**Extermination 8.3**

**Terra Stands**

*It was a battle we couldn’t lose...and yet we lost it badly.*

*It shouldn’t have been possible. Despite the sheer chaos – no pun intended – provoked by the Disjunctions and the massacres, the human forces were extremely limited in numbers. Counting the initial fleet, their ground forces and their reinforcements, these days it is considered fairly accurate there were less than one hundred million Imperial soldiers participating in the Second Fall, and this number is largely considered overblown.*

*Naturally, there were millions of insects helping the enemy. And there was an Yngir army to neutralise too. But when one considers the gigantic firepower available to the Dynasts of Commorragh and then their subordinates when Yllithian and Kraillach disappeared in the confusion of the conflict, the Aeldari should have won. Millions upon millions of warriors had poured into the Dark City. Several Craftworlds had begun to reinforce the battered lines.*

*But by the time the Last Wall of Zel’harst collapsed, whatever discipline and global strategy had once existed were largely in the process of disintegration. Yes, Dynast Maestros Xelian was still alive and had taken the mantle of supreme commander over the Dynast forces and coordinated the defence of many sub-realms against the invaders. If only this ‘supreme commander’ was not a complete moron fond of executing his subordinates to divert attention from his disastrous blunders.*

*The hierarchy and the communications had completely collapsed. Desertion was killing armies faster than our enemies did. Deprived of many aristocratic commanders, leaders fought each other for the command of a raiding force or an army, and generally ended dead under artillery fire before agreeing to a new General.*

*By this point, tens of thousands of slaves had launched their uprisings. The slave-masters had considered themselves artists in tormenting their prisoners with the small flicker of hope. The tortures they had inflicted were now repaid a million times in a short amount of time.*

*The civil war between Xelian and Vect forces continued to rage, though it had moved from Low Commorragh to High Commorragh. Fighting in the former sub-realm continued to rage though, as remnants of She-Who-Thirsts’ power and master-less mercenary’s warbands pillaged and killed for their own glory.*

*Many Aeldari survivors after this dark cycle insisted on the killing count of* Maelsha’eil Dannan *and tended to dismiss everything else. It was a mistake, in my opinion. The Queen of the Swarm brought us on our knees with the Mark of Commorragh, but she couldn’t have ensured the survival of her army for so long if we hadn’t made it easier for her. While there are no precise records and there never will be, it is entirely plausible that over ten billion Aeldari died at the hands of other Aeldari during the Second Fall.*

*We were cornered in the very sub-realms which were our home, and at this moment when we should have amazed the galaxy with our power and the might of our forces, we did not rise to the challenge.*

*As Zel’harst suffered the wrath of the Angel of Death, the situation had stopped being disastrous to become hellishly untenable. A lot of Haemonculi Covens tried to implement their evacuation plans, a move which evidently infuriated many Dynast loyalists and didn’t take into account the fact that the Gates leading and exiting Commorragh were now crowded due to the destruction and the capture of the principal ports.*

*The catastrophe was further amplified as the servants of She-Who-Thirsts broke through into several sub-realms, generating more panic and bloodbaths as millions of Aeldari reacted individually or in small groups, their only acknowledged goal being to save their souls and their skins.*

*The armies of Commorragh and the Webway could have overcome these problems. We had the numbers, the firepower and the knowledge of the Webway where the battles were fought. But the Dynast armies were fighting on four fronts. Black Heart, Yngir, She-Who-Thirsts and the humans were all coming from different directions, and at some point a wise supreme commander should have understood this reality and tried to take this into account.*

*Unfortunately, the Dynast-in-charge was Maestros Xelian, and while his cruelty and his punishments were rightly feared, his skills in coordinating multiple armies over multiple sub-realms could rightly be considered below average. Many warriors went further and outright called him unfit to command anything larger than a colony of slugs.*

*The worst immediate consequence was undoubtedly on morale. At a time where millions died under the artillery guns and a gigantic sack of Commorragh was occurring, morale and faith were at rock bottom, the presence of a leader having a plan to save us would have made all the difference.*

*The enemy had* Maelsha’eil Dannan *and for the lowliest soldier her leadership and her presence were going to carry them to victory.*

*Every Aeldari on the battlefield, from the thousands-cycle old commanders to the hastily-armed conscripts, were persuaded the defeat was unavoidable as they reeled from the series of disasters ravaging the Dark City.*

*In the end, it probably made all the difference. Port Shard and Port Carmine were gone. The Port of Lost Souls was in enemy hands. Zel’harst and Mar’lych had been crushed militarily. And the counter-attacks faltered.*

*The Corespur, the traditional seat of power of Commorragh’s rulers, was now open to direct attack.*

*And each of the choices Xelian and Vect had taken in the past to engineer their supremacy was revealing itself to be a poisoned dagger.*

*We had lost Commorragh. The only questions worth asking were now how much of us were going to survive to see the aftermath of it, and which enemy would claim the ashes of the sub-realms...*

*I am Aurelia Malys. I was there when Xelian’s spire was disintegrated.*

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“*When legends walk, do not get in their path*,” anonymous Guard soldier, Battle of Commorragh.

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*It is a major understatement to say the fact the limited reinforcements granted to Operation Caribbean were the source of a lot of controversies, accusations and problems in the later years. These critics and influence struggles happened despite the representatives of the Adeptus Custodes taking personally the responsibility of having launched the sneak attack on Commorragh without referring it to the nearby Sectors and closest Imperial bases.*

*Caught off-guard, the Imperial Navy and all the other organisations did their best to send as many warships as it was humanly possible to deploy to Pavia. Unfortunately for the brave soldiers of His Most Holy Majesty, arming entire Battlegroups and refuelling a Battlefleet is a time-consuming process and by the non-classified Navigator testimonies, we now know that the calm around the Pavia System was a thing of the past.*

*Adding these factors to the obvious difficulty of manoeuvring fleets in what had been over two days ago a true space battlefield between the Imperium and the Pavia pirates, and the reinforcements to the Scouring of Commorragh arrived in extremely dispersed order. The call had resonated from Astropathic Choir to Astropathic Choir, and every captain able to divert from his or her course did so.*

*Unlike what the legend pretends, the Battle-Barge Vulkan’s Wrath was not the first rescue-warship to pass through the Eversprings Gate, it was the second. Chronologically, the reinforcements for the first phases of the fighting were (in parentheses the arrival hour in the Port of Lost Souls compared to the Mark of Commorragh):*

Imperial Navy Destroyer *Loyal Investigator* – Tempestus Battlegroup Acacia (77 hours before MOC)

Salamander-Mechanicus Rescue Fleet [Ref Aj6431c3X] (75 hours before MOC)

Imperial Navy Corvette *Prince of Pelicans* – Ultima Battlegroup Acacia (73 hours before MOC)

Astartes Strike Cruiser *Wrath of Sanguinius* – Flesh Tearers Chapter (70 hours before MOC)

Star Galleon *Arica Orpheus* – Rogue Trader Lady Magdalena Orpheus (65 hours before MOC)

Imperial Navy Light Cruiser *Sirius* – Tempestus Battlegroup Desaderia (64 hours before MOC)

Adeptus Mechanicus Explorator Flotilla Delta-Two – Metalica Forge-World – Strength: one Cruiser, four destroyers (63 hours before MOC)

Frateris Templar Destroyer *Holy Thunderbolt* – Heletine Diocese (62 hours before MOC)

Imperial Navy Flotilla Broadsword – Tempestus Battlegroup Desaderia – Strength: 10 destroyers (59 hours before MOC)

Rogue Trader Cruiser *The Last Opera* – Rogue Trader Great Duchess Olivia Cheshire (58 hours before MOC)

Adeptus Mechanicus Cruiser *Machine Myrmidon* – Atanix Triumvirae Forge-World (56 hours before MOC)

[List continues on Page 20]

*But as the Imperial forces reinforced their position in the burning Dark City, battle was joined in front of another Webway Gate*...

Extract from the *Scouring of Commorragh*, by Lu Braganza, 330M35.

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“Terra stands.” Words attributed to the Primarch Sanguinius, Siege of Terra, M31.

**The Warp**

**Crystal Labyrinth**

Thought for the day: All Daemons are Falsehood. They are lies given the shape of creature by the fell power of Chaos.

**Impossible Fortress**

A large proportion of humanity, for all its other major flaws, had long understood killing the messenger arriving with bad news was a stupid idea.

Unfortunately for the daemons having the temerity to displease the Changer of Ways, Tzeentch understood it too. Proper punishment began and ended with ***change***.

Sometimes being blasted apart by one of the Four like Khorne did was definitely less dolorous than the kind of mutations the Great Conspirator reserved to its defeated minions.

As a consequence, the Duke of Change which had been charged to oversee the campaign of Pavia wasn’t looking like a Duke of Change at all now that Tzeentch had unleashed some of its pent-up aggression for the litany of bad news the Architect of Fate had received following the catastrophic conclusion of the Shadowpoint. The bird head had been replaced by a curious hybrid by a mix of lemming and platypus. The body could have passed for a pig, if there wasn’t blue fur and zebra coloration moving randomly. And the paws themselves had more in common with a bear than any farm animal.

It was kind of evident, but Tzeentch was extremely, extremely angry.

Many daemons in the Impossible Fortress were mutated beyond recognition. Exits vanished and millions of eldritch entities were trapped into labyrinths mazes or libraries filled to the brink with daemon-eating books.

But the Changer of the Ways was not the Dark Prince of Excess. The opportunity seized by the Anathema of the humans had only been possible because the Four had been, in hindsight, too overconfident with space-time paradoxes involving souls.

The Architect of Fate was not going to let the being besieged on the Golden Throne try a second time this method once the current disaster was over.

The Master of Fortune cursed the Anathema, a scream so violent it mutated ninety-nine sorcerers across the galaxy with additional limbs and tentacles, leading to the birth of a cult known as the Spawn Hour.

Trillions of plots and billions of plans were now in ruins, for the future they had been supposed to guide was no more.

The grand tapestry of fate was reduced to ashes, and what was coming to life to replace it was changing so fast not even one of the Four could manipulate it deftly.

Tzeentch loved change. Tzeentch loathed this change he was unable to master and use for his own purposes.

Still, the Changer of the Ways could already see some of the threats the Anathema had prepared for Slaanesh.

A generous ally would have tried to help the Youngest God or at least warn the Doom of the Eldar that the actions ordered at Commorragh and elsewhere were utterly counterproductive.

Tzeentch was not a generous ally, and in this particular instance the ever-plotting Lord of Sorcerers had decided to do what a myriad of civilisations would have qualified as ‘stopping throwing good money after bad’.

The expeditions of the Thousand Sons in the Webway were commanded to retreat to real-space immediately, beginning with the one commanded by Ahzek Ahriman. The same orders were transmitted to the Scintillating Legions. Of the nine Legions guarding Calastar and the Siege of the Terran Webway, only one remained behind. Several Warp Storms and time-cults were sacrificed coldly in pyres of blue flames by the timeless Architect of Fate.

Change could be pragmatic, and Tzeentch was Change. The wheel had turned against the Master of Fortune, but there would be other battles, other destiny points. The Anathema had burned half of the painting and the other was going to be extinguished in light. But a new artwork would take its place, and the Changer of the Ways would be there to fight it thread after thread.

A last paradox remained.

The abomination that billions of chaos cultists worshipped shivered in fury. But the thread wasn’t disappearing, and letting it remain in the Great Game would undoubtedly cause more problems later than it would ever provoke during this particular clash of fates.

The thread was cut.

And for the first time since the Horus Heresy, a Warp Storm disappeared like it had never existed, leaving a trail of dead worlds, ruins beyond count, trillions of extinguished lives...and a single warship.

Tzeentch seethed, and resumed plotting. Let the Anathema win this battle. The Architect of Fate would win the Long War.

**The Warp**

**Navigator Lully Vegtam**

Ironically, it’s this damn pain in his back which informs him he’s still alive.

Lully coughed and coughed...before opening his eyes. To his relief, everything appeared to be in the same state it had been before he lost consciousness. By it, it meant the room was a war zone and the blood stains where five other Navigators had lost their lives were still there. In all the precipitation, it had been easy to forge these dirty evidences of violence were ever there. There had been...other priorities at the time.

And there were others now. Lully coughed before repeating three times the mantras of his House and once more he opened his third eye, dreading by advance what he was going to find. Obviously the Gellar Fields had been restored since the latest horrifying incident, but it did not mean everything was well.

The first impression was...disturbing. The currents were not those of the region he remembered. The Warp Storms he had tried to avoid were nowhere in sight. The deluge of horrors vomited by the Empyrean had diminished in intensity and changed.

Lully Vegtam didn’t recognise anything. Over the course of his distinguished career, he had memorised hundreds of maps his Magisterial House was famed for, and many others his associates and family weren’t supposed to have access to. And yet none of the maps are of any use in this situation. Everything is wrong...save one thing.

The Navigator began to shed many tears, not of pain, but of pure joy. No matter how many betrayals had occurred, no matter how many years have passed in realspace, the Astronomican still shone over the galaxy.

“Terra stands,” Lully whispered, though no one would be able to hear him as this level’s inhabitants had been transformed into meat and corpses by the latest daemonic incursion. “Praise the Emperor.”

The Warp Storms had diminished and the currents were wrong, but using a point of reference, he was sure he could calculate a new course to a naval base. They wouldn’t be able to reach Terra, they were too far, but...

Something brilliant illuminated his room, and for a second the Navigator stayed there unmoving, blinking and unable to process what he was seeing.

A tall golden-armoured figure was in front of him. It was utterly impossible, of course. More than a dozen armoured fortified doors stood between him and any intruder, and the Gellar fields were still active.

But the angelic figure was here.

Lully knew instantly it was the Great Angel...and at the same time it wasn’t. It was all the purity, the compassion and the nobility of the Primarch...but at the same time it was not. His third eye revealed this was a true being of light beneath the golden armour. There was no sign of flesh or mortal presence.

The pain in his back and his chest was progressively getting more bearable. The being of light didn’t speak. An armoured finger was raised and instantly a destination was there in his mind.

There was no word of comfort, no praise, and yet the Navigator heard them nonetheless. He had a choice to make. All the while knowing the wounds he had received when his son-in-law decided to literally stab them in the back were going to kill him sooner or later.

Lully Vegtam blinked and suddenly the Angel was not here anymore...but fading golden mist informed him it hadn’t been a hallucination.

“Only in death does duty ends,” these shouldn’t be the words a Navigator should live for...but there were worse ones in this galaxy of untold horrors.

Taping three extremely elaborated codes, Lully reopened the communications with the bridge. And at the other end, he heard the gruff voice of Captain Castor.

“The trap was near foolproof.”

“But it takes only one to claim vengeance,” Lully finished.

“It is good to hear your voice again, Lord Navigator. We feared the worst after the latest incursion.”

“Captain, the Astronomican shines once more. And there is a battle waiting for us...”

In all likelihood the translation back to realspace was going to be the death of him. But he was not going to die in the Sea of Souls. And sometimes it was relief enough to give everything away for the sake of the Imperium.

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Desaderian Gulf Sub-Sector**

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

**High Commissar Lyon Gregor**

Usually Lyon didn’t tolerate anyone shouting profanities in his presence. It was undignified and unprofessional, and they were in the Imperial Guard of His Most Divine Majesty, not in some sort of sordid bar or underhive’s slum!

In this instance however, the High Commissar had to admit the man next to him had some reasons to be furious.

“WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE TEN THOUSAND HELL-POLECATS ARE THEY THINKING?” General Calum MacLean shouted with the full power of his lungs. “OPERATOR, ASK FOR A NEW COMMUNICATION TO BE OPENED! I AM GOING TO CHALLENGE THIS BASTARD TO A DUEL!”

The words could have brought him a smile, if the hot-blooded red-haired man hadn’t already drawn his massive sword – that for some reason escaping him the Desaderians persisted calling a ‘claymore’ – and looked indeed ready to order a transport and go duel to death the one who had insulted him.

“General. Enough.” Venting your anger in private when sufficiently provoked was fine, but Lyon was not going to tolerate an action going against the reputation and the interests of the Astra Militarum.

General Calum MacLean muttered a few words under his breath which certainly were polite or appropriate for noble company, but Lyon Gregor let it go. After all, he wasn’t sure the target of these insults didn’t deserve them.

“My apologies, High Commissar,” the red-haired Guard veteran grumbled. “It was...not professional of me. But I will not change my words. We have not the strength to attack the Webway Gate.”

“And like I said before, I totally support your strategic analysis of the situation.”

The problem, mused the High Commissar, was that in the ruckus of the announcement of the Commorragh invasion, people had totally forgotten about the Desaderian Gulf and the Webway Gate opened here. To be fair, it was a completely sound decision. The Gate which had been captured at Pavia had been captured intact by Imperial forces. The one which was in the Desaderian Gulf was still in enemy’s hands.

The enemy’s nauseating presence was fairly minor to what it had been a few days ago when it had captured the *Forgehammer*. But it was still an impressive xenos Battlegroup: one battleship, three cruisers and over forty light attack craft.

Since everything able to make safe Warp translations was on its way to Pavia, what Calum MacLean and Lyon Gregor had available to find and capture the Webway Gate was one obsolete destroyer and twenty military transports carrying the two hundred and thirty thousand men of the Desaderian Munitorum tithe.

Given the rapport of strength, the best solution would have been to imitate the rest of the Navy and Astartes reinforcements, and use Warp engines to reach Pavia. Or it would have been, if the transports had Navigators, which wasn’t the case. The Desaderian System had been hit hard by Drukhari raids, and the murderous long-ears had entertained themselves by leading the Guard in vain hunts while they tortured their Astropaths and Navigators. As a result, there wasn’t a single Navigator left to allow them to travel to Pavia, and they lacked the strength to assault the Desaderian Gate with any realistic chance of success.

They still lacked it now, but good luck convincing the master of the Battle-Barge *Abhorrence* of that!

“They are completely mad,” General MacLean repeated for the third time in one hour. “The long-ears have the speed and mobility advantage. These pirates and monsters aren’t going to stay on top of the Gate; the moment they stop laughing they will cripple the Abhorrence like they have disabled the *Forgehammer*. And this time, they aren’t going to both towing it back to Commorragh!”

“I know,” Lyon replied in a cold tone with a hint of reprimand. “But whether or not the Black Templars succeed or fail in their endeavour, please refrain to challenge an Emperor’s Champion in personal combat.”

General Calum MacLean was an excellent duellist with a claymore in his hands. But he wasn’t *that* good.

“They will fail,” the Desaderian retorted with steel-like determination. “Save a miracle of the God-Emperor, Marshal Hermann Malberg and his crusaders won’t be able to do more than scream at the closed Gate...if they’re lucky.”

**Archon Vypus Kryjurid**

“What is taking you so long, incompetent wretches?” the Aeldari Archon hissed, holding tightly his favourite dagger in his left hand and a whip in his left while the corpses of three slaves surrounded him. “You had more than a thousand heartbeats to reconfigure the flux of this Gate!”

“Grand Archon, the modifications are complex and we don’t have the plans or the help from Vect’s artisans! We need more time!” the useless vat-spawn protested.

“You have a hundred heartbeats,” Vypus bared his teeth. “Past this deadline, I will start torturing your team one by one until you give me satisfaction!”

The communication was cut and the last Kryjurid fell on his couch covered in flayed skins with a sigh. Honestly, the nerve of these imbeciles! They promised a lot, but when the time came to fulfil their boasts in real deeds, there were suddenly far fewer people to present themselves in front of him!

“They must reconfigure the tunnel,” the courtesan he had invited for a night of pleasure in his personal quarters declared. “Otherwise the battle will long be over when we will reach Commorragh.”

“True,” if only they had been able to take some of Vect’s agents alive. They could have discovered how they had changed the time-dilatation characteristics of the Gate. Since they hadn’t, they had to do it the old-fashioned way, and judging by the last cycles, the wretches he was paying were far less intelligent than the mongrels Vect had hired for this task. “The Mon-keigh battleship?”

“It’s still accelerating in our direction, Supreme Archon,” the black-robed servant of Lhilitu replied. “It will be soon in range to fire at us.”

“We will be able to destroy these primates long before they’re able to figure our tactics,” no matter what outlandish rumours came out of Commorragh, here and now they had a slow and clumsy Mon-keigh ship unable to catch them or find them if they played to their strengths. “Imagine, if we succeed where Vect has failed...”

A purple eyebrow was raised.

“The primates have just proved they are perfectly able to find some forgotten Webway Gates and use one for a devastating invasion of Commorragh. So excuse me if I don’t share your optimism. I think we should pass through the Gate and close it. You might not capture more slaves, but your hulls have tens of thousands primates and other morsels in them. And what’s the issue if you don’t arrive in time for-“

“No.” Vypus said forcefully. “I will return to the Dark City in time to massacre the Mon-keigh brutes. I will win the Dynast’s crown which is mine by right.”

His mother had been the fifth concubine of Ultimate Archon Kraillach, and while he had not been authorised to take the name of the Blue Sun’s master, he was still a Prince of Commorragh by blood and might of arms.

“I think it is too risky-“

“Lord Archon! The modifications have been cancelled! The Gate is reconfigured for the use of your sublime fleet!”

Vypus Kryjurid laughed loudly. At last. If some serious threats had been all it took to motivate the wretches, he would have done it sooner.

Contacting his senior warriors, the Archon ordered them to regroup in a new offensive formation.

“We crush the arrogance of the Mon-keigh in this system and enslave them,” he told the cowardly courtesan, hoping she would be better in bed than at guessing the outcome of his grand projects. “Then we return to Commorragh and humiliate their friends. It is simplicity-“

Alarms blared and the *Joyous Bloodbath* shook violently like explosive ordnance had nearly missed it.

“By Khaine’s bowels, what have the useless Gate artisans done now?” If they had damaged the Gate, they were going to pay it with hundreds of cycles of torture.

But before he had the time to do more than think about leaving his personal quarters, a rising maelstrom of Empyrean energy opened in the void extremely close to his fleet.

“Evasive course!” He screamed on his personal communicator. “Evasive course! Enemy incoming at killing-ground range!”

Vypus knew from the start it was going to be extremely close, especially if it was another Mon-keigh warship. But hopefully the first evasive course would confuse...

The Archon’s thoughts abruptly stopped as he saw the huge prow, followed by an equally monstrous mass of metal and weapons coming out of the Great Ocean. What was this thing?

“Take evasion courses and prepare to return to Commorragh! We return to Commorragh! Forget the Mon-keigh brutes, we-“

The enemy fired and his world exploded in flames. The Aeldari Admiral’s had just the time to see his bed-warmer severely wounded by many splinters before getting propelled against the door and losing consciousness.

How long he stayed that way, Vypus Kryjurid didn’t know, but when he opened his eyes again, it was to scream in pain as marvellous suffering was assaulting from every part of his body.

“You were right, disciple of Lhilitu. We should have closed the Gate.” The apology was too late. The lifeless eyes of the courtesan were not looking at him in the encroaching pool of blood.

The Archon smelled blood, and the pungent odour of smoke. He felt more than heard the moment artificial gravity stopped in the entrails of the *Joyous Bloodbath* failed. Vypus tried to rise, and realised neither his legs nor his arms were answering.

“Maybe it’s fitting. No one will remember us...save our enemies.” The young noble tried to laugh once more, but he spat more blood and strangely, the pain was getting less and less pleasant. “The End of Times...wasn’t supposed to be...like this.”

He was feeling them now. The claws of She-Who-Thirsts were severing his soul from his flesh.

His eyes rose a last time and he saw the unbelievably large battleship advance into the debris fields of what had been his fleet.

It was really ugly, by Khaine...and what sort of advanced civilisation used a name like *Flamewrought*?

Vypus Kryjurid laughed and died.

**Marshal Hermann Malberg**

A miracle. It was a miracle of the God-Emperor.

“Praise His Light, for we live in an era of miracles!” Hermann exclaimed.

There undoubtedly would be many heretics at this moment who would try to voice another opinion and spread doubts in the mind of the Faithful. But both as a loyal servant of his Most Divine Majesty and a Marshal of the Black Templars, he knew this was a miracle.

The *Flamewrought*, flagship of the Salamanders Legion, had returned from the ashes of Isstvan to punish the xenos and the traitors once more. It was a holy day for the Imperium, and the fact the Gloriana-class battleship was busy annihilating the Eldar fleet which had protected the Desaderian Gate a couple of minutes ago was evidently proof of the God-Emperor’s designs.

“It is just! It is righteous!” Castellan Marienburg declared. “The soul of the Eighteenth Legion was offended by the treachery visited upon the *Forgehammer* and the noble sons of Nocturne! The soul of the Eighteenth Legion will punish the vermin of Commorragh!”

“NO MERCY!” Emperor’s Champion Gottfried Montfort shouted.

“NO REMORSE!” dozens of Black Templars on the Abhorrence’s bridge continued. “NO FEAR!”

Hermann had never felt so alive and reinvigorated.

“Contact the Guard transports. They will follow us, or I will kill them for their abject cowardice.”

“Yes, Marshal!”

Three hundred years old, and it seemed there were still things in the galaxy which could surprise him.

But it was for the better. His Light could find them anywhere in the galaxy and lead His Champions to victory.

“I am Hermann Malberg, Marshal of the Black Templars.” The white-black armoured Space Marine repeated the words generations of Marshals had spoken before him. “By the will of the God-Emperor, enemies of Mankind challenge our blades!

“SUFFER NOT THE UNCLEAN TO LIVE!”

“A Saint fight in the burning spires of Commorragh.”

“UPHOLD THE HONOUR OF THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

“Abominations and sorcerers have been allowed to feast in this realm of darkness for too long!”

“ABHORR THE WITCH! DESTROY THE WITCH!”

“We will be outnumbered a billion to one! The armies and fleets of the perfidious Eldar will assail us in untold numbers!”

“ACCEPT ANY CHALLENGE, NO MATTER THE ODDS!”

“Brothers, in the name of beloved Sigismund, First High Marshal...I PROCLAIM THE COMMORRAGH CRUSADE! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

“WE SHALL KNOW NO FEAR! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

**Fifty-six hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

Invading Corespur in less than two days had been a massive gamble from the start. Contrary to what some Administratum idiots said, moving an army from Point A to Point B was not simple, and the problems increased when you had to fight every step of the way. The logistical issues alone were bad. The military priorities made the situation even worse.

As much as it was tempting to scream ‘CHARGE!’ and embark all her forces in a mad adventure, many forces had had to be left behind in the ruins of Zel’harst to make sure the future retreat wouldn’t be done under enemy bombardment.

Thus the 10th and 12th Skitarii Legions had been ordered to build imposing fortifications in the citadel-realm they had just brought low, helped by the Engineering Corps, while Skitarii and elements of the 1st and the 2nd Army eliminated the remnants of Eldar and mercenary resistance. Legio Defensor, supported by Houses Beaumaris and Sablus, was wrecking the infrastructure of Commorragh which had survived the assault. And she might as well count the 11th Skitarii Legion among these numbers too: they had taken heavy losses and most of their offensive purpose had been exhausted, largely on its way back to the Port of Lost Souls with a terrible forty percent of casualties, most of them fatal.

This logically diminished the firepower at her disposal to three Skitarii Legions, though of course the 1st and the 2nd were among the largest Mechanicus armies available and the 6th had been mostly left in reserve until now.

Still, until now the gamble had paid off. The enemy had been paralysed by command issues and the units which weren’t tried to assault her lines with idiotic approaches. This was good, because there hadn’t been a Plan B or C to accomplish the major Objectives – and no, Trazyn didn’t count as Plan T. Taylor had to rely on the shock and fury of the assault, wish the diversionary attacks at Mar’lych and Utar’ragh convince the enemy leadership to divert massive forces from Corespur, and hope it would be enough.

Objectives H and I – which in many ways were one and the same really, could not be accomplished without the Core Gate, and the Core Gate was in Corespur. This made the neutralisation of the spires and its defences an absolute priority.

It had worked well. The Heracles Wardens and their new reinforcement had neutralised the Gate covering forces before continuing their missions. The first spires and macro-weaponry batteries had been neutralised by her swarm. In a matter of minutes, the Guard, the Space Marines and the Frateris Templar had begun delivering the punishment which had already been administrated to the Port of Lost Souls, made the more effective by the fact this sub-realm had concentrations of population.

It had worked well...until now.

Of all the sights she had expected to be confronted with at the beginning of this campaign, an immense Biel-Tan army blocking her way to her main objective was not it.

“What must I do to make sure these treacherous long-ears will stop following me?” It took her a second to realise she had spoken aloud.

“I think total extermination of their race should be a good beginning, my Lady,” Kratos replied eagerly and predictably.

It was a sad thing when she couldn’t find it in herself to disagree with her bloodthirsty Champion. Honestly, what was it going to take for these imbeciles of long-ears to stop coming after her? They had lost an entire fleet in the Battle of the Death Star, and if Wolfgang’s report was correct, they had lost another one at Port Shard. To risk so many warships like this, they should have a reservoir of manpower and hulls bigger than the Imperial Navy, and the insect-mistress knew pertinently this wasn’t the case.

But their madness didn’t matter. They were between her and the Core Gate, and judging by the psychic energy seeping in Corespur, the abominations were on their way. There wasn’t enough time to bleed the Eldar in a long artillery duel or a series of flanking manoeuvres.

“Assuming we survive this battle, I am going to make sure their damned ‘Craftworld’ pay the price of their defiance,” Taylor promised.

The official doctrine of the Imperial Navy and the other military Adeptuses was to avoid provoking battles with the moon-sized ships of the long-ears as long as they didn’t cause too many problems, but Biel-Tan had never recognised this informal agreement, and the last years had proved this galaxy was too small for humans and the long-ears to coexist. The Basileia of Nyx didn’t know how she was going to do it or how many favours she would need to trade of, but Biel-Tan was going to *burn* for their actions.

“There are tens of thousands of them,” Gamaliel declared. “It’s not going to be an easy battle.”

“No,” she agreed, “but we haven’t a choice. We must break through.” At least some of the long-ears had been sufficiently moronic to believe a sneak aerial attack would work and had been gunned down in flames by the anti-air cannons of the Mechanicus.

It was going to be very, very ugly. There were barely five or six large ‘streets’ to advance into and these were far from empty of debris, abandoned vehicles and corpses. Moreover, the Eldar were waiting for them, and she couldn’t even count on them being too intelligent to avoid psyker powers.

“My centipedes will engage first,” at the very least they were going to bleed the xenos and decrease the initial impact of the casualties. “Then the Haemovores and the ants. The 1st Skitarii Legion will follow with the 12th Division of Major-General Weiss.”

The attack began immediately, and the Basilisks and the rest of the Imperial artillery expended a lot of the shells they had kept in reserve for this rain of fire. The centipedes rushed in, only for most of them to be struck down by a blue-green storm which was definitely not natural.

“They are completely mad!” Epistolary Aslan exclaimed. “The Immaterium is howling at...”

The psychic storm ended a couple of seconds later, but it was too late. Already she could see several pink abominations had merged with the white armours and were butchering their ways through the ranks. Breaches had been created between the Webway and the Warp, and the corrupting touch of the Ruinous Powers was beginning to be felt.

“Forget this. ATTACK! ATTACK BEFORE THEY KILL US ALL!”

In one command she unleashed everything she had kept in reserve in this sub-realm. The biggest centipedes, hundreds of thousands of Sonora Bees, millions of Catachan Ants, an unending tide of Razorbeetles and more mosquitoes, flies, hornets and average insects a world should be able to contain.

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR! ATTACK!”

Guardsmen and Space Marines, Frateris Templar and Skitarii, they all charged as the artillery barrage ceased. In a concert of screaming and howling, new Gates opened and tens of thousands more ‘Aspect Warriors’ poured in Corespur.

It was a slaughter. Despite all she had done to prepare her men, despite everything her insects could do, hundreds of men were slaughtered like they were nothing. Baying daemons came out of nowhere to fight the stubborn Ogryns of Commissar-Colonel Gerald. The Fay 25th Infantry was literally decimated, losing nine out of ten men in ten minutes. The Montgomery 6th didn’t hesitate to throw itself into the gap and massacre dozens of Eldar grav-tanks, though their Russ tanks were eviscerated by nano-filaments and armour-piercing ammunition.

They killed tens of thousands of Eldar and banished thousands of abomination, but somehow there always seemed to be more surging from the Gates to take their place. The shrieking Eldar assaulted the Buxenus 7th in a direct attempt to attack her, only to be intercepted by the Helspiders and the cavaliers of Txacopec. The Flesh Tearers recently arrived filled the gap, killing hundreds of white and green armours-

The world exploded in evil and flames, and Taylor felt herself be slammed on the ground. She did not fell unconscious thankfully...but the knowledge of it was calm comfort as when Gavreel helped her stand on the spot – it was him who had pushed her aside, it was to see Sergeant Jonas unmoving on the battlefield and a strange black-armoured enemy standing over it with bloodied blades.

“NOOOOO!”

Light struck the Eldar and annihilated it in the next instant. Four of the long-ears having ambushed them shared the same fate. Over a thousand insects were ordered to sacrifice themselves upon the Nebula’s Shard, and the next seconds Taylor poured more and more energy, slaughtering ranks after ranks of long-ears. Damn the consequences. Damn the potential mind or physical alterations it might give her. Damn them. They wanted a battle? She was going to give them a battle!

A mental order later all the newborn Haemovores which had been hidden in the growing mountain of corpses exploded from their flesh cocoons, and the Ambulls opened new tunnels for hundreds of thousands of insects to participate in the battle.

“STOP! STOP! I AM FARSEER-” one of her Dreadnought-Beetles decapitated the figure with a brilliant white sceptre.

Maybe he had tried to surrender. Maybe not. Anyway she didn’t care. They had killed one of her Dawnbreaker Guards, and dozens guardsmen and guardswomen of the Fay 20th had perished too. Dead to protect her. Dead because these long-ears had decided to try to screw her. Dead because Biel-Tan wanted an empire.

Well, she was going to give it to them.

When it was over, Biel-Tan would reign over an empire of death and corpses.

“You were right Kratos. The massacre will only cease once they’re all lying dead at my feet...”

The parahuman woman approached Jonas and fell on her knees. As she had feared, there was nothing she could do. Bacta and advanced medical technology could do many things, but over a dozen lethal wounds had pierced the Mark VII power armour. Jonas was dead and his incredible drawing skills.

“Bring him back to the *Enterprise*,” she ordered to a nearby Magos as her swarm continued to slaughter thousands after thousands of Biel-Tan soldiery. “Bring all the loyal sons of the Emperor you can. We will not abandon them in this hellhole.”

“Yes, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“Inform Archmagos Dominus Xiarch-33-Io he can begin the nuclear bombardment of the second northern quadrant. And if the Biel-Tan armies come from this side too, make sure they *burn*.”

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

During a very tiny minority of processing cycles, Desmerius wondered what sort of threats he had unleashed on the galaxy by meeting Taylor Hebert. These moments of doubts never lasted long, obviously.

In the last decade, forces under his command had found more precious archeotech than all the Explorators of Stygies VIII. Clearly the young Saint was accomplishing the Will of the Omnissiah. Praise the Great Machines and the Blessed Cog.

“The armies of Biel-Tan have withdrawn from the battlefield,” the junior Archmagos declared, “though their motives are as obscure as their previous ones.”

The golden-armoured woman laughed, and it was not done in the voice she used to congratulate subordinates or a sound of happiness. It was vindication and the light surrounding her was brighter.

“I think the long-ears have figured that if they do not help the inhabitants of Commorragh against the demonic invasions, they won’t see another dawn. Moreover, we had their measure here. A few more minutes, and the Iron Drakes would have been in range of their Farseers.”

Lankovar nodded, though he noticed there was no mention of the losses which had been suffered winning this costly victory. It was true the large suburb of Commorragh where it had been fought was now covered in Eldar corpses, both the ‘Asuryani’ and the ‘Drukhari’ sub-species. No Mechanicus Logis had tried to establish formal numbers, but it was going to be in the hundreds of thousands minimally.

But this victory had been paid in blood. The 6th Skitarii Legion had been crippled, the 12th Division of the Imperial Guard had seen its frontline troops butchered and most of its companies annihilated. Many Knights were now in terrible need of repair, and the blessed war machines destroyed were counted by the hundreds. Space Marines, heroes all, had died to protect the Basileia-General. The dead guardsmen were counted in the tens of thousands.

Desmerius couldn’t see her traits under the golden helmet, but he doubted there was a smile or a kind expression. Taylor Hebert had taken the death of several of her bodyguards hard and her revenge had been apocalyptic. He had heard the words from the lips of the survivors of this fight. Millions upon millions of insects had poured on the battlefield, submerging the xenos, slaughtering everything on their path. Blasts of light had wiped out enemy champions. Fountains of crystal had subsumed the Eldar psykers.

The Biel-Tan army had died under the unending tide of insects...but Desmerius knew it would not bring back the dead. Nothing would. And the 2nd Legion was paying the price too. Since the invasion-raid had started, over thirty percent of its Skitarii and war machines had become casualties of war.

But they continued to fight. Orders had been given, and as long as the Objectives remained mechanically feasible, the Adeptus Mechanicus would continue the fight.

“Important caches of technology, including objects presenting the characteristics of STC Templates have been found in all conquered regions of Commorragh,” the Nyx Master of Exploration informed the insect-mistress, though in all likelihood she had been informed of it well before he was. “Several Tech-Priests of Phaeton found extremely impressive archeotech weapons and what looked to be schematics of a fusion reactor in the Kraillach vaults. The Gryphonne Magi of Archmagos Dominus Basilic-Delta-90-Ballista have acquired what appears to be a STC on energy blades. A Skitarii Macroclade of the 1st Legion has discovered a damage tractor-assembling machine which might be a Standard Constructor. The Accatran Mechanicus-“

The Basileia made a gesture of her hand and he stopped listing the incredible list of achievements.

“I have no doubt this expedition is extremely productive from a STC-acquisition perspective.” His superior told him. “And congratulations for finding one yourself. But the complete report can wait. There are more Eldar armies mustered against us, and we’re still one kilometre away from the location where the Core Gate waits for us. Just make sure all templates and archeotech reach the Port of Lost Souls. I am more worried about the state of Objective I.”

Why was it that every time they found an incredible piece of archeotech, the military situation was complicated? Desmerius regretted for a second not being able to declare that the template he had personally found was in all likelihood the plans of an advanced Orbital Space Elevator, before replying to the point raised by the Chosen of the Omnissiah.

“The stasis fields are still functional,” the Stygies VIII-born Tech-Priest assured Lady Weaver, as arachnid-looking Eldar flickered into existence, only to be massacred by the combined fire of the Guard and the Dawnbreaker Guard. “And my experts have been able to recharge the generator for a few more hours. The container will hold long enough. But let it be known I have my reservations about this Objective.”

Of all the Objectives he had been made privy to – and at the moment it was a large majority – Desmerius couldn’t say to like Objective I at all. Yes, the initial concept was seducing: who had never dreamed to engineer a plot where the forces of the Ruinous Powers fought each other and the Imperium profited from their quarrels?

But the aquila-marked container they had found in the vaults of Zel’harst was something unquestionably wrong, and the Nyxian Archmagos hadn’t needed cogitators and auspexes to arrive to this conclusion.

And in practise, the only thing which happened when you tried to set heretical factions against each other was a lot of dead and corrupted Tech-Priests. Stygies VIII had learned it painfully in oil, blood and broken machines.

“I won’t say I haven’t my reservations,” the golden-armoured parahuman admitted. “But whether we managed to finish all the other Objectives or not, I understand why the order has been given. Destroying Commorragh will hurt the pink abominations a lot and possibly do more than that, but there are three other Ruinous Powers.”

“And besides,” Seraph Gamaliel intervened, “it is going to hurt the treacherous vermin of the Seventeenth Legion.”

“Yes,” the Mistress of the Nyx Sector recognised. “The First Heretic will learn treason against the Emperor never prosper.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

**Fifty-five hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

It was a lovely morning in Utar’ragh. The air was poison. The skies were in fire. The battlefield looked like all the movies Dennis had ever seen about World War One. Translation: there were tens of thousands of craters, millions of corpses in every position imaginable ranging from strangled on the razorwire to the mutilated and repugnant disintegration in a hundred different gory parts.

Everybody had taken rebreather masks to not die instantly from the gas and other chemical xenos attacks. The trenches and the rest of the battlefield were covered in corpses, so many any attempt to count was both an exercise in futility and a completely depressive endeavour.

There were Eldrad ninja-assassins everywhere trying to murder the Guard and Mechanicus officers, to the point taking a few minutes to the rear was dreaded, not desired. Positive point, the Commissars had no problem manning the trenches. In fact, all the staff officers had reported the desertion levels were nearly non-existent. Part of it was due to Taylor’s popularity, the other part was because there was nowhere to go. Where was a deserter supposed to flee? The Biel-Tan armies that the 3rd army and the other Imperial military forces were fighting killed humans as soon as they fell in their hands. The Commorragh armies behaved far, far worse. Some of the mercenary xenos ate everything and everyone that had the bad luck to come close to their fangs and paws. No, the Port of Lost Souls was the only possible salvation-exit, and the disciplined flow of supplies and evacuations did not allow deserters to pass unnoticed.

“We will have to abandon the next two trenches lines,” the Howling Griffon representing his Captain at the emergency meeting began bluntly. “We are too overextended, and the 21st Division can’t hold its section anymore.”

Every officer and Tech-Priest present grimly nodded. The 21st Division had done its best, but the cursed shadowy assassins, the ‘Mandrakes’ as they were called, had managed to slaughter its upper command, though it had cost them over thirty thousand infantry and hundreds of their flying tanks to pierce their lines in the immediate aftermath. Apparently, the aliens had made the mistake to leave alive Major-General Cassander Gorgias because he had been busy drinking his sorrows and loudly complaining about his superiors.

It had been a colossal mistake. The Donian officer had rallied a few thousands men of Scorpio, a half-mangled Leman Russ and held for most of an hour with nothing but sheer grit as the entire Guard lines resisted a colossal offensive of the Biel-Tan armies. The cost had been beyond horrifying – the most optimistic estimates were of eighty percent of the men of Brigade Green Helmets and Brigade Golden Bayonets were dead. All the Colonels save Killian of the Nyx 678th Armoured were dead. Brigadier-General Fuxi had been slain by a sort of engineered plague which had killed half of the Defiantheart 102nd Artillery. But Major-General Gorgias had fought and died like a hero; by the reports of the very rare survivors, he had taken eight Eldar with him at the end, and nobody knew how many he had killed before with his flamer.

Whatever his faults in his career, Cassander Gorgias had given everything he had for the Imperium and likely saved the 3rd Army’s right flank. The Mordian Marshal had nominated for the Ultima Honorifica and the Tempestus Honorifica – since they were technically in a contested Segmentum jurisdiction – and the Star of Terra.

“The sacrifice of the 21st won’t be forgotten,” the scarred commanding officer of the 3rd Army promised all men and women summoned to this emergency council. “No sacrifice will be forgotten. The fallen will await us by the Emperor’s side...and I agree withdrawing from the next two trenches line is the best choice. Despite the Skitarii support, we lack the sheer numbers to hold a large front when the enemy is fanatically determined.”

At least the cogboys had finished pillaging and looting the areas of Utar’ragh they had access to...for now. Dennis frowned as the eyes of Moltke turned towards him.

“Lord Clockblocker, is it possible to activate again the Cthulhu weapon?”

The time-stopping parahuman grimaced, and not just because he wasn’t feeling the humour in his own name when the air was toxic and every tactical decision was measured in the blood of thousands. At the beginning of Caribbean when everything had seemed so promising and happy, he had decided to continue the use of his parahuman name. Now with everything so dark and sinister, the humour and the joke seemed...childish.

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. “But I can say it’s certainly not going to be pretty. Leet’s inventions sometimes work as per intended, but the longer they do, the higher the risk of destruction.”

And Cthulhu was certainly not something inoffensive. The Second Naval Secretary had no idea why Leet had built this thing, and he wasn’t going to brainstorm in an attempt to try.

What he knew was that the Tinker had engineered a sort of gelatinous sphere with advanced materials, one he had based on an enemy monster in a video game called *Valkyrie Profile*. The thing was called a Will-O’-Whisp, and when its HP fell too low, it self-detonated. It had also powerful lightning attacks.

Leet being Leet, he had tried to replicate the feat in his lab and ‘boost’ it. The result was a gelatinous mass about the size of an Astartes surrounded by a mass of electrified mechadendrites and other tendrils.

Now, obviously, there were far more awful-looking things in Commorragh. There were also more dangerous beasts and traps, for that matter. Something that exploded when you tried to bring it down was rather tame compared to the same horrors the Inquisition was busy dissecting.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the end of it. The ‘Cthulhu’, as it was called by everyone – or the ‘Bouncing Horror’ if you were a bit informal – was very interested in pursuing and feeding on Eldar in general and each time it seized one, it liquefied it and used it to get bigger. Worse, each self-destruction only led to a big explosion before two newer, smaller Cthulhu orbs re-emerged.

It had been a monumental chore neutralising it once it had broken the last offensive of the crimson armours.

“The Biel-Tan armies still have a lot of Commorragh cannon-fodder to increase the weight of their attacks,” Lorelei Moltke reminded him. “If we use it again, they’re going to break.”

Dennis groaned internally. That was a good point, admittedly.

“I understand. I am going to see if Cthulhu can be deployed as far as possible from our defences.”

“Let’s return to another pressing point,” the Archmagos with the ridiculously long name buzzed. “We have to neutralise the xenos giant walkers.”

**Aurelia Malys**

A Revenant war-walker was one of the most impressive weapons in their Craftworld delusional cousins’ arsenals. It could easily leap over difficult terrain where even grav-vehicles would have difficulty travelling. Its armament was considerable with a pair of giant pulsars, multiple missile launchers and its protection was assured by holo-fields.

Frozen in time by some unnatural power, it was completely and utterly worthless.

The effect did not last, of course. But by the time it did, the human artillery had turned its artillery on the Revenant...and the war-walker was fast, but it could not evade the holocaust saturating this part of the battlefield. There were jetfighters which were that fast, but a Revenant wasn’t.

“This is the sixth they’ve brought down...”

A couple of heartbeats later, the losses in Revenants and Phantoms became a minor issue. Explosions engulfed the battlefield, as the enemy returned to its classic bombardment of their lines.

Sonic shrieks echoed as the horrible mass surrounded with electricity bounced a league to their left, spreading slaughter and thousands of casualties.

“KHAINE DAMN IT!” One of the new recruits in crimson armours shouted and climbed out of the trench in order to close with the enemy. “COME FACE ME MON-KEIGH! COME AND-“

The next explosion interrupted his rant and threw his mangled corpse back into the trench, to the disgust of every surviving veteran present inside it.

Two artillery salvoes later, Aurelia saw the next wave of reinforcements, and to her consternation, there were from Biel-Tan. By Vileth, what had she done recently to offend the Dark Muses?

“I bring the word of Farseer Kaeran,” the tallest male declared in a tone that could not be qualified as anything but pompous and full of himself. “Who’s the commander of this section?”

“I am,” Aurelia replied, making a parody of military salute.

One might say a lot of things about this battle, but it sure afforded a lot of promotion opportunities. By virtue of having survived from the beginning of this butchery, she had gone from slave to Dracon in a few battles. Obviously, it would be a bit better if she had assurances rank was going to guarantee some privilege when the last weapon fired in anger.

“You? They’re sending courtesans on the frontlines?”

Aurelia narrowed her eyes. Now that was just rude.

“Former slave, actually. I am Aurelia Malys, the new Dracon of the Black Trench. And I have a message for you, Striking Scorpion.”

“And this is?” the Craftworld warrior looked singularly unimpressed.

“Welcome to the End of Times. Welcome to Commorragh.”

“GET OUT OF THE TRENCH! GET OUT OF THE TRENCH!”

A gigantic form passed over their heads and Aurelia recognised it as one of the massive reptilian fire-breathing monsters. Already she was moving towards the relative safety of the rear. It was just in time. In the blink of an eye, the trench they had occupied became an inferno – and most of the Biel-Tan warriors died screaming as flames consumed their flesh and She-Who-Thirsts claimed their souls.

“Back to the last trench! Hurry!” Aurelia commanded to the disparate company she was now the mistress of.

“What do you think you are doing?” screamed a Farseer with a bright blue armour once they reached this meagre protection. “Return to your positions, Commorragh dogs! Return or I swear by Khaine I will-“

Sparkles of power descended on his hand and Aurelia almost froze in horror. No, no and no! Had these delusional small brains learned nothing? Using Warp power now was synonym with disaster!

Her blade was in her hand without thinking about it. In a fluid move, she cut the throat of the Farseer.

“Rule One, Oh Retarded One,” the former slave spat. “No sorcery is to be done in Commorragh, ever. We already have handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts rampaging everywhere, we don’t need more.”

“Kill her!” one of the junior leaders in green-gold armour shouted.

In answer, her warriors began to fire at the disorganised garbage the Biel-Tan had the gall to call an army.

“I don’t think the Biel-Tan are going to be very happy about we’ve just done...” laughed one of the rare Wyches which had survived to be integrated under her command when the last Biel-Tan corpse stopped twitching.

“No, they won’t,” Aurelia didn’t care for these idiots, truly. But for some reason which totally escaped her, the Farseers and their minions the Aspect Warriors seemed convince throwing army after army into Commorragh was a fine idea.

Oh, they were hurting the humans, no doubt about it. But the ‘Asuryani’ were bleeding in the process too.

The air was saturated with toxic fumes and quantities of substances the Dynasts had ordered produced for torture purposes. The battlegrounds were covered in corpses of every species, but the Aeldari numbers lying dead on this battlefield largely overwhelmed the dead of every other species. Wrecks of tanks, downed flyers and failed defensive protections were everywhere. All of this had been sculpted in a realm of crashed spires and broken walls. Here and there were the structures of destroyed slave-markets, some noble’s idea of a private residence or jetfighter’s landing pad.

And in the middle of this, the human artillery continued to fire, the super-cannons ravenously sending hundreds of thousands Aeldari lives to inglorious deaths and the lesser pieces crushing everything they targeted.

It was chaos. It was the ruin of Commorragh.

And Aurelia knew she had enough of it. There weren’t any overseers left. The Xelian Crimson Guard was nowhere in sight. The Farseer she had just killed had been a section-leader, and he was dead.

“We withdraw to the Corespur.” That way they would have an idea how bad the battle was going and she would be able to recruit more survivors to her cause. Aeldari who like her and her company had enough of these arrogant bastards of Dynasts and Farseers.

“You won’t hear an objection from me, Dracon,” a former artisan replied. “I have just a question. Where are the damned spirit stones of the Aspect Warriors we’ve just killed?”

Aurelia turned her head and realised the red-armoured recruit was right; where the familiar light of the spirit stones should have shined to protect the delusional souls of Biel-Tan, there were only empty caches.

And it had done so fast they, survivors of one of the bloodiest battles in Aeldari society, had not noticed anything.

There were very few things able to do that in the Webway, and even the Mandrakes weren’t included in it.

“What game are you playing at, servants of Cegorach?”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Old City**

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

**Trazyn the Infinite Collector**

“Please, Nemesor, be reasonable.”

“I am reasonable, Arch-Thief.”

Trazyn sighed – he had no physical need to do so, of course, but the stubbornness and the narrow minds of Neferten’s subordinates was certainly deserving of his recognition, especially at times like this.

“You are going to destroy plenty of irreplaceable treasures in your acts of wanton destruction,” the Archaeovist of Solemnace complained. “Please leave my Legions save the relics of cultural significance.”

“Request...denied.”

Trazyn cursed internally the Nemesor. What was his name again? Bah, he couldn’t remember him, so it shouldn’t be anybody too important. The average Nemesors in Neferten’s phalanxes were sadly all too interchangeable.

And now countless precious material was going to be lost, unable to be honoured with a presence in the Solemnace galleries.

Destruction-Overlord Sitkah had once more unleashed the shard of Nyadra’zatha, and the diminished essence of the Burning One was ravaging the Old City of Commorragh, killing tens of millions every hour.

This sub-realm had been heavily populated, and the sack and the destructions visited upon the rest of Commorragh had brought hundreds of thousands of refugees. Now they died in the inferno started by the C’Tan.

“What a waste,” the Infinite Collector regretted out loud. “So many things I was unable to collect...”

Alas, if Nyadra’zatha wasn’t recalled, there was really no way to send his collector-helpers to empty the vaults under Old City. Trazyn had seen Necrodermis-forged bodies survive a lot of things, but nothing living survived for long the star-flames of the Burning One.

“And now it is over.”

Nyadra’zatha rose over the spires of Commorragh and in a scream imbued with hatred and malice, conjured a gigantic meteor of flames and antimatter.

“Are you really sure you have it under your control?” The Archaeovist asked the Nemesor.

“Of course we have, thief. Do not underestimate the skill of the Crypteks who were taught by the Genial Phaerakh Neferten.”

“I was just checking...”

Some called this type of attack the Antimatter Meteor. The one Nyadra’zatha was preparing promised to be a particularly devastating one. In the high spires, the air was already burning such was the power pushed in this aster of hatred and cosmic power.

“Let Commorragh burn,” the Nerushlatset Nemesor declared.

The flames surrounding the C’Tan shard grew brighter and the meteor began its apocalyptic descent upon Commorragh.

“Prepare your teleporter, *thief*. We will not be able to contemplate for long the destruction of Old City.”

Trazyn didn’t answer. He was too busy mourning the loss of the precious vaults. This massive attack was going to destroy everything! This was disastrous! This miniature aster was too much!

The flash of silver struck out of nowhere.

Trazyn went still. Had his sensors suffered malfunctions?

The world exploded in a supernova-worth roar.

The shockwave was immense. Happily his personal energy shields held, and as their surroundings became engulfed in fire, the Infinite Collector could see the Nemesor and his bodyguard-phalanx be protected too. The rest of the Necrons warriors were not that lucky. Necrodermis was resistant, but it was not invulnerable, and between the inferno and the sheer impact of the disaster they were dealing with, most melted or were outright disintegrated.

At last, the storm calmed and Trazyn was able to see what fate had befallen the meteor. It was...extraordinary. The meteor was still there, over the dark spires of Commorragh.

Except that it looked like it had been severed in half and was entrapped in a sort of space-time anomaly, of course.

“What sort of Aeldari sorcery is this?” the Nemesor next to him shouted.

“It is no sorcery,” Trazyn answered coldly, for the first time feeling the familiar tinge of fear. “It is the ultimate expression of Aeldari swordsmanship. It is the very act of severing reality to remodel it to your desires.”

Nyadra’zatha, screaming with hate, raged and plunged from the sky, evidently having seen the one who had thwarted its attack.

There was a second flash of silver, vertical this one, and far more limited in length.

The C’Tan Shard was neatly severed in two and one second a new gigantic explosion of flames announced the disintegration of the Necrodermis shell.

“You should have recalled it, Nemesor.”

“What...what is this...” the poor Necron phalanx-commander must have been at garrison outposts for most of the War in Heaven. Not that it was going to make a difference, in the end.

“This monster? Something I dearly believed time and the Fall of the Aeldari Empire had taken care of for our species.”

Although in hindsight, it was incredibly naive. There had only been three ancient Sword-bearers alive by the time the War in Heaven ended, and of these three, *She* was unquestionably the most dangerous.

New gates opened in Old City, bringing a flow of reinforcements to the beleaguered Drukhari. Two armies of the Arach-Qin Craftworld if he wasn’t mistaken, one army of their Nacretimeï allies and of course, last but not least, the Masque of the Dreaming Shadow, Harlequins making their very purposes of sabotaging Necron Tomb-Worlds.

It was a formidable force; overall maybe one million Asuryani and Harlequins mustered to replay the old battles.

Today they were totally and utterly insignificant compared to the threat which had just defeated Nyadra’zatha. Granted, it was just a shard, and not a particularly powerful one at that. *She* had fought a minor C’Tan and survived, it wasn’t like dealing with a warm shadow of one was going to be a problem for her...

“Return to the Port of Lost Souls and inform Destruction-Overlord my assertion about the Ancient Aeldari being extinct was in error. Also send a messenger to Lady Taylor Hebert in Corespur. Tell both of them we are out of time.”

The wall of flames in front of them parted to let a single figure pass between the C’Tan flames.

Trazyn removed his cape and his most ostentatious pieces of weaponry, before sending them away in a dimension-pocket with his Obliterator. Then he seized his favourite Warscythe, mounted a Tachyon Arrow on each of his wrists, and emplaced at key points Solar Shields to augment his defence. For any other opponent save perhaps the human swarm-controller in Corespur, it would have been a stunning case of overkill. Against the Queen of Blades, it was the basic condition for not ‘dying’ in three seconds.

It looked like he was going to have to fight seriously. This wasn’t an enticing prospect...

The aeons had treated her well, Trazyn reflected with a shadowy feeling of jealousy. Aenaria Eldanesh had changed a bit, of course. The magnificent black armour was not one of those he had seen her fight with during the War in Heaven, and her skin was definitely paler than it had been, certainly the consequence of spending too much time in the Webway over the last million of years.

But the long curved blade in her left hand removed any possible mistaken assumption as for her identity.

“So you are still alive, *thief*,” the voice was like a choir of singers, lust and war ringing in one mouth.

“So are you, Queen of Blades,” Trazyn replied. “Many years I asked myself if the Fall of the depraved Empire would have been enough to kill you.”

The crimson-haired Aeldari barely raised an eyebrow. Evidently, the Mistress of the Abyssal Fleet had not improved her conversationalist skills in the last million years.

Around them, the Harlequins jumped and danced, engaging the other Necron phalanxes, and of course listening to every word of their exchange.

“You arrive too late, of course. The Empyrean abominations are going to end the destruction of Commorragh. The end of your species is at hand.”

“My species died the day of the Fall, *thief*. And so will you if you don’t return to me my mother’s crown.”

And here Trazyn thought it was the beginning of a new relationship. But no, typical Aeldari. They always returned to threats within two sentences.

“I protect the treasures of the galaxy far better than your race ever will!”

The Sword of Vaul was raised imperceptibly. Most warriors wouldn’t have noticed, but Trazyn was not most warriors.

“Strange,” the Queen of the Blades stated in her melodious voice. “Every time we fought, you began fleeing before accepting a duel once I cornered you. What changed this time?”

“Maybe I have grown bored,” his fellow Necrons and the humans needed time to withdraw, and he was the only one to be able to slow down an enemy like Aenaria Eldanesh. “Hear my words, Aeldari, Harlequins, Asuryani, Drukhari, I am Trazyn the Infinite Collector!”

The Chief Archaeovist adopted a defensive stance.

“I survived three hundred and forty thousand battles with your kind! I have betrayed the Deceiver and danced in the core of your stars. I was here before your Empire was born.”

“Don’t worry about his monologue,” Aenaria spoke to the Harlequins. “He does that every time.”

“I am the Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace, Overlord...and first cousin to the Silent King. I am Triarch-Elect of the Necron Dynasties and I. DO. NOT. SLEEP!”

For a second flames burned in the eyes of his opponent, before vanishing like they had never existed.

“How nostalgic,” the long-eared sword-mistress murmured before raising her long blade in a quick salute. “In this Age and Place, I am known as Lelith Hesperax. But forever and always, I am the Queen of Blades.”

The Ancient Aeldari charged and Trazyn fired his first Tachyon Arrow before charging to meet her.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**High Commorragh**

**Fifty-two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

Now that had the masks were removed, Asdrubael freely admitted he had always loathed the clowns of Cegorach.

These laughing ‘Harlequins’ treated the entire existence of the Masters of the Dark City and the other Aeldari armies like it was a joke, forgetting that for billions of them, it was a difficult existence and that the first mistake could send oneself directly to She-Who-Thirsts’ maw.

And the Harlequins laughed, danced, and mocked them, confident that when the hour of their demise came, Cegorach would save them.

It was absolutely delicious when their eyes acknowledged salvation was refused to them.

“I wonder what you’ve done to displease the Laughing Fool,” Asdrubael laughed, all the while avoiding without difficulty the last pathetic attempt of his opponent to take him in death with him. But since he was a busy army commander, the Supreme Lord of the Kabal of the Black Heart slashed the throat of the Trouper and returned to the battle at hand.

It was a battle which was an absolute bloodbath, as per the norm of the catastrophic events raging in Commorragh since the Port of Lost Souls had come under attack. According to his vanguard, Kraillach troops had already released a death plague before he arrived for reasons which were likely to remain a mystery for all time.

As one might imagine, the situation had rapidly turned from ‘bad’ to ‘hellishly bad’ in a few breaths.

Vect could have handled the debris of the Kraillach forces, the Xelian armies pouring into High Commorragh, the Craftworld Dire Avengers and Howling Banshees trying to kill him and countless other problems like Mandrakes and mad Haemonculi.

The arrival of the Masque of the Frozen Stars, on the other hand, was not something he had been prepared to handle. The murderous clowns had announced their presence on the battlefield by detonating a stockpile of weapons dating before the Fall, one which had turned over three entire sub-cities into a frozen landscape where nothing survived. She-Who-Thirsts only knew how many billions had been slaughtered in this attack – High Commorragh had billions upon billions of slaves and lowly servants to keep it somewhat functional – but it undoubtedly was a colossal number.

Needless to say, the insane Harlequins had not stopped there. Somehow – Asdrubael had no idea how or why – the Warlocks had managed to transport a crippled battleship over the dark spires, before releasing it with absolutely predictable consequences.

“How many of them do we have killed?” the Black Heart supreme leader asked one of his lieutenants.

“Err...maybe two dozen, my Lord?”

This was not the answer Vect had wanted to hear. Bu his most optimistic estimates, there were more than five hundred Harlequins of the Frozen Stars unleashed in High Commorragh, and no matter how he wished otherwise the Master of the Hidden Blade was not idiot enough to pretend this could be the entire strength of Cegorach’s wayward killers.

“Have the Kraillach remaining vaults been secured?”

The messenger had not the time to answer his question. In the distance, a new gigantic explosion tore apart the district Lythric Kraillach had given to one of his numerous spawns to rule over.

“Never mind,” Asdrubael Vect gritted his teeth. “And I suppose our reinforcements from the Prophets of Flesh have failed to materialise too.”

The silence which answered him was particularly eloquent.

“Obviously the situation has changed and our position must be modified accordingly. Order the retreat to Low Commorragh.”

“My Lord?” several of his subordinates barked out in an almost comical synchronicity.

“Whoever emerges victorious in this sub-realm isn’t of any importance anymore,” the Supreme Lord of the Black Heart admitted to his underlings. “The lab-facilities are destroyed, the realm has lost over half of its population, and most of the Khaine-Dandra weapons have been detonated by the Harlequins. High Commorragh isn’t worth the casualties we are going to take conquering it.”

Obviously, it was a terrible reverse. High Commorragh, Old City, Low Commorragh and of course the Corespur were the most populated sub-realms of Commorragh, and since the Dark City was the greatest Aeldari settlement of the Webway, these four regions had boasted the highest populations of the entire Aeldari race. Vect had taken control of Low Commorragh, but it wasn’t enough. The destruction of the three ports had wiped out something like six out of ten of the Webway shipyards’ shipbuilding capacity, and that was assuming Pandaimon was intact and undamaged, which given to the rumours arriving to his ears, was not the case. The destruction of Zel’harst, Mar’lych and Utar’ragh fortresses had annihilated the stockpiles and the core of elite warriors which should have rallied to the future Kabals, and naturally it had also removed millions of factories, slave-markets, mercenary holdouts and Haemonculi headquarters.

Honestly, Asdrubael didn’t know if rebuilding Commorragh was even going to be possible. From his spies he knew the Mon-keigh were looting and pillaging over hundreds of spires and vaults, so the treasures and the currency every Lord of Commorragh had accumulated would emphatically not be available for reconstruction. And that assumed-

“VVVVVEEEEEEEEECCCCCCTTTTTT!”

From the Gates leading to Utar’ragh, a new army in the reviled colours of the Dynasty of the Red Sun and with the banners of the Crimson Guard had entered High Commorragh.

And evidently, the commander leading them on a huge Ravager which was almost a small warship on its own right was none other than Maestros Xelian.

“My Lord? Do you wish to amend your previous orders?”

“There is only one slight modification I wish to make,” Asdrubael Vect agreed, “while our army continues its retreat, I am going to personally ensure the demise of the last Dynast.”

Judging by the rising levels of psychic energy, his forces – and himself, it went without saying – were in all likelihood going to have to evacuate Commorragh before the final showdown. But it was out of the question to leave Xelian alive in his back. This haughty aristocrat had been a right thorn to his plans for thousands of cycles. It was time it ended, right here, right now.

“You have challenged me for the last time, Xelian.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Middle Darkness**

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

**Admiral-Marquis Madrax Ysclyth**

If he survived this, Madrax would make his mission to kill every Harlequin he met slowly and painfully.

It was bad enough when Vect and most of the high Archons of Commorragh fought each other when there were Daemons, Mon-keigh and Yngir to provide opposition, but it wasn’t too surprising given that the Dark City’s society was based on betrayal and broken oaths since the Fall.

But the Harlequins were supposed to make their goal of protecting Aeldari against the Primordial Annihilator. If they couldn’t trust them on that, what sort of certainty did they have for the cycles ahead? Assuming they survived, that was.

The Admiral-Marquis managed to advance from a demi-step and slightly twitch his ears, but the agony he received in return was definitely not pleasurable. After a few more attempts, he abandoned his efforts. There was no way he could release himself or his forces from that trap.

This wasn’t a stasis weapon, the Talon Admiral was at least sure of that. If it had been based on stasis psionic technology, neither he nor the armies trapped in it would be able to think. And there would be no attempt to move.

But it wasn’t decreasing his anger in the slightest. Everything had been touched by this not-so-funny explosion in the sub-realm of the Middle Darkness. And yes, Madrax was not exaggerating. It was truly everything. More than a billion of Aeldari dwellers, workers and artisans mostly, had been neutralised, and thus were unable to evacuate. The Biel-Tan army which had fled in disarray before the Angel of Death – unless it was Queen of the Swarm, there were a lot of nicknames spreading about the killing-machine the Mon-keigh were commanded by – were frozen too. So were all his armies, his supporting elements, the surviving mercenary forces.

The Corespur burned. Old City was ravaged by Lelith Hesperax – and wasn’t it an unpleasant surprise that the Queen of Knives had decided today of all days to fight *seriously*? Vect was busy stabbing all of them in the back. Billions of Aeldari lives were at stake, the Gates which should have brought Shaa-Dom reinforcements had been severed, and the loss in assets was beyond catastrophic.

And the Harlequins had decided to trap all the Commorragh forces of Middle Darkness.

Worse, they had decided to trap them with an uncountable number of She-Who-Thirsts’ Legions. From his position, the Admiral-Marquis could see quite clearly the tall and abominable shapes of sixty-six Keepers of Secrets, along with quite a few horrors every Aeldari hoped to never meet during its life, like the Pale Naga, the Triple-Maw or the Tyrannical Obsession.

They were going to be utterly massacred when the effects of the weapon dissipated. Every Legion of She-Who-Thirsts which was arriving from the Abyssal Wall could move, albeit at an incredible slow pace, and this allowed them to throw in more reinforcements for the final slaughter.

All the while the Harlequins’ laughter resonated in their ears. Madrax didn’t like Cegorach’s servants at the best of times, but he truly loathed them now. Green and yellow, the Troupes of the Veiled Path flew over the battlefields, stealing a few warriors of Biel-Tan and the other allied Craftworlds. While he could be mistaken, the Talon Admiral didn’t believe they had spirited a single Commorragh warrior away.

“This won’t be forgiven,” the nominal leader of the forces present in Middle Darkness managed to utter.

There was more laughter coming from every direction, as if his words truly amused them. A Shadowseer jumped on his right and whispered in his ear words which made his blood freeze in horror.

“All will be forgiven with the Second Fall.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

**Fifty hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

There were many advantages to keeping a void-sealed helmet on one’s head, and not just because it avoided dying from sniper rifle or in a ridiculous manner on the battlefield. No one saw you grimacing when close to five hundred Martian Skitarii were disintegrated by a concentration of explosions so dark they looked like black holes.

Damn the Eldar. Damn them all to hell...or the Warp. There were sayings about beginning to respect the enemy you were fighting against.

She didn’t feel a shred of respect for these monstrous long-ears. The hundreds of thousands of slave-markets, the uncountable torture chambers, the psychopathic behaviour of the enemy armies, and the massacres of innocent civilians to enrage the guardsmen...the Eldar were scum. And the soonest they were all dead, the better for this galaxy.

Taylor shook her head and banished the gloomy thoughts. They were more worrying things to worry about.

“Chapter Master Izaz, Lord Commissar Zuhev, Archmagos Lankovar, I’m leaving the overall defence in your hands,” the insect-mistress relayed to all the senior commanders as one group of her Helspiders were busy eating a counterattack of the Biel-Tan Eldar – and yes, in this case ‘eating’ was to be taking literally. “I will still be in range to control the swarm, but don’t expect any tactical suggestions from my part. I’m descending towards the Core Gate’s chambers.”

They had lost hours and hours digging the access to the Core Gate, and to put it bluntly, Taylor was really wary about the fact they had been granted that much time. By this point, the parahuman woman was certain the Ruinous Powers had ‘seen’ what the Emperor had ordered her to do. That they hadn’t tried to oppose it save with an eruption or two of pink horrors was *not* a good sign in her opinion. The levels of psychic contamination were also rising too slowly compared to what they had been eight hours ago. No Commissar had executed mutating troopers in the last hour, and while Taylor wasn’t complaining about having all her soldiers stay true and loyal, it was not exactly normal. Something or someone was delaying the abominations’ coming, and this benefactor wasn’t the Emperor.

“The Eldar really intended to never activate the Core Gate again, weren’t they?” Gavreel commented, as they descended into a corridor whose walls were covered in Eldar runes. In ancient times, these scripts would have wiped out the Dawnbreaker Guard in a single blast of psychic energy. Now, they were lifeless and dull, unable to oppose her progression. At the end of it, her Dreadnought-beetles smashed apart the last crystal-door barring her way.

“The Commorragh Eldar are murderous and will betray each other at the first opportunity, but their ancestors weren’t complete idiots,” the General murmured. “Once their worlds were swallowed by the Abomination of Excess they had created, they knew using their powers of psykers like they had once done was an utter impossibility. Their souls would be instantly devoured by the demons. And the activation of the Core Gate, while not a very dangerous psychic device by any standard, requires Warp-empowered beings to activate.”

“Did the Custodes representative reveal how His Majesty was aware of the existence of this particular Core Gate?” asked Forgefather N’Varr, who despite not being a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard or one of the Space Marine Librarians, had insisted to accompany her.

“No,” Taylor admitted. “I think He must have found the ruins of one during the Great Crusade with ancient Eldar archives to find the others, but that’s just a supposition. What I am certain however, is that as soon as the Great Crusade was over, the forces of the Imperium would have poured into the Webway to secure this one.”

Because yes, now that the invasion of Commorragh had proceeded extremely well against the long-ears’ collapsing resistance, it was kind of evident the plan the Custodes had divulged to her ears had not been prepared for Operation Caribbean. Yes, it had been adapted to the limited forces of the Mechanicus 24th Fleet and the effectives the other Adeptuses had brought to Pavia. But the plan, unless she was badly mistaken, had been prepared during an era where the Astartes Legions still existed. The invasion of Commorragh would have been led by the Emperor in person, or failing this, several Primarchs and hundreds of thousands of Astartes.

“I was informed that there aren’t that many Core Gates in existence,” the golden-armoured General continued. “There are exactly three Core Gates the Adeptus Custodes confirmed the location of. One is rumoured to be in the mythical Black Library. One is in the Eye of Terror, and it is extremely uncertain it is in working condition, assuming one could reach it in the first place. And the third is here.”

In fact, the second one had been in the heart of the Eldar Empire, and given how traumatic the creation of the Eye of Terror had been, there was a ninety-nine percent chance it had not resisted the first minutes of ruinous ascension.

“The Commorragh Eldar still could have recruited their cousins from Biel-Tan to activate it,” one of the Iron Drakes she had borrowed from Chapter Master Dupleix pointed out.

“No they couldn’t have. The use of the Core Gate would have attracted the attention of the Excess demons and prompted an invasion the moment they set a foot in Commorragh. And anyway, the two sub-species of the Asuryani and the Drukhari hate each other’s guts. A pity they seem to hate me a bit more than they hate each other.”

“A pity indeed,” Gamaliel replied so seriously Taylor was aware he was pulling off her head. The Blood Angel was not going to escape so easily her vengeance. The moment they were back at Nyx, she was unleashing Dennis on him.

There were no more questions as they entered the Core’s Gate Chamber, just muffed exclamations and swearing.

It was...beautiful, and the scene only became more magnificent when the Salamander Librarians used their flamers to light on the large basins filled with what looked to be a flammable substance.

The chamber was a circular room that most artists in the galaxy would have sold one arm and one leg to contemplate one time in their life. The ceiling was a marvel of green crystal. The walls were decorated with so many jewels it was more appropriate to say there were thousands and move on. The floor was silver marble. There were statues of resplendent Eldar deities, and unlike all these they had seen in Commorragh until now, these sculptures were truly elegant and awe-inspiring.

But the real artwork in this room was the Core Gate. Of course, the name was immensely misleading, for it was not a Webway Gate at all. It was...the best description Taylor had was of an organ. It was an Eldar organ which was circular and massive. The claviers were espousing the walls, and there were three of them, one at knee’s height, the second more or less at her breasts’, and the third largely over her head. Veins and arteries of psychically-reactive crystals were playing the role of pipes.

“Librarians,” the insect-mistress commanded. “Take your positions.”

The twenty Space Marines formed a circle around her, just as the centre of the chamber opened to reveal a platform where a gigantic diamond-like crystal sculpted like a gigantic white tear awaited.

The sight gave her courage. Five Salamanders, five Iron Drakes, one Brother of the Red, two Angels Sanguine, two Crimson Scions, one Silver Skull, two Howling Griffons, and Aslan and Hendrik of her own Dawnbreaker Guard. Save the Flesh Tearers and the Heracles Wardens – both of which hadn’t brought Librarians to Commorragh for different reasons - all the Astartes battle-formations fighting in the Webway were here.

“I won’t insult you by pretending what we are going to attempt isn’t insanely dangerous,” Taylor began, deciding blunt honesty was the best policy. “The Core Gate is one of the central nodes of the Webway. It was built by the Eldar millions of years ago, and while they never needed a lot of their psykers to activate it, they would have largely surpassed every psyker in today’s galaxy...save the Emperor, of course.”

Silently she commanded her insects to come into the chamber. The three claviers had many, many keys and exactly ten thousand insects were required for each of them to have a ‘player’.

“With this command node it is possible to sever existing Webway tunnels, modify their points of entry or exit, or create entirely new ones from scratch.”

Obviously, it made it one of the most dangerous and valuable artefacts of the entire galaxy.

“That sounds entirely too good to be true,” and Kratos spoke, right on schedule. Sterzing was going to owe her a favour, and a big one.

“As I’m sure you have noted, Kratos, the claviers are kind of long and only one person can touch the keys per session. The experts of the Adeptus Custodes theorized there were only two Eldar ‘Core guardians’ using these devices when they were functional.” It confirmed her theory the Emperor had found a non-functional Core Gate...and explained why the Necrons had never tried to risk their fleets in the Webway during the War in Heaven.

“Still...”

“Touching the keys is also said to inflict Warp-stuff blowback. I can handle it with the protection the Emperor grants me, but I’m not sure any Imperial psyker would be able to resist the influence for any length of time. And don’t forget that we’re in a Warp-contaminated war zone.”

This was the reason why all the non-transhuman psykers except the Astropaths had been kept aboard the warships and the transports in the Port of Lost Souls. Commorragh was literally built over the very mouth of Hell, a direct Gate which could open to unleash endless legions of demons of the Warp against them. Psyker powers were outright suicidal to use in this part of the Webway, and dying was in many ways the best scenario for the psyker who risked using his abilities. Possession, spawn-mutation, soul-fracture...the list was long, and could give nightmares to Guard veterans.

And since all of her non-Marine psykers were kind of weak and would die in mere seconds before activation, the insect-mistress had refused to use them. Twenty Astartes Librarians would have to suffice.

“Archmagos Cawl,” Taylor turned towards the only non-Astartes in the chamber save herself. “Are you ready?”

The Martian Archmagos nodded, as his mechadendrites were already in action with quantities of recording devices, scanning, analysing, and photographing his surroundings. It was unlikely the Imperium would be able to replicate a Core Gate anytime soon, but at least they would have the data.

“I am ready, Lady Weaver.”

“Dawnbreaker guards, in position,” twenty of her bodyguards drew their bolters and each one placed himself behind a Librarian.

It was cruel...and absolutely necessary. They couldn’t afford a single one of the Librarians to succumb to the assault of the Ruinous Powers.

“Let’s begin the activation,” the former supervillain of Earth Bet would be lying if she said she wasn’t very, very nervous at this moment. She had received hypotheses and hearsay rumours from the Custodes, but these were no substitutes for a true manual or the testimony of someone who had used the Core Gate in the past. “Pour as much energy as you can handle in this diamond-crystal.”

Three Catachan Queen-ants were also in the room just in case she ended additional protection...or more energy to remove exhaustion and tiredness.

The diamond pulsed as the Librarians began to add slowly but surely steams of vivid energy to this psychic crystal.

The song started, powerful and enthralling.

Instantly, the golden aura burned brighter around her, and there was a sort of mental assault...like a hammer was wielded against the walls protecting her mind.

Damn it. What sort of insanely dangerous psychic artefacts the Eldar had been playing here?

Concentrating, Taylor began to play the keys, pouring her emotions into her insects, forcing them to ask the thing at the heart of the Core Gate how to accomplish Objective H.

She asked how to sever the existing Webway artery linking the fallen Webway City of Calastar and the Golden Throne of Terra.

Maybe it took minutes, hours or years, she didn’t know anymore. The song was assaulting her senses, and millions of Eldar runes and symbols she had only a very incomplete understanding flashed before her insects and her eyes.

The parahuman repeated her mental command.

*Sever the Webway connection between Calastar and Terra.*

Instantly the song shifted to some sort of oppressing melody, which she found oddly...martial.

*You are not Aenaria*.

The thought arrived directly in her mind, and it took the General several seconds to master herself and reply.

*No, I am not. I am human*.

*Where is Aenaria*?

That at least, Taylor could be trustful. She had not bothered learning the names of the Eldar of Commorragh, save those of the principal targets, and this name had not been mentioned anywhere.

*I don’t know*.

A Salamander collapsed, and his armour began to burn in a fire which was many things, but certainly not natural. Taylor closed her eyes and winced as the sound of a bolter round echoed.

*I need help. I need to sever the demon-infested tunnel between Calastar and Terra*.

*You are no Priestess of Hoec. How can you play the secret melodies?*

*I am Weaver. I am the Swarm. I am many and one.*

A second bolter shot arrived to her ears. She had to hurry. Their sacrifice couldn’t be in vain.

*The liaisons of Calastar cannot be severed or modified in any way. The act would endanger several critical nexuses. Decree can’t be countermanded by the True Aeldari Emperor and the Queen of Blades.*

Damn it. So close...

Taylor gritted her teeth as the pressure on her mind and body became incredibly painful.

Wait a minute...

*There is no True Aeldari Emperor anymore. What is the process to crown one?*

The entity communicating thought-to-thought with her appeared to feel surprise or at least an emotion sharing a lot of common points with it.

*You need to defeat a Phoenix Guard and have the support of six hundred sixty-six thousand six hundred sixty-six Aeldari of the noble court...or convince them to withdraw their claims by blade and death.*

Could it be really...that simple?

*I fulfil the conditions.*

This time the mental assault made her head ring a lot, and none of it was pleasure, just pain.

*You speak truly. Yes, the conditions are fulfilled.*

*I am Taylor Hebert. I claim the title of Aeldari Empress for myself.*

*Claim made and acknowledged. Emperor Malekith is dead. Long live the Claimant Empress. Further steps require the Oath of Allegiance of the Phoenix Court or fighting a duel with the Queen of Blades.*

Well, this was progress...a scream of agony brought more tears on her cheeks.

*Best way to eliminate the threat of Empyrean-based invasion between Calastar and Terra?*

*Study ongoing...change requires modification of approximately five thousand tunnels...*

A complex maze materialised in her mind, and the ex-Brockton warlord had to focus to not lose any time enjoying the triumph.

*All right. This is what I want you to do...*

Compared to the length of time she had needed to understand the artefact, the execution of her command was amazingly quick.

All feelings of triumph she could have felt disappeared when she reopened her eyes to meet the corpses of six Librarians, and before she had the time to scream the psykers to stop their effort, Epistolary Aslan of her Dawnbreaker Guard, loyal son of Sanguinius and the Templars of Blood, joined them in death.

**Webway**

**The Gates of Terra**

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

**Dark Apostle Sor Djakartal**

The Siege had lasted for so long any change was almost welcome.

Almost.

The Dark Apostle who had once named Sor Djakartal but now had become a far greater Champion of the True Gods as one of the Gal Vorbak was...concerned.

The faithful son of Lorgar had continued the Siege of Terra while lesser warriors and priests had long returned to the Materium and died against lesser opponents. Let the weak minds and the opportunists perish in the Eye of Terror or countless minor battlefields.

It was in front of the Gates of Terra the Long War would be decided.

The False-Emperor resisted, but the Legions of the True Gods could exert more and more pressure against the gigantic golden wall the failing corpse had erected to protect his Golden Throne.

The False-Emperor would fall and humanity would be forced to accept the truth: only in the embrace of the True Gods was any salvation possible.

But this time, the commander of the Defilers of Heaven Cult was...concerned.

The number of Legions trying to bring down the Gates was never fixed, of course. The Architect of Change’s numbers were eternally varying, per the nature of the Master of Fate. Mighty Khorne’s hosts regularly arrived and left, as there was no blood to be spilled; the servants of the False-Emperor at Calastar had long been hunted down and crucified.

But on a ‘normal cycle’ – if these words had any meaning when time and space were garbled and the Warp had long reigned supreme – nine Scintillating Legions for Tzeentch, eight Blood Legions for Khorne, seven Plague Legions for Nurgle, and six Legions of Excess for Slaanesh.

There were also sixty-six Emperor’s Children Legionaries, seventy-seven plague-infected Death Guard warriors, nine Tzeentchian Sorcerers, and eighty-eight World Eaters, like the symbolism of the Primordial Truth demanded. The six daemon-imbued Titans and the eight hundred eighty-eight World Bearers of the Defilers of Heaven completed this order of battle.

This was a force able to bring down the fall of Terra with ease, and yet it was only a fraction of what would assault the seat of the False-Emperor once the protections collapsed. Thanks to Magnus’ Folly, the World Bearers and their allies could count on an infinite number of reinforcements from the realm of the Gods.

All of this made the last events even more concerning.

For a reason which escaped him, in the last hours all the servants of Slaanesh had deserted the Siege. Yes, both Legions of Excess and Emperor’s Children had departed, and none of his injunctions had been answered. The problems had not stopped there. The Scintillating Legions had rapidly decreased in number, and now there was merely one left to provide its might for an eventual fight. The Possessed Sorcerers were all gone too.

“**Be ready for anything**,” the Possessed Dark Apostle growled to his officers. “**I don’t know what sort of trick the False-Emperor has tried this time but**-“

His sentence was never completed. There was a gigantic blast, and the Webway section the Legionaries of the Seventeenth Legion had waited for so long began to shift and be reshaped like a God had decided to play with it.

The Defilers of Heaven began to run in search of a more secure position, but there didn’t seem to be one. All around them walls became avalanches of machines and a realm of swirling debris and crystals.

Fear had long been burned out of his body, and yet at this moment the entity which had been born under the name of Sor Djakartal fell something very close to it. Bloodletters were banished from existence. Nurglings disintegrated in pus and good as their larger brethren trampled them or the World Eaters rampaged in their ranks with their blades.

A Titan exploded, its pyre annihilating everything nearby. There were flames and unpleasant sensations everywhere.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the cataclysm stopped.

The Dark Apostle assessed the situation, and though the urge had not been present for an eternity, the temptation to mourn was strong. Half of his Legionaries were gone, and the rest of the Siege forces didn’t look as they had fared.

“**Where are we**?” There were still in front of the Gates of Terra, but the Webway avenue they used for the mustering of the Primordial truth was entirely different...in fact it looked entirely brand-new. It was ridiculous, of course. The Webway was Aeldari work, old, abandoned, and no one living knew how to repair it.

But the worst sensation was the certainty they were cut from immediate access to the Warp. Neither his sorcery skills nor the daemon he hosted in his flesh could feel immediate contact with the Sea of Souls. There was no potential source of reinforcements from the Gods and-

They had no reinforcements and they didn’t know where the liaison held anymore. This event, however it had been done, had hurt the besieging forces badly, and the initial order of battle had been weakened in the first place.

There was nothing preventing the False-Emperor to reopen the Gates of Terra and waging the Webway War anew.

“**Flee**,” he ordered to his surviving World Bearers. “**Flee and discover where this new Webway tunnel leads**.”

But it was too late. A heartbeat after he had uttered the last word, light was summoned and the Dark Apostle’s senses were overwhelmed. It was...sickeningly *pure*.

The sun arose again and it was horribly *bright*.

“**IT BURNS**!” he roared.

“**THE SUN AND THE GOLDEN FLAMES**!” a bleeding Bloodthirster roared before being banished in a red explosion when a terrible column of golden light blasted him off. “**THE ANATHEMA! THE ANATHEMA COMES**!”

The son of Lorgar watched where the immense wall had stood since the defeat of Horus, and before being blinded by the abominable light, he saw ranks upon of ranks of tall and brilliant grey-armoured Space Marines marching side by side with the eighth-damned golden Custodes. Behind them came the soul-dead abominations, the cursed Sisters of Silence, and they had over a dozen Titans roaring their familiar challenge.

“FOR HIM IN TERRA!”

The surviving Legionaries could not let a challenge like this go unanswered.

“**DEATH TO THE FALSE-EMPEROR**!”

The Gal Vorbak roared and raised his weapon to rally his troops. An instant later, the Possessed Legionary was disintegrated by a volcano cannon and his part in the Long Siege at last came to an end.

**Tribune Basil Macedonian**

When the Captain-General had departed to Pavia, he had left to his Tribunes the choice of deciding what considered to be an ‘appropriate retaliation force’ to punish the traitor-abominations which had threatened their liege for so long.

Basil was a firm believer in the best defence being an overwhelming offence, and while the very principle of the operation called for a total severance of the Webway Gate, the commanding Tribune had not risen to his current position by taking chance.

Seven thousand spears of the Adeptus Custodes, six hundred Grey Knights, five hundred Sisters of Silence, twelve God-Engines, and of course thousands of war engines had been assembled with celerity and discretion in the last year, ready to be unleashed the moment His Majesty gave the order.

Basil Macedonian at this moment was very happy he had done so.

Because the Webway corridor leading to their liege was definitely a lot of things, but it wasn’t severed.

“AVENGE THE FIRST DEFEAT!” he roared as he impaled two vile red-skinned parasites with his spear in close succession. Custodes did not usually shout battle-cries, but today was a very special day. For the first time, the shame of the Defeat suffered by their predecessors four millennia ago was about to be repaid back in pure and glorious annihilation.

Suddenly deprived of most of their endless reinforcing armies and the terrible of the power, many abominations tried to flee. They were gunned down the moment they broke rank.

“Supreme Grand Master Helios,” the Watcher of the Throne addressed the Champion of Titan. “I do not know where the new Imperial Gate leads, and judging by the reaction of the parasites, the ignorance is mutual. Please ensure they are banished before they have the ability to share the news with the greater abominations.”

“Do not worry, Tribune,” the Astartes who commanded the 666th Chapter of the daemon-hunters replied. “They will return to oblivion with empty claws and no information of importance.”

Mere seconds the last Blood Legion to have maintained some amount of cohesion broke and the extermination pursuit began.

The monsters asked for no mercy.

The Custodes and their allies granted none.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

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

**General Taylor Hebert**

One of her best decisions before launching Operation Caribbean had been to replace the rations far more edible flavours while the old ones were given to the grox herds. It was a neat progress: now the new rations merely tasted bad instead of the ‘awful’ so many guardsmen and guardswomen complained about.

Taylor knew she could have gotten a far better meal if she wanted. She was the General of Army Group Caribbean, and her word was law barring some intervention from the Custodes or another ‘miracle’ from the Emperor.

But it would strain the logistical chain of the Army Group, which was already stretched to its very limits. And as long as she had enough energy to function properly, the insect-mistress had decided it didn’t matter what she ate in the middle of the battlefield as long as it was something which wasn’t going to give her health problems in a few months or years.

And hopefully in a few days she would be back in her personal dining room aboard the *Enterprise*, eating high-class meals and afterwards enjoying a true bed with the girlfriend included with it.

Taylor felt exhausted. Siphoning energy from the ants was keeping her standing and in peak form, and even somehow erased the mental strain, but the feeling of tiredness was still a shadow in the back of her thoughts, getting worse hour after hour.

Alas, she couldn’t really afford a few hours of sleep. Her insects were a major strategic and a tactical deterrent, far more than the emergency fortifications the Tech-Priests had hastily built around the Core Gate. If the Helspiders and the other insects lost their tactical flexibility, the cursed psykers of the long-ears would become aware of it in the next minute and try again to send their shadowy assassins after her.

One thing she had to give to the bastards of Biel-Tan: they didn’t abandon the battlefield without a fight. Of course, one had to wonder what the hell the aliens were going to do assuming they won. By the most optimistic estimate from an Eldar point of view, the Battle of Commorragh was destroying their armies faster than it took to describe the process. They had lost millions of warriors in the last twenty-four hours, if the last reports from Utar’ragh and the other sub-realms could be trusted. Give it twenty-four more hours, and there would be no longer a Biel-Tan army.

“I wonder what they think my death will accomplish?” the parahuman General asked Gavreel as a hundred Helspiders decimated several ‘Aspect Warriors’ which had tried to make a reconnaissance-in-force. “By this point, even the total annihilation of Army Group Caribbean would result in their armies being stranded in the middle of Commorragh with eldritch abominations and murderous Commorragh warlords.”

It was kind of obvious, but the Inquisitors interrogating forcefully the rare prisoners had confirmed the Drukhari and the Asuryani sub-species of the Eldar were only united in their hatred of her above everything. On every other aspect, these long-ears hated each other and gladly stabbed an undefended back when given the chance.

“I’m unable to explain it,” the dark-armoured Astartes admitted. “Rationally, the loss of millions of their elite warriors must be compensated somehow by your death, but I don’t see how or why. Maybe you have unwillingly removed their retreat options with what you’ve done with the Core Gate artefact?”

“I have touched as little as possible Webway Gates and tunnels close to Commorragh,” the golden-armoured woman said in a dubitative tone.

To alter the connections between certain Gates to cause more Eldar fatalities had been extremely tempting, but with the general earthquakes and Demonic Disjunctions since this battle had started, unleashing more problems would in all likelihood return itself against her.

No, the only gate in Commorragh she had modified was the one she had told Archmagos Lankovar to wait nearby in order to throw Objective I in it. Assuming it had functioned correctly – and there were no reasons and evidence to believe the contrary – the ‘present’ of the Emperor must have reached Sicarus by now.

“In this case, I believe the simplest way to discover it would be to ask the xenos.”

Plenty of guardsmen and Space Marines waiting outside the Baneblade *Machine’s Loyalty* chuckled, courtesy of the vox-casters relaying the voices. The only ‘questions’ between humans and their long-eared enemies had been voiced with bayonets, lasguns, artillery shells, and macro-batteries’ ammunition.

“All right,” Taylor stood as she finished swallowing her last ration and began the fastidious procedure to re-seal her helmet. “I want the status on the primary objectives.”

“Objective A is one hundred percent accomplished General,” Marshal Werner Groener declared after saluting. “The Mechanicus 3rd, 4th and 9th have finished pillaging and looting everything of value which was recoverable in the Port of Lost Souls. Port Carmine and Port Shard are total losses for our enemies; they won’t be able to do build capital ships in these realms for centuries if ever.”

“On Objectives B and C, I regret to say we have not done so well,” the hololithic projection of Chapter Master Dupleix of the Iron Drakes announced on her command table. “We have eliminated hundreds of clones of Urien Rakarth and Asdrubael Vect, but each secret facility we discover has one or two back-ups, somehow, and that’s not counting all the ‘supreme leaders’ we’re slaying in the streets which are persuaded to be the real leaders while in reality they’re just doubles used to distract us. Chapter Master Isley’s kill-team has also reported slaying blowing dozens of replicas.”

That was...annoying. She had really, really hoped to kill those two, and not just because these two monsters had massive bounties on their heads – Vect’s was recent, but it was worthy of attention.

No, these two psychopaths had caused billions of deaths and could cause far, far more.

Unfortunately, she had not the time to search sub-realm after sub-realm of Commorragh to end all the clones and their secret gene-lairs of horrors and damnation.

“Stop your search, Chapter Master. We will just have to hope the damage we caused to these two was enough to set them back their plans for centuries.”

“Yes, my Lady.” The image of the Chapter Master flickered out.

“Obviously, Objective D was successfully dealt with,” she had killed personally Drazhar, after all. “Objective E?”

“The containers have been sent to Pavia,” the Cadian Marshal assured her. “There have been several ambushes from the Arch-Enemy, but the Custodes and the escort have fended them off.”

Good, it would have been a pity to negotiate with Trazyn only to be robbed of the ‘gains’ before they were out of Commorragh.

“Since we were speaking about the Heracles Wardens a moment ago, have they been successful localising the whereabouts of the Khan?”

“No, my Lady,” Gamaliel said sadly. “They continue searching for the ‘Black Gate Prison’, but so far they have found nothing.”

Taylor clicked her tongue in annoyance. Of all the Objectives she was given, why was it this one her forces and she had to utterly fail?

Objective G was a success; it had cost them a lot, but most of the Commorragh fleets were exactly where they wanted them. Objective H, the manipulation of the Webway could be considered a success; the Webway section had not been severed, but since she had chosen an abandoned Gate close to one of Nocturne’s greatest calderas to link it to the Webway connection leading to Terra, she was rather sure the demons weren’t going to replicate an invasion there anytime soon. Objective I was going to bleed the Word Bearers by opposing them to a species more chaotic and prone to betrayal than them. And Objective J was prepared in the Port of Lost Souls.

“Chapter Master Izaz is in communication with Isley and his kill-team, right?” Taylor didn’t wait for an answer which was more a confirmation given what the flux of information she had heard via her insects during the last hours. “He will have to give them the bad news; they have thirty minutes before withdrawing to Zel’harst.”

“My Lady, we’re speaking about a *Primarch*,” Kratos spoke bluntly on her frequency as she left the protection of the Baneblade to return to the familiar smoke-filled, blood-stained wrecked landscape of Commorragh.

“I’m aware we’re speaking about a son of the God-Emperor,” the ‘Saint’ stated since there were hundreds of people in the vicinity listening to their conversation. “But even with my swarm, so far we haven’t found a single clue beyond the last words of a dead White Scar.”

The body of the son of the Khan had been transferred to the Iron Drakes Apothecarium. If nothing else, the White Scars would be happy to have it back.

“Psychic levels are rising again and I can’t afford to let the Army Group and the rest of our allied forces stay here. We’re too vulnerable, and each hour is costing us thousands of wounded and dead veteran soldiers. The only reason I’m willing to give thirty minutes is because Archmagos Cawl hasn’t finished extracting everything transportable from the Core Gate yet.”

The psychic device had cost her seven good Librarians - two Salamanders, one Angel Sanguine, one Howling Griffon, and the two Crimson Scions – and put out of commission the thirteen survivors. But it was out of the question to allow the Ruinous Powers or anyone else to grab the sentient diamond-crystal – as the entity communicating thought-to-thought with her had so kindly informed it was *the* diamond, not hidden somewhere in the room. Without the principal focus, the keys, the jewels and most of the systems allowing its activation gone, what she had done with the Core Gate would not be reversed so easily.

“This may be so, but my Lady, the opportunity isn’t going to repeat itself,” the Flesh Tearer insisted.

The ground shook as to approve Kratos’ words. No, this was inexact. The entire sub-realm shook.

A powerful shriek echoed in the distance, and a fortress which had been under the Andes artillery’s bombardment suddenly exploded...but the smoke which materialised was not the dark black – not as dark as the Eldar’s souls, said the jokers – it was pink.

The veil separating Webway and the Warp began to thin. Millions of screams, none of one belonging to a mortal’s voice, began to be heard.

“Let me rectify my previous command,” the recipient of the Star of Terra ordered her forces by vox and insect communication. “Forget the half-hour, general retreat! General retreat, immediately! All forces, pack your gear and your equipment, and begin a fighting withdrawal to Zel’harst!”

Damn it, they had been too overconfident. She should have just taken the diamond-crystal and forgotten the rest. But they had stopped Biel-Tan’s attacks and slaughtered the defences of Corespur.

Deep inside, she prayed she was wrong. That they still had time.

But as the infernos began to burn pink and the air began to be poisoned by a perfume no human or Eldar wished to smell, Taylor knew she wasn’t wrong.

Exactly three seconds later, six distant portals swirled in infernal shades and disgorged an unending army of pink abominations in Corespur.

“Now we’re out of time.”

**Major-General Helmut De Villiers**

“Merciful God-Emperor saves us...”

That, mused, Helmut De Villiers, was an exactly accurate summation for what had just materialised in Corespur.

In hindsight, maybe the luck of the Brigade he was nominally in command of would have been better if they hadn’t chosen the particularly challenging name of ‘Legion Punishers’.

The Cadian Major-General stopped this amusing thought there. In the end, whether it was bad luck, fate, or the avidity of several Tech-Priests to grab ever more archeotech which had brought them in this position, it didn’t change the fact the Arch-Enemy was there and most of the 9th Division was going to take the brunt of it in less than a minute.

The six Guard regiments had zero defensive lines; they had after all been the ones doing all the punishment. As if it couldn’t get worse, the Luminy 9th Armoured had been badly mangled thanks to the stupidity of Ludendorff. So the sole armoured regiment which could have possibly stalemated the gigantic abominations materialising a couple of kilometres away was in no state to do so.

“So Cadian blood will pay once more the price...” he muttered before turning towards his watch-dog also known in Low Gothic as a Commissar.

“We can’t stop them here,” Helmut said to the political officer bluntly. “The Luminy tanks are too weak, and the Polar Reconnaissance and the Toulon Drop Regiment are out of their depth in a fight like this. As for the Calypso Artillery, their Basilisks are too valuable to lose in a fight at close-quarters. I am going to lead the Fay 24th and try to delay them for as long as possible. Tell Brigadier-General Moreau I relinquish command of the 9th Division to him. Tell him to place the Nyx 34th in the rear-guard and to run back to the Zel’harst Gate.”

The representative of the Commissariat saluted, and Helmut realised after a few seconds it was the first time the man had done so.

“It has been an honour.”

“I’ve screwed up many times in my career...but Cadia stands.”

There was nothing else to say and the Major-General ran to the command Chimera of Colonel Utuskov.

“My men stand ready,” the brown-haired officer’s hands were shaking. “I can block the main avenue with my Chimera...”

“In other times, I would command your tactical skill, but it won’t serve our purposes. We won’t delay this horde by staying on the defensive. General attack, Colonel. We must attract all the attention of the Arch-Enemy if the rest of the Division is to survive.”

The preparations to reform the line didn’t last long. The one hundred-plus surviving the Chimeras had all been piloted by competent drivers, and while they had all expended more than fifty percent of their ammunition, it would not be too much a problem in this battle.

Helmut’s command vehicle took place at the centre of the line, as everything shook and the shrieks of the daemons increased to an unbearable intensity.

“THE GUARD STANDS FOREVER!” He shouted in the vox. “ATTACK! ATTACK FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

The armoured vehicles obeyed. At the fatidic hour, all the guardsmen answered the call of duty and pushed their Chimeras to meet the daemonic horde at full speed. The air felt corrupted and vile, even in the turrets blessed by the Adeptus Mechanicus. But the Fay 24th charged, gunning down quantities of horrors. With some surprise, the Major-General realised the Eldar broken armies they had been fighting were also trying to oppose – if quite ineffectively - the host of the Arch-Enemy.

The shock when they met the Warp abominations was impossible to describe. All the lights in the Chimera instantly turned a bloody red, and the shock was such it was like they had been punched by a Knight. But the armour held, and the weapons barked in anger. The vehicle was surrounded by claws, fangs and a sea of pink horrors.

“**FOR THE DARK PRINCE! FOR SLAANESH! FOR SLAANESH**!”

Helmut heard his driver scream as the proscribed name was repeated by a million daemons. Voices echoed in his thoughts, promising him wealth, power...

“Cadia stands forever,” the Major-General repeated. “Cadia stands forever. All the daemons are lies and evil incarnate. I serve the God-Emperor...and the line will stand.”

“**SURRENDER TO EXCESS! YOUR SAINT HAS ABANDONED YOU**!”

Infernal claws carved apart the plasteel and the other alloys of the front armour of the Chimera, and he had no choice but to draw his chainsword and open the turret, immediately cutting apart the two pink humanoids which had tried to tempt him.

The battlefield was a sea of monsters. There was pink everywhere, the skies of Commorragh were turning pink from the sickness of the Warp corrupting the place...not that they had much to do, considering how horrible the Eldar lair had been in the first place.

It was something you rarely saw outside the Black Crusade and the constant assaults coming from the raiders of the Eye...and there were things crawling in this horde of damned traitors and heretics that looked like Eldar but truly weren’t.

Helmut De Villiers cut down pink daemon after pink daemon trying to reach him, grimacing when he saw the catastrophic situation he was into. Most of the Fay 24th had been repelled several dozen metres behind his command vehicle, and-

“**SLAANESH! SLAANESH**!”

“Shut up and crawl back to the pit of horrors where you were born!” The Cadian snarled. “CADIA STANDS!”

“**CADIA WILL FALL**.”

Something huge came. Something that could look down to him, despite the fact he was on top of an armoured vehicle. Helmut had heard of such things, though he had never seen one with his own eyes. It was a Keeper of Secrets, one of the unholy abominations leading the Hosts of Heresy and Damnation.

“Cadia will stand,” he managed to utter, his rebreather mask making his voice more guttural than it was in reality. “For all your sorceries, your betrayals, your corruption, you have never managed to break our walls. For all your promises of power, you are never able to win when the numbers are roughly equal! You are...failures and lies.”

There was a flash of pink and purple, and Helmut’s body exploded in agony. When he opened his eyes again, he realised half of his body was lying on the ground, broken.

“**I WILL ENJOY TORTURING YOUR SOUL FOR ALL ETERNITY**!”

And that was when a hundred Helspiders assailed the abomination, making it shriek in a noise that was definitely indignant and surprised.

“My soul belongs to the God-Emperor...and Cadia stands.”

**Marshal Werner Groener**

This operation had gone so far beyond its parameters it was not even funny. Werner finished decapitating one of the female pink abominations with his power sword and grimaced when he saw the ocean of malice and heresy coming straight for them.

Only for the vanguard to immediately die as a gigantic worm and tens of thousands of Helspiders exploded out a hidden tunnel and began to inflict a massive amount of carnage onto the daemonic army.

“Colonel, please record that I recommend Major-General Helmut De Villiers for the Star of Terra,” in the encroaching darkness, General Taylor Hebert looked like the last beacon of light, and her crystal sword shredded the materialising abominations at mid-distance by the hundreds. All around her, the Space Marines tore apart everything which tried to assault their mistress with bolter and blade. “We will also reward the Fay 24th with the highest military awards possible. Their sacrifice allowed more than fifteen regiments to disengage.”

Werner wasn’t going to disagree. The Fay 24th had lost so many troops in this last mad charge they had attracted over three main hosts of pink daemons before their resistance broke. Ninety-five percent of their men had died...and yet, somehow, they had managed to save their regimental standard.

“Yes, General,” said Tanya Sevrev, Colonel of the Fay 20th.

“I am going to join Chapter Masters Ta’Phor Hezonn and Dupleix in the rear-guard. Commissar Zuhev, please ensure the artillery regiments are ready for the abominations once we will have returned to Zel’harst. And vox Lankovar, his forces can release all the dangerous insects I’ve kept in reserve until now. No need to tie up our hands anymore, the real challenge is here.”

And the ‘challenge’ was definitely impressive. There had to be billions of daemons pouring in Corespur. It was difficult to estimate because merely looking at the Warp horrors hurt, but there had to be over one hundred different hosts and more were coming every minute.

Even by Cadian standards, it was sheer insanity. To his shame, it appeared he had voiced it aloud as plenty of guardsmen’s heads turned towards him.

“More than you believe, Marshal,” the angelic-armoured woman replied as hundreds of thousands of Helspiders and Catachan ants were storming out of every hole to support the Space Marines one hundred metres in front of them. “More than you believe. Every demon we face today is here because their Ruinous Power expends energy to allow them to invade the Webway. With every demon banished, a lot of energy is lost. And the demonic hordes already suffer from the destruction of Commorragh. I’ve seen a few thousand monsters disappear since their emergence in Corespur. The laws of the Materium are taking back their due and the process is going to accelerate. In sixty hours at most, the forces of Excess are going to suffer the worst defeat in their existence.”

If the Emperor-favoured swarm-mistress said it, Groener was going to accept it. He could not help but feel a twinge of worry from the size of the opposition, though.

“Gamaliel, relay to the Abbess-Crusader the Frateris Templar have to accelerate their retreat. If one point of our echelon-defence stalls, it’s the entire flank of our army which is placed in danger. I don’t care if-“

“**WEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAVVVVVVEEEEEERRRRR**!”

The scream was loud and utterly reeking of evil and madness. Ten guardsmen of Atlas which were waiting to relay more orders to their regiment screamed and clawed their eyes with their bare hands, forcing the Commissars to give them the Emperor’s Mercy.

It was impossible to miss the thing which had spoken.

It was slithering in the heart of the nearest advancing horde. May the Holy Golden Throne protect them, it was gigantic; easily the size of a Knight machine, if not more.

Reality seemed to die where it went as the screams of the damned and the dying echoed in a heretical symphony.

It was a gigantic four-armed snake, which had somehow managed to acquire two wings and a vaguely humanoid head.

“My Lady, you always find the most interesting sort of abominations to anger,” the only back-armoured member of the Dawnbreaker commented with had to be a heavy dose of sarcasm. “Should we add this thing to the updated Endbringer list?”

“No,” the golden-armoured General retorted. “I think I have a rule that to be an Endbringer, there need to be a risk it will come back for a second round. And when we will have finished implementing Objective J, this thing won’t try to return in realspace for a million years.”

“I envy your confidence, Lady Weaver,” said the Salamander waiting nearby. “But it’s still a Daemon-Primarch and we need to defeat it.”

*Wait. What?*

“**WEAVER! COME TO FACE ME**!”

“I think I will have this decline this so-generous ‘invitation’. We have a few more surprises waiting for it at Zel’harst...”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Low Commorragh**

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

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

Asdrubael Vect should have been happy when he emerged from the Gate which had allowed him to escape the chaotic melee of High Commorragh. It wasn’t every day one was holding the decapitated head of a Dynast by his hairs, obviously.

The problem was that if things had gone according to the plan, Xelian would never have been decapitated. A Mon-keigh starship would have pulverised him and his entire progeny at the very onset of hostilities, while all the Haemonculi labs allied to the Dynast of the Red Sun suffered catastrophic malfunctions.

But the plan was gone, and the death of Maestros Xelian after all this destruction was done more to ensure the moron would not pursue him as they retreated in the Webway.

“How far are we in the preparations?” the Supreme Lord of the Black Heart asked, before realising the smell and the ambiance were wrong.

Everything was wrong. There were no disjunctions in Low Commorragh like there had been in High Commorragh or the Corespur – plenty of deserters and refugees had been quite insistent on the latter.

Asdrubael Vect activated on his wrist an expensive artefact - it had cost him enough to buy a virgin Craftworld slave - and uttered a forbidden word.

The world shifted to his eyes and the horrid smell went from bearable to absolutely repugnant. Deep inside, he knew nothing had changed. It was the illusion he had been bewitched which had been broken.

And the spectacle that now greeted his eyes was one which made his blood boil. Thousands upon thousands of his warriors stood to attention, but it was clear from the pink collars on their necks and the handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts behind them that their allegiance had recently changed.

It was total and utter defeat. There was nothing to salvage. Some delusional leader would have held to a last hope, but Vect, for as long as remembered, had decided to remain clear-sighted to the last breath. For millions of his warriors and his newly conquered subjects to have submitted to She-Who-Thirsts – the unending columns dragged by the Daemonettes were all the proof he needed – meant a large majority of his lieutenants had betrayed him.

And between the parody of honour guard which had ‘welcomed’ him, stood something which might have been an Aeldari once, but now had definitely lost the right to be called by this name.

“**Vect...at last you come**. **The Dark Prince had predicted your arrival**.”

To his horror, the Supreme lord of the Black Heart recognised this voice, as horrifyingly corrupted and distorted as it was.

“Rakarth?”

The laugh which answered him could not have been made by any Aeldari throat, no matter how hard one’s tried. And his disgust must have been a bit too evident, because the twisting shape surrounded by a pink cloud laughed again.

“**Surprised by my betrayal**?” yes, the old Haemonculus was definitely mocking him.

“By the act itself? No. By the identity of your ‘mistress’? Yes.” Everyone was willing to betray everyone. It was simply common sense to accept this fact. But every Aeldari, especially Rakarth, should have done better than allying with She-Who-Thirsts.

“**My mistress, as you say, has a proposition for you**.”

“I am not interested in hearing it, much less accepting it.”

This time, it was the turn of his interlocutor to be surprised.

“**You would refuse the blessings of Slaanesh?**” a storm of shrieks and screams of ecstasy hurt his ears. “**You, the blackest soul of Commorragh?**”

“Yes, quite the surprise isn’t it?” Asdrubael Vect gave a splendid smile. “And maybe, in different circumstances, I would have considered an offer coming from your mouth. But.”

He let the thing which had been a Haemonculus ask the question. To the end, he would irritate it...a fitting punishment for its betrayal. It didn’t escape him though the handmaidens of She-Who-Thirsts had him completely surrounded.

“**But?**”

“But the truth is, servants of She-Who-Thirsts, you have nothing to offer to me. I have analysed the plan of attack the Mon-keigh have used for their invasion of Commorragh, and between my last spies’ reports and what I have discovered on my own, I believe they have a genuine chance killing the Dark Prince.”

“**Ridiculous**,” the chaos Aeldari standing next to Rakarth scoffed.

“I prefer the term ‘humiliating’,” the being who had tried to engineered the demise of the Dynasts corrected. “I wonder how long it will take for She-Who-Thirsts to devour you again in a vain attempt to safeguard its existence...all these Disjunctions and invasions must have taken a lot of soul-energy...”

“**Swear yourself to Slaanesh and maybe we will forget your insults to the Lord of Dark Desires!**”

“Operation Scorched Commorragh authorised,” the former slave stated. “Codeword: Vect-Vect-Asdrubael-Execution-One-One-Abyss.”

“**You can’t kill all of us**,” the daemons screamed.

“My dears,” Asdrubael Vect smiled brazenly, “that sounds like a challenge.”

One heartbeat later the anti-Empyrean bombs - that no one but him knew the existence of - began to explode across Low Commorragh.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Corespur**

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

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

Most people didn’t believe a Space Marine could feel fear.

Aeonid knew it was an outright lie. The difference between a battle-hardened Space Marine and the average soldier of the Imperium was simply that it took far, far more to shock the former than the latter, and in the end an Astartes had psycho-indoctrination and inbuilt reflexes which would protect him even as his mind froze for a fraction of a second.

The Ultramarine Captain knew it, because at this moment he was very, very afraid. There were few things which could inspire fear in his two hearts, but the thing which had slain effortlessly his Primarch was one of them.

Fulgrim was here, and the Daemon-Primarch had not grown weaker after the battle of Thessala.

“**WEAVER! COME FIGHTING ME**!” screamed the serpentine abomination the Primarch of the Emperor’s Children had become, his four blades carving a massacre in the flesh of the Frateris Templar.

The military strategy of retreating towards Zel’harst could have worked. Slowing down the monster with a few million of insects and presenting an unbroken wall of several hundreds of Space Marines and heavy tanks had allowed hundreds of thousands of Skitarii and guardsmen to properly disgorge while the artillery could prepare a new saturation bombardment.

But there was a thing the sons of the Emperor had been renowned in the days of the Great Crusade, and this was their peerless strategic skills, not their sheer strength or their might – though obviously the latter was considerable. And it was once proved once more, delaying the forces protecting one flank and the most dangerous opponent in the daemonic hordes coming straight at them.

“**ARE YOU A COWARD**?”

The ground under the Daemon-Primarch exploded and dozens of Ambulls and Haemovores launched a surprise attack on Fulgrim, and the Naga was not quick enough to avoid everything...not when spiders had trapped its tail in their web.

And then a gigantic centipede larger than most super-heavy tanks charged the serpentine monster.

Aeonid would be badly lying if he didn’t feel a very large amount of satisfaction when the insect slammed in his Primarch’s bane and for the first time, the pink madness shining in the abomination’s eyes was not the least feigned.

“**I WILL KILL YOU**!” The Daemon-Primarch’s wounds all over its body healed in a fraction of a second and the centipede was soon the target of a true maelstrom of blades and was transformed into a badly crippled carcass. “**I WILL KILL**-“

This promise was interrupted by the Heracles Warden Dreadnought Pierre grabbing the tail of Fulgrim and twisting with considerable strength.

The serpentine daemon screamed.

“FULGRIM, I HATE YOUR HAIRS!” Aeonid laughed at the expression of the fallen Phoenician before charging in the melee, delivering his last bolter rounds filled with the special ammunition he had borrowed from the Sisters of Silence. Directed at the not completely healed wounds, the effect was terrible and soon the wounds were bleeding quite heavily in pink-purple blood.

“**I recognise you Ultramarine**...” the monster seethed. “How did it feel to fail to protect your Primarch?”

“It hurt,” Thiel recognised, “but it will get better soon. His murderer is going to be punished for his treachery.”

“**And how are you going to do this**?” the Daemon-Primarch mocked him. An uncorrupted Primarch would have not made the mistake to ask. While the battle had been raging, a Frateris Templar command vehicle had still been functional nearby and now it rammed the partially immobilised daemonic Naga.

And the rest of the Heracles Wardens had arrived, firing their volkite weapons while their Dreadnought brother had not released his hold on the tail.

“**I WILL KILL YOU ALL**!”

From head to edge’s tail, the Daemon-Primarch exploded in Warp pink energy and a gigantic shockwave threw away Space Marines and the other fighters.

“**I AM FULGRIM**!”

Rallying to the Traitor Primarch, Possessed traitors of the Third Legion ran to form a terrifying honour guard, and hundreds of thousands of daemons came on their heels.

“**I AM PERFECTION! DO YOU THINK I CAN BE BEATEN BY LOWLY MORTALS**?”

“Liar.”

A gigantic storm of insects rained upon the battlefield and the battered ranks of the Frateris Templar opened to let what appeared to be a million ants rushing to war.

And from the sky, a brilliant winged figure repelled the pink clouds and the chaotic-tainted energies.

Aeonid had rarely seen a spectacle so magnificent, and he had seen the Primarch of the Blood Angels fly.

“**So the Saint of my father deigns challenging me, at last**,” Fulgrim laughed, even as several of his corrupted sons were devoured and killed by the insect assault.

“Liar,” the golden-armoured woman repeated.

“**Oh**?” the Daemon-Primarch questioned. “**You seem under a few mistaken assumptions, fledgling Angel. Primarchs can embrace the Truth of the Universe**-“

“Youare not a Primarch,” Lady Weaver interrupted the condescending speech. “Possessing the husk of one does not give you the right to call the Emperor your father.”

Aeonid, like nearly all the people and daemons on the battlefield, froze at the words. By the ashes of Calth, there had been rumours throughout the Heresy, but...

“**YOU WILL RETRACT THESE WORDS**!” the scream had to be heard all over Commorragh. Dozens of men and women took their own lives, or collapsed in agony.

“Why?” the insect-commander asked whimsically as hundreds of Space Marines arrived to form a Honour Guard around her. “The true Fulgrim considered humanity above all xenos forms. He would not have tolerated taking the appearance of a Laer, a race his Legion had defeated and brought to extinction. And my ants can feel the bleeding where the original soul was ripped from. You are like the rest of your demonic breed: usurper, parasite and abomination. You disgust me.”

“**I am really going to take great pleasure killing you**,” the serpentine daemon hissed. “**And I will use you skull as a teacup like I did for the corpse of the Iron Hands Primarch**.”

“These are big words for an overgrown snake,” the angelic-looking woman as she drew a crystal sword and rose in the sky with golden wings. “But of course, you are unable to say anything but lies, don’t you?”

“**SLAANESH WILL TORTURE**-“

Something jumped from one of the multiple underground holes the Ambulls and the other insects had dug up, and a second later the false Daemon-Primarch screamed as a gigantic axe bit in its tail.

Aeonid was not easily surprised...but the presence of the newcomer was literally reason for a lot of surprise.

The newcomer was small in size, but its arms were easily more muscled than a Space Marine. And the reason why he could make this assertion was that the warrior wore only pants and not much else; the long beard and orange-dyed crest which remained of his hairs were not enough to hide the top half being not closed.

The warrior was a Duardin. Or like the Imperial authorities prefer to call them, Dwarf or Squat.

“By Grimnir!” and as befitted a race which was by galactic standards completely insane, the Duardin Slayer looked incredibly pleased. “I escape out of this damned prison and my Doom comes to me! Living Ancestors be praised!”

“**One or a thousand foolish heroes, it makes no difference**,” not-Fulgrim hissed. “**I am still going to kill you all**!”

The axe-wielding Duardin exploded in laughter.

“I am Champion-Slayer Borek, son of Burlek, of Karaz-a-Karak! A million enemies have made the same boast, and failed to deliver!”

“**You are a descendant of the rats hiding in the Galactic Core, waiting for the Gods to finish your last redoubts**!”

“Now that’s just not polite...*traitor*.”

Aeonid felt his presence seconds before he emerged from the tunnels. His armour was utter scrap, the like Ork brutes used for their equipment, and one of his hands had been replaced by a large metallic power fist, but the aura was unmistakeable.

“**You**...”

“Me.”

The Ultramarine Captain had come to Commorragh to free the Khan, a certainty which had been confirmed by the presence of a White Scar Astartes in the dark cells of Commorragh.

But this Primarch which stood like an indomitable rock as more diverse creatures emerged from the tunnels was not the Khan.

His name was Rogal Dorn, Praetorian of Terra, and Primarch of the Imperial Fists.

“**Praise Slaanesh! After Ferrus and Roboute, I will add you to my hunting collection, brother**!”

“YOU ARE NOT BY BROTHER!” Aeonid couldn’t remember the Praetorian shout like this but this was a scream which solidified will and determination into something unbreakable. “SOLDIERS OF THE EMPEROR! TERRA STANDS!”

“TERRA STANDS!”

And the legions went to war.

**Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius**

Never give an order that you know won’t be obeyed is one of the simplest commander learn when climbing the ranks.

And as a Primarch raised his fist and spoke to them, Theodora knew there was only one order to give and it was not ‘retreat’.

“TERRA STANDS! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR! ATTACK!”

The four infantry regiments of the Frateris Templar had bled and died hard in the last hours. More than half of the men and women who had donned the fleur-de-lys armours were dead. And yet in a triumph of faith over the frailty of limited endurance, her soldiers followed her into the inferno. Many jumped on the ants and the centipedes, using the biggest insects to take the higher ground and rain destruction on the daemonic horde.

But in the centre, the Space Marines could not hold against the serpentine monster. Despite their might, the Chosen of the God-Emperor were slain or thrown aside. The false-Primarch was simply too strong. It crushed dozens of insects with each strike of its blades. The battlefield turned into butchery where everything felt wrong. Hundreds of guardsmen and Skitarii arrived only to die fighting the evil hordes for mere seconds.

Theodora has her eyes on the Naga, and thus she sees it moving, its target incredibly evident. The serpent is going to strike the unprotected back of the Primarch. She sees an Iron Drake Terminator lose one leg and half of its body.

“LORD PRIMARCH! BEHIND YOU!”

Her blade breaks in her hand and Theodora dimly realises two of the four abominable blades have impaled her body. The power armour she secured before their departure...was not enough.

“**He doesn’t care about you, you know**,” the abomination laughed as her life faded away. “**He never wanted to be worshipped and each of your prayers hurt him more than ten thousand deaths**.”

“Liar,” the Abbess-Crusader replied. “You are all...liars.”

And with the death of the dying she used her last seconds to grab the swords and preventing the heretical creature to remove them from her body. Alone, she couldn’t have managed it. But she isn’t alone. Ants are pouring their light into her body, and from the corner of her eye, Theodora saw the Primarch strike a mighty blow in the head of the monster.

Light descended. More light poured and hundreds of thousands of insects swarmed the thing which had pretended to be a son of the God-Emperor.

Theodora Gaius closed her eyes for the last time.

**Abbess-Brigadier Galatea Dumas**

Galatea knew her superior and almost-mother was dead before her body fell to the ground. She knew it and yet she ran to save her body from the ravages of the abominations, slaying four in the process. The Abbess was with the God-Emperor now. There had been a flash of light when she closed her eyes, and the Abbess-Brigadier had no doubt His Most Holy Majesty had rewarded her for her sacrifice.

Dragging it away from the scene of the fight where the Primarch and the Saint were fighting the serpentine abomination was more complicated, but half a dozen soldiers of the God-Emperor were there to help her.

So concentrated was she on her task to protect the body of Theodora Gaius, she almost jumped when a very large commander of the Adeptus Mechanicus advanced and, pushing aside one Frateris Templar, strapped a device on the blades which had been used to kill the Abbess-Crusader.

“What do you think you are doing?” She barked angrily. “Who are you to-“

“I am Archmagos Belisarius Cawl and your Abbess-Crusader has been killed with the very blades and poison which were used to wound the Primarch Roboute Guilliman. Tech-Priests, prepare a stasis field. Extraction of the blades can’t be done here.”

“My Frateris Templar will escort you-“

“**DO YOU THINK I WILL ALLOW YOU TO STEAL MY BLADES?**”

The monster was suddenly there, flashing and killing, the Archmagos stood alone...

And suddenly there was a bright flash, a feeling of ozone, and an entire cohort of huge robots assaulted the pink-shrouded Naga.

“**I HAVE ALWAYS HATED YOUR PATHETIC BREED, CRIPPLED METAL-CREATURE**!”

“And I’ve always loathed your desire to attain perfection!” Belisarius Cawl snarled back. “The quest to improve ourselves, to climb back and improve ourselves genetically and technologically is what makes us humans! The Flesh is weak, and we must protect it!”

“**You are a problem I will enjoy getting rid of**,” the monster hissed, breaking two robots like they were nothing.

“And you, you should watch your back.”

The daemon contorted itself, but not fast enough to avoid the powerful blow of the Primarch, and once again a web of spider silk trapped the tail. Again, it didn’t last long but the blade of the Saint opened a large wound on the monster’s back, and the last daemons next to it were disintegrated.

One by one, the heroes of the Imperium took position. There were numerous and powerful: the Primarch, the Saint, the Chapter Master of the Salamanders, the Archmagos, and many other Space Marines and fighters, the short abhuman with the gigantic axe which had arrived before the Primarch.

“**Our father would be so disappointed by your behaviour**,” the daemon mocked Rogal Dorn, but there was no confidence in its done.

“My father, lying creature,” the Primarch of the Imperial Fists retorted, “has always praised the soldiers who eliminate parasites like you.”

**General Taylor Hebert**

Now that she had met one, Taylor’s opinion on the subject of Daemon-Primarch – or in this case, ‘False Daemon-Primarch’ - was that the Ruinous Powers had boosted them to a really unfair degree. Speed, corruption, strength, regeneration, command over the demonic hordes and even the totally disgusting ability to recreate blades from its own bones; the Arch-Demon of Excess was so far over what a Primarch was able to do – and the sons of the Emperor weren’t exactly small game - it was truly a terror.

Seriously, what the hell was it going to take it going to kill it?

Axes and blades had pierced its scales. Five times Ondu Terrors had trampled it, there were tens of thousands ants trying to eat it despite how lethal the ‘food’ was, many her spiders were hard at work burrowing beneath the scales, the Helspiders had removed five times one of its arms, and the Nebula’s Shard had easily inflicted hundreds of wounds.

And yet this abomination simply refused to be removed from reality. Not even the light she was able to imbue her sword with was effective to give it a fatal blow.

Part of her thoughts insisted it was a good thing. The more energy the Abomination of Excess poured into the snake-demon, the more it was going to be weakened in the next hours.

The rest of her mind simply wanted the monster dead. This abomination had cost her dozens of Space Marines, thousands of veterans, and her Frateris Templar commander. The insect-controlling parahuman had her differences with Theodora Gaius, but the woman had been a loyal commander and had stayed true to the end. Just for her sacrifice, Taylor was going to tear apart the demon.

“**You can’t win**!” because of course the horrible snake could not remain silent. “**Slaanesh is going to exterminate your pathetic army and reign supreme! Our armies are already surrounding you! Our victory is imminent!**”

The Naga had a very strange concept of victory. Since she had intervened against it, her swarm had forced the demon hordes to abandon over five hundred metres of terrain and more than six hundred Traitor Astartes had been killed. The artillery which was not at Zel’harst was sending a rain of destruction on the pink horrors and the shock of the initial onslaught was gone. Ultimately, neither the Guard nor the Mechanicus forces could win this battle, of course, the demons were simply too numerous, but for the moment the outcome was definitely in their favour.

No, victory was not impossible to claim. The only problem was how to deliver the killing blow to this snake-demon without getting killed in the process.

And without getting the Primarch killed, obviously. The sheer presence of Dorn was extraordinary. The Custodes’ charisma and aura was paltry in comparison. Watching the Primarch of the Imperial Fists was like meeting a living mountain, a force of legend somehow shaped into a humanoid body. His voice was the echo of every rally which had resonated over millions of battlefields. His moves were those of the gallant champions standing on top of the ramparts ready to defend their homes. Many times from her insect’s side, the Primarch was appearing as a crusader, as an architect, or a master-builder across the different millennia of Earth.

But there was no denying the equipment Rogal Dorn had equipped himself would have raised no eyebrow on an Ork Warboss, and his health mustn’t have been great before he raised his blade in this battle.

Though fortunately, the thing which was definitely a Daemon-Primarch in power had not the ability to enrage him.

“**I wonder if your sons would accept pilgrims onboard of the *Phalanx* when they will want to pray over your corpse in stasis!**”

This mockery would have been a bit more impressive if Cawl didn’t seize the opportunity for cutting the edge of the tail. The daemonic ‘flesh’ began to regenerate immediately, but more energy had been expended.

Bolters fired, bringing revenge and punishment onto the monster.

“**You have failed, tiny Saint**,” the serpent taunted her. “**Cadia will burn and then it will be Terra’s turn!**”

Daemons were really not logical creatures, weren’t they? The General in her wondered how Terra was going to be under attack when for the last millennium the Ruinous Powers had routinely failed to bring a single Kars’ wall of Cadia, never mind burning the famous Fortress World.

And then a gigantic Webway Gate opened in the skies of Corespur.

And this shape...Taylor had seen the same prow on the *Forgehammer*, albeit on a smaller scale.

It was a mountain of macro-batteries, armour and emerald, the ultimate expression of Imperial power.

Its very arrival was announced by pulverising the few dark Eldar spires which still stood in this sub-realm of Commorragh.

And then the immense battleship – and to her stupefaction, it was bigger than the Arks of the Adeptus Mechanicus – fired a full salvo against the Enemy.

The demonic hordes had bled and suffered. This blow, however, disintegrated their formations.

The Salamanders’ reaction was far more vocal.

“VULKAN LIVES!”

**Aurelia Malys**

The humans were truly insane.

The problem was that the more craziness they tried in Commorragh, the more it seemed to work in their favour.

Aurelia and the Aeldari surrounding her had watched the gigantic battle as they tried to find a Gate to lead them out of the Dark City. The human forces had been outnumbered significantly. Many of their elite Space Marines had fallen. The size of the enormous swarm, for the first time, was not enough to guarantee victory.

And then the new madness had come.

A gigantic battleship, greater than any starship ever built by the Aeldari since the Fall, had translated in the Corespur, pulverising the mighty Xelian’s spire and four other air-bastions, and the only reason it had not done more damage was because the other towers and top structures had already been destroyed by the heavy fighting.

The fact another battleship followed the monstrous reptile-themed starship out of the Gate a micro-cycle later just confirmed what she had already known.

The humans had won.

By this point, it didn’t matter that this small-eared race could not coordinate a two-pronged invasion by different Gates given their limited knowledge of the Webway. It didn’t matter that they had left thousands of their elite warriors and hundreds of thousands bodies on the different battlefields of Commorragh. The behaviour of the forces, their willingness to retreat, and the carnage they had inflicted to the Aeldari and to She-Who-Thirsts all pointed to the same conclusion: the invaders had won.

And everyone else had lost.

Maybe in a few thousand cycles, assuming that she lived that long, Aurelia could have felt sad about seeing the Corespur consume itself in the flames of destruction and damnation. But this society hadn’t given her anything but slavery and humiliations, and it was only when the rule of the Dynasts had crumbled that she had begun to exist as more than an anonymous slave. Aurelia hadn’t enjoyed her stay at Commorragh and the collar around her neck, and few of those who followed her now had a single good thing to say about the games the Archons, Admirals, and Great Nobles had played with their lives.

“Where will we go, Lady Malys? The Gates to Shaa-Dom and Pandaimon have fallen to the forces of She-Who-Thirsts, and I doubt we have the strength to overwhelm even one of their garrison forces.”

This was a good question. Originally, Aurelia had seen three options. The first was to take refuge in a sub-realm not too far from Commorragh, using the opportunity provided by the fact her column by now had grown to almost five thousand refugees, deserters and conscripted warriors. Pandaimon and Shaa-Dom would have been too dangerous for them, but there were small dimension pockets here and there, and hopefully one could have been used as a safe haven. The second, assuming the Dynasts won the battle, would have been to flee to a Maiden World and abandon all ideas to return in the Webway forever.

It was evident these two approaches weren’t going to work. So it left the third.

“We are going to take the silver Gate surrounded by four statues of Megasaurs. It will take us to Craftworld Ulthwé.”

“Craftworld?” asked an Aeldari woman who given her clothes had been in the courtesan circles for far longer than she. “Aren’t we going to suffer their wrath for not helping the idiots of Biel-Tan?”

It was very well her interlocutor didn’t know what most of her fighting force had done to ‘convince’ the Biel-Tan Aspect Warriors to let them go.

“I don’t think so. Ulthwé and Biel-Tan are both sovereign realms on their own right, and their leaders are regularly shouting at each other.” Or so the rumours from captured prisoners and whispers from bitter warriors had informed her. “The forces of She-Who-Thirsts can predict some of our moves, but I don’t think they will have anticipated this one.”

“Let’s hope you are right. We have not the strength to oppose one of the Legions fighting the Angel of Death and her swarm...”

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Despite Nyx being a Sector of little importance, it had not escaped the multitude of rumours concerning the Space Marines. Some were completely out of touch with reality, their origins likely propagated by people who had never met a single Astartes in their lives.

There were some which included more realistic facts. The Ultramarines were Champions of the Codex, though Gavreel had not met one until Commorragh and thus was unable to say how much they truly adhered to it. The Blood Angels were perfect angels, as beautiful as Sanguinius himself had been. And the Salamanders were genuine giants, despite a rather impressive appearance, the very antithesis of the warmongering maniacs also known as the Black Templars.

This may very well be so; Gavreel had not lived next to Salamanders to have a definitive opinion about them: two days of battle were not enough to give a final judgement.

But it was best not to forget the Salamanders were Space Marines. They had been built for the terrible wars of the Great Crusade.

And the gigantic battleship now dominating the skies of Corespur was the *Flamewrought*, one of the many Gloriana-class battleships which had been declared ‘missing in action’ since the Great Heresy.

There simply was no other monstrous Salamander’s flagship of this size built since M31.

And this meant the drop pods which fell on the burning daemonic-infested battlefield of Commorragh were filled with Space Marines who had survived the Isstvan Atrocity, better known as the Drop Site Massacre.

To say they were burning to avenge their losses and punish the abominations and the traitors was, if anything, greatly underestimating the truth.

“**Well, well...what have we here**?” the Naga hissed as a Drop Pod disgorged a platoon of Salamanders in battle-scarred power armours. “**The failures have returned**...”

If it had not proved before that the daemons had no instinct of self-preservation, this was more confirmed now.

The new Salamanders didn’t utter a word, they just opened fire, and the weight of the heavy weapons they had all hit the serpentine body, adding flames and ammunition which had been banned from the Imperial inventories. Burning with a palpable fury, hundreds of Astartes pulverised tens of thousands of daemons and forced the rest to retreat or face utter annihilation.

And then new drop pods crashed the burning spires, and the newcomers needed no presentation.

“DORN LIVES! THE ETERNAL CRUSADE CONTINUES FATHER!”

With a helmet on his head, it was difficult to guess what the Primarch was thinking, but his stature did not look pleased.

Anyway, these new arrivals had proved enough to turn the tide. Everywhere the hordes of the Warp were pulverised, and though more were coming, the guns of two battleships were decimating them before they had the time to come at close-quarters. And new transports were arriving from the Webway, shuttles already descending to provide Guard reinforcements.

As for the thing which had pretended to be the Primarch Fulgrim, his endurance was not in the least diminished, but he had not managed to kill anyone in several minutes, and the mid-range guns were ensuring it stayed that way.

“**You should have chosen a better sword, little Saint**,” the monster laughed, despite having one of his arms cut again by Mechanicus ancient blades and thousands of spiders immobilising two others.

The answer of Lady Weaver was incredibly fast, and before Gavreel or any member of the Dawnbreaker Guard had any time to shout a warning, their Lady had jumped and delivered a terrible strike to the head of the Excess daemon...parried mere centimetres away from its goal by the fourth arm of the creature.

“**Tell me...how does it feel to be a failure? How does it feel to abandon your forces to die to the True Gods of this galaxy?**”

Nebula’s Shard and daemonic blade were clashing, but for all the golden energy fighting the pink corruption, Gavreel could see it was a combat Taylor Hebert was not going to win. The Ruinous Power empowering the Naga had made it too powerful, and besides the rest of the fighters had been forced to stop firing least they hurt her.

“I have a message for the abomination you call a God,” Gavreel felt his hearts soar in hope, as the Basileia’s voice had definitely a lot of viciousness in her tone.

“**A message**?”

“Tell him that there will be no next time.”

And on her right arm, a golden protection was ejected, revealing a dark-coloured handle that Gavreel had seen once when it was confiscated off the third Callidus assassin.

And then Weaver activated the green blade of energy and stabbed the snake-daemon right between the eyes.

“**AAAAAAARRRGGGHHHHH!**”

The serpentine abomination screamed, and for each scream the C’Tan blade stabbed the daemon in the face again...and this time the wounds didn’t heal anymore. The Naga screamed harder.

The Nebula’s Shard began again to shine with magnificent golden energy.

“Crawl back to hell, and tell your friends it was Weaver who ruined you face, usurper,” the green and the golden blades shattered the last daemonic blade and pierced the daemonic scales where a heart was supposed to be.

There was a terrible explosion...and when the light dissipated, there was nothing but a vast amount of pink goo and fading corruption.

“VULKAN LIVES! VULKAN LIVES!”

“THE DROP SITE VENGEANCE BEGINS!”

“AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR!”

**General Taylor Hebert**

In a fairy tale, the death of the enemy leader would have convinced the rest of his troops to see the error of their ways and the misguided bad guys would thrown down their weapons and surrender.

The Battle of Commorragh was not a fairy tale. In fact, Taylor was going to say it lacked the core ingredients for it.

Too many heroes had died to achieve victory. After so many losses, so much bloodshed...the insect-mistress was just feeling numb.

And unfortunately, removing the serpentine abomination which in power if not in name had been a Daemon-Primarch had not banished the rest of the demonic legions with it.

The monsters were still pouring by the millions into Commorragh and Corespur, and her swarm could not hold it at bay eternally.

“The *Flamewrought* must immediately withdraw back to the Desaderian Gulf,” she ordered to the Space Marines around her. “Once our retreat to Zel’harst will be over, the monsters will not take long turning their anti-air and flying assets against the starships.”

“I agree,” the Salamander Captain who had presented himself as William Castor, commander of the Eighteenth Legion’s 9th Company replied. “But since our Navigator has died valiantly to lead us there, our forces will stay there and fight with our brothers and our cousins.”

Taylor shook her head, feeling a small tinge of amusement. Most people would try to flee Commorragh as fast as it was technologically possible – but not these Space Marines. While she had no idea of the torments they must have endured lost in the Warp, it was obvious these Astartes warriors had fought during the Heresy, with their Great Crusade-era armours and their battle-cries.

“As you wish,” Taylor was not going to refuse the support of four hundred eighty-four additional Salamanders, supported by sixty-two Raven Guard Legionaries and the tanks and other weapons they had brought with them. “You are temporary placed under the command of Chapter Master Hezonn. We will determine later the questions of seniority. Shadow Captain?”

The black-armoured Raven Guard was...well, he was seriously different from every Space Marine she had met until now. Gavreel wore black armour too, but these Legionaries seemed to bathe in the shadows and strike at the most unexpected moments. Watching them fight was a surreal experience.

“We will join your forces and strike from the shadows,” the black-haired son of Corax promised.

“Thank you.” Taylor turned to Marshal Groener. “Inform the Desaderian officer I want all his troops at Zel’harst within the hour. I do not care how many grudges he has with our enemies, now is not the time to settle them.”

“I will transmit the order,” the Cadian officer declared. “But I must warn you about not expecting the kind of discipline and training you built with Army Group Caribbean. They have a lot of conscripts and nothing has prepared them to Black Crusade-levels of opposition.”

The General nodded, conceding the point. Of course, it was an excellent question what the Munitorum had been thinking when it mustered these inexperienced troops to fight for a conflict against the Eldar. The Desaderian troops had a lot of infantry and not much else.

“If I could spare him, I would send Zuhev,” it would cost her a few lives, but at least the officers of this Guard expeditionary force would understand her words weren’t to take lightly. Alas, there were so many problems with the retreat of the 1st and 2nd Army crippled regiments that she needed Zuhev where he was, preventing the troops from panicking and executing the soldiers who had fallen to demonic corruption. “But I can’t.”

In moments like this, the lack of high-ranked officers was a major thorn for the tactical and strategic decisions. The Commissars were overwhelmed by the number of tasks they had to care of, and the few competent officers who had survived and thrived were sharing the same predicament.

“The self-preservation of your army takes priority over the salvation of a lesser command. You can’t reinforce failure when your own situation is so perilous.”

No doubt that if she asked her staff later, they would provide her a hundred different answers as to how they had perceived the voice. As for herself, she thought the voice curiously looked like Legend when they had been gathering to battle Leviathan.

But when she turned her head to meet the blue eyes, the sensation was not like watching Legend at all. There was no parahuman equivalent. The Primarch was simply beyond every cape of Earth Bet.

The blue eyes were capable of deep warmth and yet colder than an iceberg. The visage was like a marble decorated with snow-like hairs, magnificent and yet terrible, fuelled by an implacable purpose. The armour he had somehow managed to forge was bronze-coloured scrap, and yet with it the son of the Emperor could move faster than most Space Marines.

His very presence was absolutely crushing. Most soldiers had fallen to their knees the moment battle was done, like only the carnage had prevented them from feeling the aura of domination and power.

Suddenly, it was easy to acknowledge why so many bureaucrats were rumoured to be afraid at the idea of a Primarch returning.

“I bow to your experience, Lord Primarch.”

The primogenitor of the Imperial Fists made a sound that was like the laughter of mountains.

“My experiences of the Great Crusade never involved invading the Webway and kicking the Eldar sociopaths between their ears,” Rogal Dorn admitted. “A pity it didn’t. This lair of pirates deserved destruction a thousand times over. Please walk with me.”

Taylor mustered a couple of thousands more insects and followed in the steps of the giant transhuman. Technically, she remained in command of the entire operation, but she knew the Primarch could have asked for it and immediately received it. The sons of Emperor’s authority were largely surpassing those of a mere General by law and custom. And like her, Rogal Dorn was recognised as a Saint, though maybe he was not aware of this fact.

The Black Templars and her Dawnbreaker Guard followed them, though they stayed at good distance.

The Primarch did not go far, just a few hundred metres to reach a set of prominent Eldar stairs with some similarities to white marble. The son of the Emperor used the ruin as an improvised seat.

A sigh escaped his lips and suddenly the Primarch looked very, very old.

“It was not supposed to be like this, you know. We were to be the heralds of an age of logic and reason.”

Taylor did not say this age was long gone. The Primarch knew far better than her how the golden age promised had been slain by the traitors.

“How bad is the behaviour of my sons?” asked bluntly Rogal Dorn.

Taylor hesitated, before deciding honesty was the best policy.

“I have only met the Death Strike Chapter,” aside from the sons of Sigismund, it went without saying, “but from I understood from the descendants of the Blood Angels, the Imperial Fists and their main Successors are credit to your teachings, fortifying the Imperium against all threats and punishing traitors.”

“And the Black Templars?” the tone employed was a very big warning sign Dorn had already an opinion on the subject.

“Most of the Chapters, and this include the Flesh Tearers, consider the Eternal Crusaders fanatic warmongers which have succumbed to the same lies the Ecclesiarchy had poured into the ears of the Imperial citizenry. And while investigations have been nearly non-existent due to this very same faith, it is kind of obvious the Chapter of the High Marshal has violated every Codex rule and restriction in the last millennia.”

“It was supposed to be a punishment and an act of penance,” the Praetorian of Terra murmured. His voice was barely audible now. “Sigismund had begun to understand...duty always comes first.”

The Imperial artillery continued to bombard the demonic lines. Her swarm continued to keep the rank-and-file of the horrors at bay. The carnage continued in the wrecked sub-cities of Corespur, with some forces of Eldar trying to fight on their own the abominations.

And the Primarch, for all his formidable aura and huge size, looked incredibly human and vulnerable.

“What happened to you, Lord? The stories are a bit contradictory on the subject.”

And it was probably a big underestimation. For every ‘historical work’ – sponsored by your friend the Imperial department of Propaganda – the fate of the Primarch differed. For some he was dead, buried in a gigantic amber coffin in the heart of the *Phalanx*. Others mentioned a tomb next to the Golden Throne. The most reliable texts – taken from Astartes libraries – had mentioned a space battle against Traitor Astartes which had went wrong, leaving only a bisected hand. Since one of Dorn’s hands was a metallic power fist now, this story had had a core of truth in it.

“I went on a hunt to kill one of my treacherous brothers,” the blue eyes regained strength and power. “You may know him as Alpharius.”

Taylor blinked.

“Lord, Alpharius is dead...or at least he was declared dead.”

“Oh he’s dead,” the Primarch confirmed, “though it was a massive undertaking to confirm it. I killed a very successful clone of him in the Battle of Pluto, months before the true Siege. Between the physical surgeries, the retro-viruses and all the other forbidden technologies the Space Marines of the Twentieth used, it was a bit difficult to discover where the Primarch was in this nest of snakes.”

Taylor knew what Dorn was going to say.

“There never was a single Primarch of the Alpha Legion. There were two. And I feared Omegon managed to survive the attack of Guilliman on Eskrador. So I went on a hunt to eliminate him. Only to learn it was a trap as many Traitor ships ambushed my fleet. I led a boarding operation on one of the enemy battleships, but the Warp drives weren’t neutralised in time. And we were lost in the Warp for a long, long time, without a Navigator, half of the crew butchered by our own fists and enemies with every reason to take us with them in death.”

It was not hard to guess what had happened next.

“And once you translated back into realspace, you were assaulted by an Eldar fleet of Commorragh.”

Rogal Dorn laughed, though the sound lacked warmth or happiness.

“A good try...but no. There were three ships, I think, and two only watched from afar.”

Only one?

“This single ship just entered range long enough to let one of their female ‘Wyches’ reach the hangar bays. Long enough to begin the massacre. My sons and the treacherous dogs of the Twentieth all died fighting her. I’d never seen this before in my life. This she-Eldar fought with just two knives and half-naked...and we weren’t even able to scratch her.”

The Primarch had a haunted expression, like he was in throes of a nightmare.

And suddenly, the words of a dying pirate came back into her mind.

*But there is another Queen in the Webway. If you see her, flee.*

“And she cut your hand.”

“And she cut my hand,” the Imperial Fists Primarch repeated, “though as I was wounded and exhausted, this killer must not have been satisfied by the one-sided defeat she handed me and departed without slicing my throat. Alas, her ‘allies’ arrived shortly after and dragged me to the prisons of Commorragh. A few White Scars found me in the past centuries, certainly under the guidance of Jaghatai, but each time the attempted evasions ended in blood and failure. I believe you know the rest of the story.”

Yes, she did. Some forces in league of the Ruinous Powers must have reoccupied the battleship after Dorn’s capture, and when the Imperial Fists and their Successors located it again, they only had the severed hand of a Primarch and no clue about the exact sequence of events.

“Well I can’t make any guarantee on the subject, Lord Primarch, but I have excellent Biologis in my service and the rest of the Mechanicus owes me a few favours. I’m sure they will be able to grow you a new hand on realspace...”

The Primarch stood again, reminding her how impossibly tall he was.

“Ah, yes. I’m afraid I will not go with you.”

At first she believed she had misheard him, but looking at his resolute expression one second, Taylor knew this wasn’t the case.

“But Lord Dorn...the people of the Imperium needs you...the news of your survival alone!” instinctively she went on one knee, only to be raised gently by the intact hand of the Praetorian.

“You have the same priorities as Sanguinius, you know? Maybe your soldiers had a point about you deserving the blonde hairs...” Taylor blushed. These traitors would pay for that.

The Primarch looked at her with eyes filled with sadness.

“I think you overestimate my influence and my political power, young General. I am the Praetorian of Terra, not its High Administrator. To put the fear of my father in the bureaucrats, it was to Malcador or Guilliman’s door I went to knock.”

“But...”

“But whether I overestimate it or not, I will not abandon Jaghatai in the Webway when many of sons have endured unspeakable torments to free me. I was not always a perfect brother, but the Khan has never betrayed my trust and he came to my help many times in the past. Saving him is more important than the other obligations I owe to the Imperium.”

Taylor instantly knew the Primarch would not bulge on this point. And to be fair, was she supposed to convince him to? One of her goals had been to find the whereabouts of the Khan. By letting his brother go to save him, the insect-mistress technically fulfilled the spirit of her orders.

“You will have to hurry, then. We have prepared...something the demons aren’t going to like. The Webway around Commorragh is going to be slightly changed by it, I’m afraid.”

“I feel the fingerprints of my father over this entire operation,” Dorn smiled before handing her a small vial of blood. Well, small for his hand. “A small sample of my blood,” explained the primogenitor of the Imperial Fists. “With gene-wright’s help, create a new Chapter of Fists to help you in your battles. Ask my sons spread all over the galaxy to train your new aspirants. And in exchange...” The blue eyes turned more melancholic. “Please lessen the fanaticism and the insane practises of my Black Templars.”

“I’m used to impossible missions and miracles, Lord Primarch,” Taylor bit her lip before answering, “but I’m afraid this task is a bit over my capabilities...”

The Primarch Rogal Dorn laughed and for the first time it truly looked like a genuine smile.

“I’m not expecting miracles. But your...status...and the defeat of the Naga should give you enough good points to control their excesses until I return.”

The gaze of the Praetorian returned to the white-back Space Marines waiting nervously at a respectful distance of their location, silent statues as the retreat of the Imperial Guard accelerated.

“I will give them a few words of my own before leaving.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

**Forty-six hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Marshal Hermann Malberg**

Hermann was shedding tears, and behind his helmet he was sure the eyes of each and every one of his two hundred and thirty-four Templars were tearful too.

They had been reunited with their Primarch for less than one hour, and their Father was already leaving them?

If the Marshal had thought protesting would have done any good, his words would have been heard loud and clear, but his gene-sire’s presence was crushing by its very existence his thoughts.

And frankly, no Black Templar could contest that if it was possible, the Primarch of the White Scars needed to be rescued. Oaths had been sworn on the ramparts of the Imperial Palace, and lives had been mutually been saved.

“Do not succumb to despair, my sons. The light still shines and the age of shadows will have an end, like every lie and artifice of the Enemy. I will return and once more take command of the Phalanx when I will have found my brother. So I have sworn. So it will be.”

Hermann Malberg wanted to say a united force of several Space Marines could do this job, but honour...

The honour of the Legion was at stake, and oaths were not to be forsaken.

“In my absence, you will obey the commands of Lady Taylor Hebert.” Their Father commanded them, posing his sole armoured hand on the shoulder of the God-Emperor’s Living Saint. “You will not forget the Seventh Legion was made to protect the Imperium of Mankind and the trillions of humans living on its planets. Remember that for all the might of the Crusades, no conquest is sweet if you come back on a loyal world to find the foundries in rebellion, the citizens enslaved and order collapsing everywhere. An enemy is not awaited behind the walls if you can pre-empt its coming, but the walls mustn’t be left unmanned. Our enemies always take our advantage of our absence.”

“Yes, Father,” the commander of the Commorragh Crusade answered, followed by all the Sword Brethren, Initiates and Neophytes. The Primarch had opened a new path for the Black Templars, and like Sigismund himself, they would thrive on it for the greater glory of the God-Emperor, their Sire, and the Imperium.

“You will repeat my words to your brothers in the other Chapters across the galaxy. You will reassure them that while I have lost a hand in combat, my determination has never been greater to rebuild the Imperium to the pinnacle of technology and magnificence we had reached at the end of the Great Crusade. Terra stands, my sons. We held it against overwhelming treachery and dark betrayals, and for all the shadows that have fallen the Imperium, we can always rebuild. Though your colours have changed, you are still Imperial Fists in blood and legacy. DO. NOT. LOSE.”

Each Black Templar struck his right fist on the location where ceramite armour protected his original heart.

“TERRA STANDS.”

Their Father turned to the strange abhuman which had accompanied him for most of the last hour. Hermann had ordered a rapid search in the data-libraries of the *Abhorrence*, but it indeed seemed there was a sub-species of humanities called ‘Squats’ – though for obvious reasons they preferred to be called ‘Duardin’.

“Our paths separate here, Borek. I hope you will find your way back to your Stronghold.”

“That, or my Doom will find me before!” and the small warrior burst into joyous laughter. “I have found someone who will lead me to mighty battles and worthy opponents. Plenty of grudges will also be avenged! Can an old Slayer like me ask for more?”

Their Father laughed too and clasped hands, each using a strength which would have pulverised Astartes bones.

The next handshake was far lighter, but lasted longer.

“Sanguinius would have been proud to count you among his Legion...” their Father told the winged General-Saint stoically. “Make sure the betrayers of the old dream pay. Build great fortresses with my sons and ensure the traitors despair. And never forget no defence is ever foolproof. What counts at the end of the day is protecting what you cherish.”

The Saint saluted once the hands were unclasped, and the Primarch returned the gesture.

Then the Primarch saluted them, his sons, and began to run away, followed by the ten-strong Honour Guard he had chosen – two Salamanders, two Iron Drakes, one Brother of the Red, one Howling Griffon, one Crimson Scion, one Angel Sanguine and of course two Black Templars.

Then their Father was gone.

And Hermann Malberg, Marshal of the Black Templars could only pray their Sire would return in his lifetime.

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

Time wasn’t a law the entities of the Empyrean cared about. That said, when one powerful Warp predator was banished from the Materium, the Power having created it could wait an eternity of torment and suffering before summoning it once again in its presence.

And in general, the more humiliating the defeat and the more plans ruined by the banishment, the longer the exile. The very idea did not sound bad in principle. In reality, it was a slow and agonising death for the banished. Far from the realms where their mistress-master reigned, daemons of one of the Four rapidly weakened. Denied the support of a Legion to handle the infinite mass of carrion soul-eaters, the hunter quickly became prey and was hunted in the depths of the Empyrean, all the while knowing it was a challenge and a punishment coming from their God.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh had been defeated badly and been unable to accomplish the will of Slaanesh, and thus had anticipated a very lengthy punishment before being summoned back to the Palace.

Instead the daemon was near-immediately summoned back, its scales bloodied and his ruined appearance a testimony of the harsh battle which had resulted in its banishment.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh hissed in utter loathing the very moment it re-emerged in the Avidity Circle.

For as long as it had ascended to the supreme favour of the Dark Prince, the entity which had been worshipped by the Laer race as a God had taken the name Fulgrim for its own.

Now it was unable to.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh muttered six hundred and sixty-six curses of undying enmity against the Anathema’s spawn. She was going to pay for that. Weaver was going to pay, and when her broken body was in its claws, six Legions of Excess would make sure her agony lasted until her soul was broken and begging for the mercy of Slaanesh.

Its body was wracked in abominable pain, and Fazar’nzlath’hesh realised the last wounds inflicted by the green blade were not healing at all. Those inflicted by the golden light were already gone, unable to withstand the aura of excess, but there were others not closing.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh screamed louder. As the daemon which had pretended to be the Primarch of the Third Legion for so long watched in a pool of liquid silver like one used a mirror, horror and loathing wracked it. Its noble visage, its precious appearance, was in ruins. Fazar’nzlath’hesh did not look like Fulgrim anymore...its face was now a horror, disfigured by plenty of scars and as much as he tried to pour infernal essence of selfishness and avarice on it, the scars simply didn’t vanish.

Only one great cure appeared in the mind of the thing which had usurped control of a Primarch’s body.

It had to devour Fulgrim’s soul. Once it was done, it would be truly Fulgrim again, and no one, not even this angelic menace, would be able to deny him.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh tried to call the pathetic Emperor’s Children. They needed to bring to its location the *Pride of the Emperor* immediately.

But the moment the words of loyalty came out from its mouth, they felt wrong and distorted. Utterly appalled, Fazar’nzlath’hesh was forced to realise Weaver had just not denied it the right to call itself Fulgrim. It had also crippled the sire bond existing between the essence it used to fuel its power and the gene-allegiance of the Third Legion. The scions who had been corrupted would still be loyal to Slaanesh, but Fazar’nzlath’hesh had no way to control them anymore!

The powerful daemon seethed before acknowledging the unavoidable: it was going to have to depart in search of the *Pride of the Emperor* by itself. Thankfully the Gloriana-class battleship should not be too far away and-

The thoughts of the formerly-recognised Daemon Primarch were brutally interrupted as an entire section of wall began to burn in an ugly taint of crimson fire.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh shook off the problems involving its appearance and realised for the first time since he’d arrived that maybe, just maybe, his God had not summoned it to begin a long list of humiliating punishments.

The skies over the Palace, which should be a languid pink, were tainted with flashes of crimson. Faint traces of nauseating sulphur were beginning to arrive to the nostrils of its Naga-like shape.

And as it used its weakened wings to fly over the First Circle, Fazar’nzlath’hesh screamed in rage once more. The forests, plains and cities of Excess built by its God were in flames, and there were uncountable Blood Legions rampaging everywhere, with many Bloodthirsters leading the charge.

Fazar’nzlath’hesh was fast. It was this speed which allowed it to avoid decapitation by gigantic axe to the list of recent humiliations it had suffered.

“**WELCOME, FAKE PRIMARCH**!” Ka’Bandha welcomed it with a roar. “**I HAVE A FEW LESSONS TO IMPART TO YOU. YOU WILL LEARN TO NOT TOUCH MY PREY**!

Before the Battle of Commorragh, dealing with this brute would definitely have been not easy, but probably doable. The Angel’s Bane was a brute, and as proven by Sanguinius, Primarch-empowered beings could and would defeat it with talent and flair.

Now?

Fazar’nzlath’hesh was weakened and badly wounded from its recent battle. And there was nowhere to flee save in front of Slaanesh.

Cursing Weaver six thousand six hundred and sixty-six more times, the winged Naga tried to fend off the attacks of the Bloodthirster.

Eight strikes later, its essence was sent crashing against the Wall of Avidity at subsonic speed.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Utar’ragh**

**Forty-six hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Marshal Lorelei Moltke**

It took a lot to shock a Mordian General.

The ‘Cthulhu’ weapon seemed to have a gift to achieve this feat without trying.

The fact she and no one else had ordered the weapon to be deployed a second time wasn’t exactly something that cheered her up.

Gone was the time when a single giant bouncing mass was massacring the enemies of Mankind. Now were more than a dozen of them, and the effect was particularly nauseating.

It was enough that these huge doom-like orbs were attacking with incredibly powerful lightning-like blasting attacks. They were also consuming thousands of corpses to get bigger, and the shrieking sonic attacks required everyone near the battlefront to weak earmuffs in addition to their helmets.

And from her position, she and her staff were a half-kilometre away from the closest ‘Cthulhu’.

If the things had been decimating any other thing than Eldar and *Daemons*, Lorelei would have felt quite guilty. As it was, it still gave her a deep sense of unease. It wasn’t the idea of killing the long-eared xenos; these bastards had chosen to come to Commorragh of their own volition; if they didn’t want to fight the Imperial Guard, they should have stayed away from this battlefield.

But in the privacy of her own head, the Mordian Marshal would have really, really preferred to use something conventional like a deathstrike missile and not be forced to rely on an invention which looked far too much the delirium of a Mechanicus heretek for her peace of mind.

“I wonder why the Nyx Mechanicus authorised this ‘Leet’ to build this thing,” Lieutenant-General Hannover wondered on her vox-frequency, speaking out loud having become quite rare with all the secondary effects of Cthulhu deployment. “We didn’t stay long on this Hive World obviously, but the impression I gained while fighting this battle was that the cogboys serving personally the General were extremely focused on efficiency, mass production and reliable weapons. This thing is not meeting any of these criteria.”

“I asked the same thing to Lord Dennis Peters,” the General’s representative had decided to not be addressed as ‘Lord Clockblocker’ of his own volition two hours ago when he departed to make his report at Zel’harst. “He told me most of Cthulhu is useless except for the gelatinous substance stabilising and containing what is inside the orb. The Mechanicus has apparently found some important use for other projects, but to properly study and replicate it, they needed a prototype. And once they didn’t need it anymore, well bringing the weapon to a warzone was apparently the logical conclusion.”

“No offence, Marshal, but I find that sometimes the logic of the Mechanicus is not one I would consider particularly sane,” the Sonasthi officer commented tartly.

“No offence taken, Lieutenant-General,” Lorelei replied. “I find myself in agreement with your views. General situation?”

“The flow of abominations coming from the eastern gates is slowing down a bit. So they are coming in hundreds of thousands instead of millions now.” The Marshal could not see the face of her subordinate, but there was undoubtedly a grimace on it. “But for the time being, the daemons seem to concentrate on fighting the armies of Biel-Tan and the ones which don’t are trying to neutralise the Cthulhu self-replicating weapons. With a rather distinct lack of success, I might add.”

The commanding officer of the 3rd Army nodded. After stabilising the front following the first major Biel-Tan offensives, retreat had been ordered to the major defensive lines prepared by the Mechanicus and the other support forces. And while it was not a standard Imperial fortress due to the lack of time and specialised materials, the cogboys and tens of thousands of workers had accomplished near-miracles. In mere hours, massive trenches had been dug, high walls had begun to be raised, countless killing grounds had been created and the artillery had hundreds of prepared positions to fire at the enemy without risking the precious cannons and artillery servants to be slaughtered by long-eared assassins.

Not that they had seen much of the latter in the last hours. Either the xenos bastards had had only a limited number of kill-teams with these assassins, or those they had were now busy fighting the monsters of the Warp. It was also possible it was both. And since the Skitarii had finally run out of vaults to loot and archeotech to grab with their mechadendrites, the fortified positions were now manned by the Skitarii Legions too, and she had the Legio Aeris Aestus to provide an extremely devastating bombardment.

Lorelei had decided to keep the ‘citadel’ word in the reports she was sending regularly to the Port of Lost Souls, but it wasn’t because this sub-realm of the Webway was a bastion for the xenos anymore. It was because humanity had entrenched itself there, and if the abominations wanted to dislodge them, they would have to pay a terrible price.

Otherwise, Utar’ragh was now a scene of desolation and a war-torn landscape in one. Hours of heavy fighting and heavy bombardment, the use of Titans, and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of war machines and flyers, had transformed the slaver’s citadel into a no man’s land where death was never too far to claim your life.

And kilometres away, the armies of Biel-Tan were locked into a death struggle with the heretical forces assaulting Commorragh.

Now normally there would be strict orders to not let the average soldier about such things, but the Inquisition’s representatives had not given them, and even the Commissars seemed to be mostly concerned about shooting the defeatists and the weak souls which faltered in front of the Arch-Enemy and the servants of Evil.

And judging from the tone of the orders coming from her, Lady Weaver had endorsed this course of action – which had increased her popularity, something that the Mordