles of xenos body parts, burning remains and more things Werner didn’t want to identify.

The Eldar assault hadn’t stopped because they had feared the casualties; it had stopped because their entire wave had died.

“They must have sent hundreds of thousands into our artillery barrage...” The Cadian General almost didn’t believe it, even with the proof right in front of his eyes. By Ork standards, this was rational. By those of any other intelligent species in the galaxy, it wasn’t. The Imperial Guard’s artillery had been well-provisioned, and could not be dislodged by a suicidal infantry assault. But the Eldar had tried it. They had sacrificed the equivalent of an extremely large field army just in the hope it would be able to delay the 1st Field Army and the forces coming behind.

Truly the Eldar needed to be exterminated before their cruelty spread further among the stars.

“I think we can turn the artillery against the redoubts which protect the tunnels leading to Zel’harst, Lord Commissar.”

“I agree,” replied the grim political officer. Orders were barked, and with the calm assurance of a veteran force, gunners changed the elevation of the Earthshaker guns and began to load different types of shells. “The infantry and armour must take the Vileth shipyards. We need a larger landing zone for the Skitarii Legions and the Knights.”

Ten seconds later Zuhev shouted the order which was going to begin the next phase of the massacre.

“BEGIN THE ASSAULT! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

The artillery and the infantry had utterly broken this part of the Eldar forces. And now in a roar echoing everywhere in the Port of Lost Souls, five thousand tanks and half a million men ran to kill the xenos.

**Colonel Tom Cameron**

One day, Tom Cameron would thank the Eldar for making these large bridges over the dark chasms and acid cascades of Commorragh. One day.

For the moment, he could only grin at the sight of hundreds of Eldar running away when the perfidious xenos saw that his command Nyx-pattern Cataphract *Hammer of Pirates* was heading in their direction.

And the bridges of Commorragh were barely large enough for Cataphract use. Given that many of their horrible-looking paths had no guardrails or any form of security, the xenos were left with only a few very unpleasant options. Running away was the first – and it generally ended with the retreating soldiers shot in the head by the crimson-clad Eldar equivalents of Commissars. Otherwise the mob seemed to have figured after a few unpleasant attempts that their rifles were not really useful against the reinforced armour of a super-heavy tank, and that when running towards they were not going to be a major obstacle: Eldar mutants may be strong, but a Cataphract weighed roughly three hundred and fifty tonnes once loaded and given its full crew complement. The third option was to jump into the abyss waiting below the burning city of Commorragh. But for some reason, even the Eldar weren’t enthusiastic about that one.

“A lot of armoured regiments are far behind us now,” his vox-operator informed him. “The Russ tanks aren’t able to follow our Cataphracts, and it’s worse for the Khans.”

“We are going to find something to keep us busy waiting for them,” the Colonel of the Patton 3rd declared, showing the image of the bombastic tank commander every guardsman had in mind. “Gunners, do you see the ugly crimson hover-vehicles at eight hours coming in our direction?”

“Yes, Colonel!”

“I don’t want to.”

Three seconds later, the Battle-Lascannon of his Cataphract fired a spectacular blue beam of energy, followed by four other Cataphracts and ten Khans. Plenty of shells and lasers missed – the holo-fields of the enemy were of a new breed apparently - but there were only four targets and fifteen tanks eager to destroy the long-ears.

Two seconds later, the burning carcasses of the flying xenos transports were on their way to join the hundreds of thousands of their friends in the pyres of the Dark City.

“Good work! Continue to advance! The shipyards are close, and there are several anti-air cannons we need to destroy!”

The breakthrough had not been cheap in machines or in men. Many Jaghatai Khan Battle-Tanks and one of his precious Cataphracts were immobilised for reparations, as the ‘dark light bombs’ released by the Eldar bombers could do extremely nasty damage if they exploded too close.

But it was a breakthrough. The Eldar machines had been reduced to incinerated wrecks thanks to the Space Marines and the full armoured thrust of the 1st Army, and now they were rushing into the shipyards’ entrances, eliminating the last armoured units, gunning down the routing infantry, and buying more and more space for the rest of the Army Group and the rest of the non-Guard armies to deploy.

“These shipyards are an offense to the blessings of the Omnissiah,” the Tech-Priest assigned to the *Hammer of Pirates* voiced as the vanguard of the Patton 3rd entered the shipyard proper. For security’s sake, they had taken the paths leading to the top of the structure. That way the xenos wouldn’t be able to collapse the incomplete hulls hanging immobile onto their heads in an effort to delay their offensive. “They must be cleansed in fire.”

“No argument there,” his senior gunner muttered.

“All in good time, all in good time,” Tom promised the cogboy. Unlike the rest of the Port of Lost Souls, these shipyards hadn’t been reduced to molten debris because they were close to the tunnels of Zel’harst. And these xenos tunnel-gates had to be captured intact to continue the invasion, for some reason Lady Weaver and the higher-ups had not bothered inform him of. “We need the space for the landing zones it will give us. Once we no longer need it, I have no doubt we will give it the same fate as the rest of the xenos docks.”

And the Patton veteran would cheer with his men when it happened. The battle had lasted less than a day, but already Tom Cameron had seen things that would likely haunt him for years. As the artillery bombardment had unleashed its fury, the tank regulars had tried to help some former slaves. It had been...horrible. For every man or woman whose slave collar they were able to unlock without triggering an explosive or acidic reaction, there were ten or twelve who died in their arms.

It was not the sort of crude incompetence brought by the Munitorum or the Administratum when there weren’t enough resources on a starving continent. It was cruelty for cruelty’s sake, and it was done on a scale of billions! Merciful Emperor, how had a race so vile and monstrous managed to build and rule over the Webway?

So many crimes and monstrous deeds that made an Exterminatus look like a fate to be envied. He had seen alleys filled with impaled men and women, and those poor souls somehow were kept alive by some horrible tech-sorcery procedure.

The guardsmen of the Nyx Sector had heard sobbing released prisoners tell how sometimes they were forced to go to the torture chambers voluntarily, in order to give their loved ones one more day of clean water and food.

There had been prisons filled with dead, for the prisoners had belonged to the Guard and preferred the sweet escape of suicide to the sick games of the wardens. Children were dissected in front of their parents and vice-versa. There were gardens of plants deliberately seeded to slowly eat the slaves of the Commorragh Eldar. There were pits where humans were flayed by the thousands and the result of these procedures went to the xenos ‘clothing industry’.

Bless the God-Emperor, Master of Mankind, for bringing them here. The reign of suffering and torture of these monsters had lasted for far too long as it was. Killing the dark masters by the millions was the just and good course of action.

“Destroy the battery at ten o’clock!”

It was very, very satisfying to see the dark spire and all its defences crumble when the big lascannons had finished rupturing the shadowy pillars supporting it.

One minute later the big transports and landers of the Mechanicus were sallying forth from the bays of the capital warships. The Eldar were going to taste more of the suffering they enjoyed giving to others so much.

**Ranger-Quartus Truk-6-4**

Skitarii Rangers were relentless killers who would kill their target even if it fled into the Eye of Terror.

Everyone knew that.

As a result, Truk-6-4 was really curious to learn the logic behind his current orders. Which, for the Noosphere data-records, were to watch over a group of subpar Tech-Priests trying to find some precious archeotech in the damaged structures of the Port of Lost Souls.

The Ranger-Quartus had gone through a hundred different simulations in the time spent with the waste of mechadendrites he was overseeing, and he had concluded the chance of these Tech-Priests of minor ranks finding something more important than a M33 cog had probabilities so low they might as well not exist.

And his new Galvanic Mark III Rifle stayed in his arms, untested and with a machine-spirit undoubtedly unsatisfied.

He, Ranger-Quartus Truk-6-4, Third Caribbean Mechanicus Legion, 2nd Macroclade, 3rd War Cohort, was bored and mechanically irritable.

Many Skitarii maniples were fighting and winning great renown for their Forge-Worlds. The Fabricator-General himself, greatest servant of the Omnissiah, had his representatives in the Legions and the Twenty-Fourth Fleet. But he, lowly Skitarius Ranger of productive Ryza, was escorting a loud Questor who certainly had wasted his last processing cycles researching a new recipe of sacred lubricant.

“We have finished with this room. Follow us, Ranger-Quartus!” The Questor canted far louder than was necessary. Truk-6-4 wondered if the Tech-Priests found him as ridiculous and illogical as he did.

He obeyed, for the Motive Force and the love of the Omnissiah. But he couldn’t help but wish something interesting happened...

“AHHHHHH!” The ground under the cybernetic augmentations of the Tech-Priests...disappeared. One second later the only evidence of Tech-Priests was their binaric screams, and if Truk-6-4 did not have the cybernetic enhancements granted to each Ranger, he would have shared the fate of the Questor and his group...a fate which did not seem to be particularly pleasant, if the rising screams were any indication.

The Ryza Ranger-Quartus castigated himself for his restrained optimism. They were in Commorragh. All the traps they met were going to be lethal in nature, and the few which weren’t would somehow manage to inflict even greater suffering and pain.

The validation of his thoughts did not take long. Just the two seconds necessary to observe impalement spikes rise from the ground and watch a series of Astartes-sized beasts unleashed in the corridor the Mechanicus detachment had arrived from.

At last, Truk-6-4 fired his Galvanic Rifle and began to run towards the enemy. Two of the beasts exploded as each of his shots found their mark, but the third suddenly absorbed the bullet, somehow feeding upon the blast of electric force which should have killed it.

There was an explosion...and then he was elsewhere.

Obeying to the Omnissiah-approved Maxim ‘Don’t be afraid to resort to violence’, the Skitarius fired at the shadows surrounding him and increased his rate of fire when he saw reptilian and Eldar-shaped things assault him.

Ten seconds later, he was satisfied to see nothing save himself remained alive in the room where he had arrived via those infernal traps.

Unfortunately, the shredded red robes and disabled augmetics told Truk-6-4 the dead included the very Tech-Priests he had been ordered to protect.

This was a mission failure, and not one that could be forgotten or overlooked. Omnissiah have mercy, he was going to be demoted to Ranger-Quintus!

Desperately, he searched something, anything, which could make the Alpha Skitarii of the War Cohort forget his failure. Unfortunately, it seemed he had arrived in a sort of heretical painting room. The Eldar living here had used the location to create things with blood, corpses and metal...many things heretical and the details of a copulation scene between two xenos were of no interest to him.

There were two statues too. Heretical.

There was a cube-shaped object surrounded by purple flames. Completely heretical and he wasn’t going to touch it.

It was only when he turned back to examine the metallic remains of the Questor that he noticed the dead Tech-Priest had been crawling towards something. A curious action, since his legs had been removed by one of the dangerous shadow blades.

Kneeling, Truk-6-4 saw it was a strange box made from a deep black metal. On it was an inscription in Low Gothic.

*Han Combine #68-STMHS-DTK*

It was human archeotech...maybe. Given the surroundings, the Ryza Skitarius could not possibly dismiss the scenario of an elaborate trap engineered by the deceitful xenos.

“But if the Omnissiah smiles on my path, it may be enough to not be relegated to Ranger-Quintus...”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

**Eighty-four hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Dynast Maestros Xelian**

“Trench, am I not a reasonable and fair Dynast?”

“You are, oh magnificent and benevolent Ultimate Archon, Grand Eternal-Dynast. Your actions are a crimson example of the pinnacle of Aeldari superiority and courtesy.”

“Yes,” Maestros Xelian narrowed his eyes. “So let me ask you a question...”

And after a couple of heartbeats the Dynast of Commorragh exploded in anger.

“WHERE IS THE HEAD OF ASDRUBAEL VECT I WAS PROMISED? WHERE ARE THE HEADS OF THE MON-KEIGH VERMIN I ASKED FOR?”

It had taken an eternity of time for the Haemunculi of the Everspiral to find the antidote to the poison Vect had used, and when he had left his personal healing quarters again, it was to be greeted by the greatest spectacle of devastation ever wrought upon his domain. By Khaine and Vileth, even the Fall had not caused such a large amount of carnage and lost assets.

And so the Ultimate Archon of the Red Sun, Light of the Dark Stars, and Noble Admiral of the Night-Crimson Fleets, regarded the recently resurrected fleet commanders with hate.

“Magnanimous Dynast, we are aware our actions...”

“Don’t waste my time,” Maestros Xelian interrupted him. The very air was defiled by the presence of these defeated insects. “You lost. You were in charge of the defences of the Port while I was recovering from the wounds inflicted by the Great Traitor, and you gave the Mon-keigh brutes free reign in MY PORT!”

“It is Nothraq Xerathis’ fault! It is his fault we lost so many fleets before they could repel the talking primates!”

“And Xerathis is already punished for his defeat,” if not in the manner Maestros Xelian wished. The resurrection contingency plans of Nothraq Xerathis had been to return in a well-defended Haemunculi facility in the Port of Lost Souls, extremely safe from rival sabotage...but not so much from a battleship ramming it at high velocity.

The Admiral of Terror was in She-Who-Thirsts’ claws now. One might easily argue there was no greater punishment for one’s failures.

“Fortunately for you, I have more pressing matters to attend to,” the Dynast declared before commanding his executioners to seize the incompetent Admirals and disgraced Lords. “Impale them, and make sure they remain alive for several hundred cycles.”

Silence fell inside the Red Room. Other commanders arrived and prostrated themselves. Admirals, Succubi, and Incubi, the ones not involved in the recent disaster anyway, waited nervously. In appearance, it was as it should be. He was in one of his great spires, the decoration of the room proved the splendour, the power, and the influence of the Red Sun.

The evident holes where his servants should have prostrated before his greatness proved the crimson night was many things, but normal was not one of them.

“Bloody Baroness. How fares the battle?”

“We are getting slaughtered, Dynast,” replied the voluptuous red-haired and red-clad Succubus bitterly. “Every Wych of the Jade Dagger was killed at the very beginning of the battle, and all the Succubi, Dracites and Hekatrixes of the Red Grief have been disintegrated. The Cult of the Stilled Heart was incinerated with Port Carmine. The Cult of the Pain Eternal is locked in a death struggle with the Yngir at Port Shard. They can’t disengage.”

“That sounds suspiciously like you are about to admit you were beaten by lowly primates!” chuckled Archon-Admiral Craxis of the Broken Sigil, who had instantly vied for the post of the defunct Xerathis.

Many began to laugh too...until in a fluid swipe the Bloody Baroness decapitated Craxis with her personal Agoniser.

“It is the *human* artillery which is breaking us,” Xelian had to restrain himself to not order the death of the Succubus for uttering that word in his presence. “They are bringing more and more batteries to fire at our fortifications before the largest Utar’ragh and Zel’harst’s tunnel-gates. I am sending more and more of the flesh-fodder mercenaries into the melee, but for the moment all they’ve done is provide the enemy with more targets.”

“Then get rid of their artillery!” snarled one of the captains, who suddenly took two step backs as the leader of the Impaled sent him a glare promising ten thousand agonies.

“Do you think we have not tried?” the young-looking Wych retorted. “Hellions, Scourges and Reavers have died by the thousands in vain attempts to do exactly that. But their fleet is dominating the space above the Vileth shipyards and the Lhilitu flesh-markets. Complete aerial superiority is theirs, and as long as it stays that way, we can only delay them. Their thrice-cursed ‘Space Marines’ are eliminating our best warriors too easily, and their average soldier does not panic when it faces our less experienced recruits.”

“Many armies of your great Dynasty are engaged in large-scale battles with Asdrubael Vect in Low Commorragh, the Sprawls, and River Khaides,” Baron-Admiral Sathonyx pointed out with a sinister expression. “With your permission, I would like to recall them back and throw them against the Mon-keigh.”

“No!” Xelian shouted. “I have underestimated the perfidy and ambition of Asdrubael Vect once! Never! Never again! I want him at my mercy! I want all his resurrection chambers destroyed! I want the Everspiral torturing him until he can’t remember his name!”

“Ultimate Archon...” the Bloody Baroness licked her lips before tensing her muscles and continuing her sentence. “Millions of raiders and mercenaries are converging towards Commorragh, but we can’t afford to fight on three fronts. The Yngir will soon finish destroying Port Shard, and I don’t think the Falling Moon fleet of Xindrell Y’Polleon will arrive in time to prevent them from assaulting Zel’harst or another sub-realm. The Mon-keigh will focus on us or on the Kraillach holdings. And we have Vect raising the scum of the Dark City and stabbing us in the back.”

“I see the Cult of the Impaled will have to choose its Succubi better in the future,” Xelian shook his head in disapproval. “The Dynasty of the Red Sun has reigned over the Port of Lost Souls for millions of cycles, and I will not cede it because of your cowardice! Remove yourself from my presence Bloody Baroness, and run to mobilise the garrisons of Middle Darkness and the Abyssal Gate. Maybe these orders are not above your capacities?”

To his surprise, the Wyches behind the Succubus didn’t desert her side. Maestros Xelian smiled. It seemed a large purge of the Cult of the Impaled was in order. The arena mistresses were in dire need of being reminded of the identity of the person keeping them at the top of the food chain.

“Baron-Admiral Sathonyx!”

“Yes, High Dynast!”

“You are now in command of the forces which will crush the Mon-keigh! Storm whatever pathetic defences the vermin have landed in my Port! The Incubi will support your assault. Succeed and I will name you my Admiral of Terror. Fail and you will wish the fate I have in mind for Vect will be yours.”

“I will not fail, High Dynast. The Port of Lost Souls will be reconquered.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Eighty-three hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

“The enemy commanders are not exactly quick to learn from their mistakes,” one of the Iron Drakes mumbled before trampling a writhing Eldar under his right foot.

“I am not exactly complaining,” Agiel replied, exterminating ten of the crimson-armoured long-ears with his bolter, and listening to the inevitable laughter. “If they want to charge under an artillery barrage before meeting our bolters and blades, who are we to discourage them?”

The rulers of Commorragh had many flaws, but no one could accuse them of not understanding the stakes of this battle. They understood from the very beginning that any possible Eldar victory required keeping a foothold in the Port of Lost Souls. The Eldar space cavern was not just large, it was also a nexus of tens of thousands of Webway Gates. Give it a few hours, and the Tech-Priests would eventually find a way to close the tunnels, portals and whatever possible exits made entry into the Port of Lost Souls possible. And if that happened, the Eldar would have no choice but to activate new Gates and see what happened when their starships arrived under the fire of an Ark Mechanicus or two.

As long as the Eldar had an army in the Port of Lost Souls, pushing deeper into the dark realms of Commorragh would be extremely foolhardy. And so the Brothers of the Red and the other Astartes reinforcements helped their valiant guardsmen allies kill every long-ear trying to break cover and charge them.

“One would hope they would have learned that their ‘splinter weaponry’ isn’t exactly useful against our power armours,” one of the Iron Drakes Sergeants remarked.

“It isn’t exactly useful against the standard carapace armour Lady Weaver issued to her infantry formations, brother,” one of his companions quipped. “I’ve been helping the Nyx 514th a couple hours ago, and most of the Eldar guns were unable to pierce the ceramite.”

“These abominable devices are designed to torture and inflict suffering,” Agiel commented as a Hydra Gun shot down three more hovering devices some of the xenos used to travel across the Dark City at incredible speeds. Unfortunately for them, it had no decoys, and the anti-grav technology made sure that when it was hit, it was a guaranteed explosion. “They aren’t worth anything in a real war.”

“Speaking of real war, does Lady Weaver intend to join us? We have not seen her Death World arsenal in action and...”

The air shivered and suddenly a gigantic fortress was teleported into the middle of the Port of Lost Souls. Despite knowing the attack from the tunnels was likely a feint for something the Eldar would judge impressive in their monumental arrogance, Agiel stood flabbergasted for a second before his bolter unleashed the Emperor’s wrath on the xenos again.

No one in the Imperium had ever thought about teleporting something so big. It was too risky and most of the precious teleportariums which remained available to Mankind were limited to masses in the Land Raider ranges. There were some rumours a few Titan Legios maintained devices to move their God-Engines from orbit to ground without a transport, but even an Imperator would be small in size compared to the mass of dark spires and horrible xenos statues which had somehow arrived on the frontlines.

Of course, the Eldar did not enjoy their arrival. They were perfectly positioned to take a full starboard volley of the *El Dorado*, and the flagship of Archmagos Hediatrix was less than one hundred kilometres away by its best estimate.

It simply couldn’t miss.

Agiel Izaz had seen the Ark kill plenty of pirate warships hundreds of thousands of kilometres away. At one hundred kilometres, the dark floating fortress received an apocalyptic barrage and began to burn anew.

Immediately after, shadows and flashes of dark light appeared over the shipyards they were busy fighting over. And this time what came were not the half-naked torturers or the useless crimson armours which had come to battle the Space Marines.

“They have brought thousands of Incubi and Mandrakes,” the Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red warned the other Space Marines, recognising the obsidian power armours and the monsters for what they were. “Stand your ground, cousins. Those are going to be a real challenge.”

“FOR THE EMPEROR!”

Agiel switched to another high-priority vox frequency immediately.

“General? The enemy has committed its best forces for the counterattack. You can proceed.”

“Acknowledged,” the Basileia of Nyx replied curtly.

Five seconds later, millions of the creatures the local Eldar called ‘Helspiders’ emerged from the dark pits and the abyss.

At first the Space Marines heard many of the perfidious xenos laughing and mocking them for the torments they were about to endure.

These cruel and odious sounds ceased in the next few seconds, when they began to realise none of the eight-legged killer-insects were attacking the human regiments and formations.

Before the next minute was out, the Eldar forces began to scream in agony.

It was truly deranged that some of them were asking for more pain, not less.

Truly these Eldar were really sick freaks.

**Aurelia Malys**

The moment the enemy artillery stopped firing, Aurelia instinctively knew something terribly bad was about to happen.

The fact that their self-proclaimed ‘omniscient masters’ immediately decided to send millions of mercenaries and Dynast infantry through hundreds of Gates for what could only be a full offensive to retake the Port...it made her wary, extremely so.

“I WANT MANY PRISONERS!” roared a gigantic Homunculus who had long since surpassed all physical limitations of the Aeldari genome with thirty arm-contraptions and a height of four metres. “I WANT MILLIONS OF MON-KEIGH FOR MY EXPERIMENTS!”

The Helspider impaled him a heartbeat later.

It was a gigantic specimen, like most of the beasts the arena-masters kept in Commorragh. It was bred and built for war. The eight legs of the Helspider were blades able to pierce the toughest armour. Its fangs were more often than not covered in excruciating venom.

The Homunculus of the Dark Creed – the former slave recognised the flayed standard – emitted a shriek of pleasure-agony. And then it was utterly massacred.

None of his Coven members had the time to help him, assuming they would have – helping his or her neighbour was not something the population of Commorragh was renowned for. In less time than it took to say it, over a third of all the beasts and the large Pain Engines had turned on their creators.

It was a mass slaughter. The Beastmasters were butchered right after the Homunculi, and suddenly there were tens of thousands creatures out of control in the centre of the Aeldari army.

Aurelia didn’t hesitate and fired on the Helspiders and the rebelling animals as fast as she could with her new splinter rifle.

“By Khaine’s bloody hand...”

The exclamation made her turn her head...and inside the crimson armour she had stolen, Malys felt real fear in its full intensity.

Up and down, right and left, front and centre, an unending army of Helspiders was called to war. Not a single beast was fighting against the Mon-keigh invaders. Not a single one. They were all charging the army of Commorragh.

And if it continued like this, soon the encirclement would be complete. It did not take an Admiral’s mind to know what would follow.

“RETREAT! WE MUST RETREAT!”

The mercenary lines were pulverised quasi-instantly. Sslyth had many talents, but they were not trained to stop a horde of Helspiders ten times larger than the greatest arena massacre-spectacle.

“Stand your ground!” one of the Red Sun officers shouted. “Stand your ground and fight! We are the superior race! We are Aeldari! We will not be defeated by beasts!”

Before the Xelian sworn-blade had the time to catch his breath, his head was violently separated from his shoulders and the main body was devoured by something huge and worm-like.

The calls for retreat were heard from every throat among their section-battalion.

“RETREAT! RETREAT!”

“WITHDRAW! WITHDRAW!” a Hellion screamed. “WE CAN’T HOLD AGAINST THE HELSPIDERS! WITHDRAW! WE RETURN TO UTAR’RAGH! WITHDRAW BEFORE EVERYTHING IS LOST!”

Aurelia did not wait to obey these commands, following three Wyches of the Seventh Woe which were slaying everything in their way, be it Helspiders, beasts, or Commorragh warriors.

“KHAINE! BY KHAINE FIGHT!

“RETREAT! RETREAT! WE RETREAT TO ZEL’HARST!”

“HELSPIDERS! HELSPIDERS ON OUR FLANK!”

Like every slave, Aurelia had heard the endless assurances of the overseers that the Aeldari were the true masters of the galaxy. Every other race was natural prey and should feel honoured to partake in long sessions of suffering.

But there had been a core of black conviction under the sermons delivered after many strikes of the whips, syringes and other instruments of torture.

The armies of Commorragh never broke. The forces of the Dynasts gave untold slaughter and agony to their enemies. Every defeat, be it ever so minor, was immediately avenged in most superb cruelty and malice.

Not in this battle. Not in this war.

The armies of Commorragh broke. Hundreds of thousands of mercenaries threw down their weapons and tried to run. Discipline went from light to nonexistent. Red Sun, Blue Sun, White Sun; the banners were abandoned in the haste of the companies to flee the doom coming for them.

Half-encircled by the Helspiders, tens of thousands of warriors and conscripts like Aurelia abandoned all pretence of superiority and ran away in what could only be classified as a total rout.

And the Helspider horde continued to receive reinforcements.

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

“You know Gavreel, I think that if enough Eldar survive this day, they will make it their priority to kill all spiders wherever they live,” Sterzing spoke. “After this battle, I think the long-ears will all suffer from arachnophobia.”

“Also known in certain circles as common sense,” the former Dark Angel replied humorously. “But I completely agree with you. I think our enemies have realized that letting colonies of Helspiders live underneath their main shipyards and slave-markets may not have been their brightest idea.”

To be fair to them – not that any Dawnbreaker Guard was particularly inclined to fairness where those abominable long-ears were concerned – the Eldar had not known the powers granted to an insect-controlling parahuman were possible in the first place.

On the other hand, for once the irritating Tinker named Leet had a point. You couldn’t keep a legion of spider-like monsters near a city and then complain about unfairness when they turned against you.

“This is a massacre,” Chaplain Sidonius stated coldly. “The Eldar are at last receiving what they deserve.”

From the hangar bay of the *Enterprise*, five kilometres above the battlefield, the outcome of the battle was impossible to miss. The forces of Commorragh were trying to extricate themselves from the trap their Lady had weaved around them.

Contrary to many things done in the last hours, the Helspiders had not been included in the pre-battle war plans. The woman they were protecting had added them using her prerogatives as a General.

Judging by the massacre occurring below, Gavreel knew this move was going to enter the annals of the Imperium. First, the artillery regiments of the Guard had frustrated the counterattacks of the ‘Drukhari’, bleeding their hordes of hastily-armed slaves, Whiteshields, and cannon-fodder dry. Then when they had been truly exasperated, the bombardment had stopped, letting the arrogant long-ears send some of their best troops and a solid core of warriors into the middle of the trap. Finally, the Helspiders had been unleashed. The rest, as they said, was just a matter of watching the extermination of the slavers and their abominable creations.

One Helspider was not an opponent to take lightly. The legs were blades. The fangs were able to penetrate power armour. The bites were poisonous. The silk was often corrosive. Sometimes the Eldar had judged it a good idea to add spikes and barbs on the onyx abdomen to make them even more dangerous. And these mutated spiders could reach truly gigantic sizes.

But like it had been said, everyone was willing to bet the Eldar were really, really regretting not keeping a closer eye on the regulation of their Helspider population right now. There had to be millions of them...and Taylor Hebert had taken control of this arachnid army.

Their Lady chose this moment to raise her hand, bringing an end to the whispers and small conversations echoing around her. Her eyes did not turn away from the carnage below, though the Sergeant was rather sure most of her attention was used directing the swarm and thousands of other tasks even a Primarch would likely have been unable to manage.

“Magos, contact Archmagos Dominus Mu-Sever-400101 and inform him one of his Skitarii Rangers, designation Quartus Truk-6-4, has stumbled upon a piece of technology presenting several characteristics found in highly valuable archeotech.”

“Immediately, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

A possible STC? Truly? At this rate, the Mechanicus was going to worship Taylor Hebert first and the Emperor-Omnissiah second...

“Isley.”

“My Lady?” The Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens saluted.

“The confusion on the battlefield below is maximal. Regroup your kill-team and Ancient Pierre, and begin your infiltration. Take ten Iron Drakes with you. Objective B is yours.”

“We will not disappoint you.”

The Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens saluted again and ran to enter a nearby Thunderhawk waiting for him. As the Space Marine flyer left the battleship and went on to join the ground assault, Gavreel glanced at the battlefield, where hundreds of thousands of Eldar forces were trying to flee toward the tunnel-gates. So far, all they were doing was giving an even larger if slightly agitated dinner to the millions of Helspiders. Five Catachan Queen-ants had already landed in the Vileth shipyards. The xenos had never stood a chance in the first place, short of using an Exterminatus.

“Archmagos Hediatrix can land the 1st and 8th Legions on the conquered platforms. The Knights of House Curtana, Taranis and Krast can accompany them if they wish. Begin the logistical and technological preparations for the sixth wave.”

The Knights and Skitarii would march, all right. They had seen the 1st Field Army and the Space Marines kill xenos by the millions, and they felt the irresistible urge to loot and pillage for archeotech, as well as to avenge hundreds of thousands of atrocities committed by the Eldar.

“Ah.” The murmur would have been missed by lesser ears, but not those of a Space Marine. “It appears Objective D has decided to come to confront us directly.”

There was something in the tone of the female parahuman that rang many alarms in his head.

The fact that two seconds later Taylor Hebert decided to don her helmet only confirmed his fears.

“Pardon me my Lady, but you didn’t tell us what Objective D *is*.”

Nearly all the secondary objectives had been disseminated down the chain of command, but the primary objectives were a different story. The Dawnbreaker Guard had known Objective A was the destruction of the three Eldar realm-shipyards and the infrastructure supporting them, but for the others, they were only unveiled one by one and their Lady remained extremely tight-lipped about them.

The more he thought about it, the less he believed it was a coincidence.

“Objective D is...the answer to an interesting question. Order Archmagos Lankovar to launch the last Bard-cicadas and one-third of the Extremis-level reserves. I want Queen-Tortoises, Bayou Moths, Ripper Spiders, Sonora Bees, Dreadnought-Beetles, White Razorbeetles and three more Queen-ants on the ground.”

“An interesting question?” inquired Gamaliel, trying to ignore the fact that a third of the reserves which had been constituted for the assault on Commorragh were probably largely sufficient to begin a planetary genocide by insect invasion.

“Is an Imperial Saint truly complete if she does not believe she is one?”

The void shields were lowered as the last word was uttered, and Gavreel and the other Dawnbreaker Guards activated their jump packs, running after the woman they had sworn to protect.

**Captain Corr Phoecus**

The *Obsidian Chariot* was a marvel, praise the Primarch’s forge.

The Volkite Carronade was firing again and again with incredible precision, exterminating hundreds of xenos in superb pyres. It was truly the ideal tank for a Nocturnan warrior. By some arcane tech-process the Techmarines of his Company were unable to explain, the xenos weaponry targeting the Artefact of Vulkan was deflected or sent back to the attacker, often in a more than lethal manner.

At first, he like every Salamander had thought the Primarch had found a way to integrate a miniature ion shield in the cuirass of the modified Fellglaive tank, but however this formidable protection worked, it was not one the eye of an Astartes or the instruments of the Mechanicus could measure.

“We remember the raids, xenos!” The Captain of the 2nd Company shouted as hundreds of Eldar warriors vanished forever in the pyres of the *Obsidian Chariot* and most survivors broke ranks to run away faster. His Drakeblade *First Guardian* in hand, Corr Phoecus slew every xenos that tried to turn back and rally its command.

It was too bad he had not trained to be a member of the tank companies of the Chapter. At this moment, Corr would have loved being the commander of this magnificent engine of war, but he would have to settle for seeing it in action. Besides...

There was a shiver in the air, and by reflex the son of Vulkan struck with *First Guardian*.

It saved his life.

Where there had been nothing behind him a second ago, now there stood a tall dark figure, and it was not a Space Marine. Corr shouted a warning over the vox, and it was all he had the time to do before the xenos attacked.

Right from the first clash, the Salamanders Captain was on the defensive. The Eldar warrior was impossibly fast. It had to be one of the ‘elites’ of Commorragh, one of the abominations which had survived the onslaught of the Great Crusade and the wars before that. It wore dark power armour and the part of the helmet covering its face was pale ivory.

It was also perfectly ambidextrous and had the equivalent of a xenos power sword in each hand.

And Corr realised, gritting his teeth and pouring all his talent into the duel, that it was far superior to him in the domain of swordsmanship. The few guardsmen in position to intervene lost their lives when they tried to close the distance.

He saw the moment when his blade was not going to parry in time...but the xenos did not have the time to finish its move. Over a dozen gigantic spiders assaulted the dark-armoured Eldar.

Phoecus withdrew to his brothers, taking his bolter and trying to kill the xenos before it had the chance to demand a second round.

But he didn’t find an opportunity. The xenos was too fast, and every bolter shell either was parried or missed by several metres.

Watching it was like seeing a storm of blades. There was no mistake. It was swordsmanship in its purest form, strikes and parries with no superfluous movements, an extreme rapidity, and the kind of skill one had to spend hundreds, no, thousands of years to achieve.

The gigantic spiders of Commorragh, the Helspiders, all died within a minute.

And then the Space Marines arrived.

From the burning skies they flew, and shells and light announced their arrival.

On the ground hundreds of drop pods disgorged hundreds of Death World insects.

And in the middle of the devastation, a golden-armoured woman stood, against one of the most dangerous Eldar to have ever existed.

“You are a difficult Eldar to find, Drazhar,” General Taylor Hebert stated, and while the angel-shaped helmet hid her face, Corr could almost see the shadow of a smile.

The blade by her side was drawn and instantly erupted into a formidable cascade of crystals.

Thousands of insects were surrounding the battlefield, with tens of thousands more coming.

The Eldar didn’t move. It didn’t utter a word. It was simply there, a lone and silent killer.

“In the name of the Emperor, you die today.”

The murderous Eldar raised his blades and the duel began.

**Slave 5537-K**

He is 5537-K, and one cycle of work ago he knew this would all he would ever be.

5537-K doesn’t remember having another name. He was too young when the Dark Ones killed his family and stole him like they did thousands of others.

5537-K had seen boys and girls like him flayed and impaled cycle after cycle. Not because they angered the monsters. No one would dare. But the Dark Masters often get bored.

And when they are bored, they want torture-pets.

But this time there’s something different in the air. The Dark Masters begin to run everywhere. The skies begin to turn red.

Some collars explode, killing many. But these are quick kills, easy ways to die. This is not the way of the Dark Masters.

5537-K does not see the first Dark One’s starship crash. But he sees the second. He watches as uncountable warships die.

5537-K feels something different for the first time in the prisons of Commorragh. The scaly overseers are not opening the prison to whip them in front of the Dark Masters. The shrieking doesn’t start. They are not dragged in chains to begin a new cycle of work.

The Helspider lands in front of their cell and kills the overseers.

5537-K cheers like the entire block of slaves.

The Helspider destroys the doors.

A swarm of beetles arrive and unlocks their chains and their collars. Poison injectors are removed. Torture devices break.

5537-K is the fourth to run outside, and the second to trample a wounded overseer.

They run outside and they don’t recognise the Dark City.

The spires are burning. A black fortress is burning and falling.

The Dark Masters’ corpses are everywhere.

Commorragh, the Dark Nightmare of slaves, is burning.

But 5537-K is still afraid.

Not far away a duel rages, and 5537-K recognises the dark figure fighting the golden warrior.

It’s the Executioner.

It’s the Killer of Commorragh.

It’s the Incubus Executioner.

The one the Dark Masters call Drazhar.

The one they insist no Master can touch.

But there’s an angel fighting the killer.

There’s a lot of light. There’s a lot of power.

But the angel attacks and the Helspiders are helping the angel.

The Executioner is the Executioner. But he’s surrounded by a thousand blades.

The Executioner is the Master of Blades, but he has two legs and two arms.

And the swarm engulfs the Executioner.

The angel’s blade pierces the dark armour.

5537-K hears a terrifying shriek-scream, but when it’s over he feels...happy.

Something awful has died. 5537-K doesn’t know how, but he’s sure of it.

And the angel raises his crystal blade in victory.

The angel removes his helmet and a woman’s face is revealed.

And 5537-K whispers a prayer worth a death sentence if the Dark Masters hear you.

“Praise the God-Emperor and his Saints, for they protect humanity...”

The golden hair turns black.

And gigantic golden wings appear on the back of the Saint.

They are saved.

Whatever happens, their souls are saved.

“We will not be slaves anymore. This I can promise.”

The pain doesn’t stop. The scars are still there. But 5537-K sees the light and knows they will be saved. There’s someone to stand against the Dark Ones.

“FREEDOM! FREEDOM! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

“THE ANGEL! THE ANGEL!”

“FOR THE LIGHT AND FOR THE SAINT!”

**General Taylor Hebert**

If Missy didn’t tell her ‘I told you so’ at her return to Nyx, Taylor was going to increase Dragon’s budget by one billion immediately.

The thought made her chuckle before returning to seriousness again.

Impaled on the Nebula’s Shard, the corpse of Drazhar the Master of Blades disintegrates into a cloud of black dust and ashes.

Taylor can’t help but feel a lot of satisfaction seeing the black armour be reduced to nothing. When she struck to destroy the alien’s soul, the insect-mistress saw flashes of the killer’s life. She learned a name.

*Arhra*

The Custodes – and thus the Emperor – had been right. Drazhar had been a symbol of defiance and hope against Chaos and the Ruinous Powers.

Drazhar had been one of the strongest Eldar in existence, one of the so-called ‘Phoenix Lords’.

So much potential...so much power...all of it squandered.

Viewed like this, Taylor can’t help but think the Commorragh Eldar are a monumental waste of genetics and energy.

Sliscus, Drazhar, Vect...they could have done a lot of good. They could have helped make this galaxy a better place. Instead they did the exact opposite. They tortured and they killed. The Dark City was the greatest empire of slavery, torture and horrors in the known galaxy.

So much waste.

So many horrors.

And so many *sacrifices* needed to erase the colossal sins of this evil race.

Even now, feeling the powerful wings of gold-auramite shine on her back and her hair returned to its original colour, Taylor feels the price is too high.

The price is far too high, and yet how can she refuse paying it?

As the General donned her helmet again and the Helspiders were unleashed by her will against the last pockets of enemy resistance, the slaves freed from the pits and the torture chambers came.

Their very sight made her break out into tears. Their appearance was not unlike those of the victims of the Nazi regime in the concentration and extermination camps. Many of them were living skeletons bearing on their tormented skins the scars of years of torture and the most sadistic cruelties.

It was evident a lot were not treated like the butchers of Hitler treated the Jews. The Eldar wanted to keep their prisoner-slaves alive as long as possible. It seemed the reports of the Inquisition interrogation teams were correct in the end. The Eldar of Commorragh indeed fed on suffering, pain, and the most awful activities ever imagined.

So when many bowed or tried to touch the *Angel’s Tear*, Weaver let them whisper prayers and thank her. A lot of them were going to die before the next twelve hours had passed. Red Bacta and healing treatments, good food and clean water, she would give it to them. But many thousands were too weak and had the cursed poisons of the monsters flowing in their veins.

Their lives won’t be saved, but their souls will.

Their years in the Dark City were a nightmare, but they would die free and with hope in their hearts.

Commorragh was going to burn for this.

“You can run,” the female parahuman told the broken armies retreating towards the tunnel-gates of Utar’ragh and Zel’harst. “You can hide. You can continue to lie. You can continue to feed on arrogance and suffering. But you won’t do it for long.”

*I have the shards of Sanguinius and the Emperor burning in me. And their shards are* ***Sacrifice***.

“We are humanity. And we are coming for you, Dark Ones.”

**The Warp**

Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched.

It was a human proverb the entities of the Immaterium had been content to ignore forever.

Present, past, future; all words meaningless for the abominations trillions called the Chaos Gods.

If one living being gave his soul away to these immaterial predators, the Ruinous Powers were free to use it as they wished when and how they wanted, no matter how many temporal paradoxes it may create in the Materium.

Indeed, Tzeentch delighted in such impossible situations and the devastation they caused.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it was a great advantage for the forces of Chaos. In fact, it could be argued it was the sole reason they had won against the human Anathema in the end: a monstrous time and space paradox which would have wiped them out if it had failed.

And now Slaanesh was on the receiving end of the same tactic.

All the lust, greed, excess, depravity, pain, pleasure, hedonism, and cruelty the Drukhari of Commorragh had created, would create or were in the process of creating was at risk.

The Lord of Dark Delights had used the constant suffering produced by Commorragh to fuel its dark ambitions far faster than any young entity should be able to. In another timeline, the ascension of the Kabal of the Black Heart and the supreme rule of Asdrubael Vect would have raised the strength of the Prince of Excess to unbelievable heights.

Now everything was at risk.

The Doom of the Aeldari could not see as far into the future as Tzeentch, but what it could see was a pure and simple disaster. Already the Port of Lost Souls, Port Carmine and Port Shard were burning, and tens of millions of Drukhari were no more. These cruel servants would inflict no more suffering, and their souls alone were a sour and unpalatable meal.

If given the chance, it was a guarantee the humans were going to exterminate billions more and raze Commorragh to its foundations.

And the foundations of She-Who-Thirsts’ power would tremble.

From a position that was arguably Khorne’s greatest rival, Slaanesh would plummet to become the weakest of the Four.

The Prince of Excess would be weakened, perhaps fatally so, and in the Sea of Souls weakness was not tolerated.

There was only one thread of hope.

The trap of the human Anathema was not completely closed.

The defeat would be huge, but it could be quarantined and the Drukhari remodelled to create a new and more useful civilisation for the Prince’s purposes.

Slaanesh screamed.

Across the galaxy, three Daemon Worlds exploded. A million Astropaths clawed out their own eyes and took their own lives. In the Eye of Terror, uncountable warzones were drowned in cataclysms few entities had witnessed since the Fall.

Entire warzones from the abysses of the Eastern Fringe to the fringes of Nova-Terra were abandoned.

Before the Palace of Pleasure, sixty-six thousand six hundred and sixty-six Legions of Excess answered the call of war.

Every type of Legion was represented. The Flayer Legions stood side by side with the Hunter Legions. The Legions of Eternal Punishment sang as the standards of the Glamiatrix Legions were raised. The Courante Legions began massive rituals to boost the speed and the ferocity of the Terror Legions.

Never since the Siege of Terra had so many Daemonic Legions been mustered together in a single location.

It was a Host capable of conquering hundreds of Star Empires and drag trillions into damnation.

“**COMMORRAGH! BREAK KHAINE’S GATE AND KILL WEAVER**!”

Sixty-six thousand six hundred and sixty-six Legions were unleashed.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Khaine’s Gate**

**Eighty-one hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Succubus Jezekel ‘the Bloody Baroness’**

Jezekel had been utterly enraged by the humiliating tirades of Maestros Xelian. It was strange, but in thousands of cycles the hypocrisy of the Dynast had managed to evade her attention.

If it had been anyone else, Dynast or no, they would have paid for those insults with their own life. But the Ultimate Archon had thousands of his personal guard to protect him in his inner fortress, and tens of thousands more were ready to storm in and kill any potential enemy if given the command.

Xelian was a monstrous hypocrite, Jezekel realised it now.

As the Port of Lost Souls burned, she and the other commanders had been forced to organise the counterattacks with vat-grown battalions who a cycle ago had never fired a splinter rifle or used a dagger to kill someone. The elite troops of House Xelian could have done a lot of good...except they were all staying by the Dynast’s side, doing nothing while the outer defences and the shipyards of Commorragh burned.

Most of her anger vanished as she saw the fissures running everywhere across the surface of Khaine’s Gate.

The anger was replaced by pure fear.

Jezekel knew it couldn’t be a coincidence. The Dark City was burning in the fires of civil war. The Yngir were exterminating them by the millions, and the Mon-keigh had mounted the greatest invasion ever organised in the Webway.

She heard them. Something – or a lot of somethings – was striking Khaine’s Gate.

Jezekel watched Khaine’s Gate in consternation. It was an ancient Webway Gate, not unlike the Eversprings passage the Mon-keigh and the Yngir were using at the moment. It had once been constructed from crystalline jewels and the noblest psychically-reactive stones.

But the immense Gate – it was the size of a Cruiser’s prow – would never again be used by any Aeldari. For if the majority of the Webway Gates leading in and out of Commorragh were risky to use to varying degrees, Khaine’s Gate had once led to the capital of the Aeldari Empire.

In the past, this had been the most direct path for reinforcements to reach the nexus-heart.

Now it led directly to the Palace of She-Who-Thirsts in the deepest and darkest regions of the Empyrean.

After the Fall, the Dynasts and every noble of Commorragh had funded the efforts to make sure Khaine’s Gate stayed closed forever. The Gate could not be destroyed or moved away; it had been tied into the foundations of the first sub-realms when Commorragh had been created, and the destruction of one would have fatal consequences for the others.

But it could be fortified and neutralised. Thirteen walls of psychically-resistant materials had been built between the outer and the inner antechamber. Millions of Aeldari protective scripts had been carved into the walls. Thousands of the most powerful null fields in existence were functioning every cycle.

And the Dynasts permanently stationed a powerful army of Incubi and other elite warriors here, supported by many aberrations and an arsenal which for some parts had survived the Fall.

Jezekel wished at this moment the garrison had been tripled like certain Harlequin emissaries had suggested one thousand cycles ago.

The fissures were spreading, and they were spreading *fast*.

“What are the soul-alerts telling us?” the Succubus of the Cult of the Impaled asked the lead Incubus allied with House Xelian.

“They are malfunctioning. The readings...”

“Humour me.”

The Incubus turned his head away, but not so fast the renowned Wych couldn’t see the fear in his eyes.

“If there are no malfunctions, that would mean...twenty thousand Legions of Excess!”

That would be enough to conquer Commorragh twice over, even if they hadn’t suffered horrifying losses in the last cycle.

“Empty all the artisans’ battalions from the Abyssal Wall and Middle Darkness. Requisition all the null anomalies and the blanks you can lay your hands upon. Order all the Incubi Temples and Wych Cults not engaged in the battle of Commorragh to abandon their current obligations and charge here to support us.”

This was very much against all the orders she had received from the Xelian Dynast. Jezekel at this moment didn’t care.

“What do I tell them?”

“The truth. She-Who-Thirsts is coming to end us all.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Eighty-one hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

The losses, as painful as they had been for the Imperial Guard, were far less than Anubis had calculated in his military predictions.

So were the starship losses, although the necessary repairwork and the number of destroyed ships was not to be taken lightly.

However, compared to the gigantic amount destruction delivered to the Port of Lost Souls’ infrastructure and that of the other facilities, the starship’s losses were more than acceptable.

The Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes looked at the Vileth shipyards, crowded by Skitarii Cohorts, tanks, artillery guns, Imperial Guard regiments, and tall Knights with bright banners and felt the shadow of a regret.

He had not been lying when he had told his interlocutor they were all expendable in this battle.

Commorragh was an opportunity that may never come again in five thousand millennia. The Cults venerating the abomination of Change were too fond of their schemes and arrogant in the extreme, but even they were going to notice the entire affair with the Shadowpoint had given an advantage to the Imperium.

One of the Great Parasites was extremely vulnerable now. As dangerous as it was to think this way, every man and woman in this expedition was expendable. Even he, the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, was expendable.

It was the price to pay if they wanted to achieve a lasting victory.

The battle was not won, of course. In fact, every instinct told him the largest challenges were still ahead. The Commorragh fleets, whether close or distant, had been warned of what was happening by their dark brethren. There was no doubt they were on their way now.

Millions of xenos, not just the cannon fodder massacred everywhere in the Port of Lost Souls, but the elite the long-ears used in their murderous raids across the galaxy, would come too.

At the same time, the element of surprise was totally gone. The woman who flew over the mustering’s landing zones with her Honour Guard had played her cards well, but most of the surprises had been used at least once.

And the Lords of Commorragh were going to get desperate. So would the Ruinous Power known as Slaanesh, Doom and Master of the Eldar Depravation.

Anubis Excelsor rarely felt optimistic, like most of the Custodes commanders, but this time they were forcing the Enemy to react to their moves...and he rather liked it.

The cants of the Mechanicus in the deployment zones grew louder and more powerful.

It became a roar as the mighty *Ilium Scutum*, Warlord-class Titan of the Collegia Titanica, marched onto the bloodied yards of Commorragh.

Veteran of Beta-Garmon, the *Ilium Scutum* was the oldest Engine of Legio Defensor, the Nova Guard. Like its Legion, it had endured harsh times, but never faltered.

Anubis had raised no objection when their choice had turned towards the M30-built Titan to lead the Titanica forces against the Eldar citadels.

“So it begins again,” there was no one near him to hear the words, but the message would be heard. “For the second time in the history of Mankind, Titans will march to war in the Webway.”

The Mars-Alpha Pattern howled and raised its Volcano Cannon-arm high.

“FOR THE OMNISSIAH-EMPEROR!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Charadon Sector**

**Charadon**

**Eighty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**The Queen of Blades**

“And I think fighting an opponent with so many insects could be beneficial to you, Lelith. You never smile anymore these last cycles.”

The ancient Aeldari closed her eyes, reminding herself that the owner of this voice was dead and alas out of reach of her dagger.

“I am Traevelliath Sliscus. Long live myself!”

She raised an eyebrow at that last snarky comment. For his sake and no one else’s, the Arena mistress hoped the Serpent didn’t end his long and surprising career spouting a tirade like this.

Who is she trying to convince? Of course Sliscus did it. He was always arrogant that way.

For four calm heartbeats, she played with the little black jewel in her right hand, pondering what to do.

Assuming that the Duke was right – and for all his annoying tendencies and his regular invitations to share his bed, Sliscus was rarely wrong – an attack against Commorragh was on its way. It may have already started given the time the miniature relay-stone had taken to be fully empowered.

It was...annoying.

All emotions which could be interpreted as affection or fond remembrance for the Dark City had long since waned. Commorragh had been beautiful, in the first cycles of its Founding. But like everywhere else, the central transport-nexus had long ago been tainted by the myriad problems of excess and decadence.

By all rights, it should have been destroyed with the rest of the Empire’s Core. The current state of the Webway was proof enough that if your soul belonged to She-Who-Thirsts, the avenues of the Webway were not going to be an effective defence against its implacable hunger.

The fact it had not fallen yet reeked of a plot from the Primordial Annihilator or one of the dreadful jokes of Cegorach.

Now an interesting dilemma presented itself.

“Mighty and Peerless Beauty of the Blade!” one of the lackeys of the Pandaimon imbecile who had organised this greenskin hunt arrived and kneeled. “There are troubling alerts...”

“Commorragh is under attack.” She didn’t phrase it as a question.

“Err...yes...your Glorious Excellency...”

At least it was good to know the Serpent’s strategic instincts had not failed him, even if his arrogance and lack of caution had led him to his doom.

What was she going to do?

She-Who-Thirsts was going to intervene in this battle. The Goddess-Daemon’s palace was literally next door, and it did not take a Farseer to feel the ripples of destiny.

All the fleets of Xelian, Kraillach and Yllithian were going to be recalled. The presence of Yngir in the assault force Sliscus had faced strongly implied the soulless servants were going to play an important role too.

Oh yes, it was going to be a disaster like no one in the Webway had seen since the War in Heaven.

And there were going to be plenty of worthy opponents.

Yngir. Space Marines. A swarm-controller. Maybe one or two Custodes of the human Anathema. Millions of soldiers, and likely the Legions of Excesses.

The kind of battle where legends were made and Gods marched by the side of mortals.

“Prepare my transport.”

Emperor Bel-Korhandis had ordered her to watch over Commorragh during his reign. She owed her former lover enough to return at its moment of destructive destiny.

“Your Supreme Excellency?”

“I want a fast transport,” the Succubus Queen did not like to waste her words, and the lackey died of a dagger in the eye. By a strange coincidence, the other lackeys were instantly more cooperative. “I am going back to Commorragh.”

Slaying the greenskin warlords of this planet had stopped being funny after the fiftieth anyway.

The Aeldari Champion gave a last disgusted glance at the five metres-high specimen she had executed and the ten thousand-plus corpses wich had been necessary to pile up before fighting this duel. The Krorks would be horrified if they saw their idiotic descendants, truly.

“Summon my Wyches. I have orders to give them.”

Three other lackeys died before understanding she had no use for their excuses, their ridiculous words, or their miserable manners.

She was Lelith Hesperax.

Since the Fall, she was the Queen of Knives, Succubus of the Wych Cult of Strife.

In the Age of Decadence, they had called her Qa’leh, the Mistress of Blades.

In the Age of Light, she had gone by Alarielle Starblade.

In the Age of Twilight, Vela’ra Delenor had fought for the supremacy of the Aeldari.

And during the First Age, she was the First Sword-bearer, the Herald of Vaul, and the first and last Aeldari to have survived a duel with one of the dreaded Yngir.

These were just a few titles and names among the millions which had been given to her over the aeons.

She was Aenaria Eldanesh. She was the last true Aeldari of the War in Heaven.

“After a long sleep, the time has come.”

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**Extermination Countdown**

**Eighty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Surviving Drukhari population in the Webway: approximately 183.1 billion**

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**Author’s note**: Hell is coming to Commorragh. And the Imperium has a very, very warm reception organised for the xenos and the heretics.

The battle will continue in *Extermination 8-2 Hell or Commorragh*.

Don’t hesitate to thank Trevayne and Thanathos for their excellent beta work!

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption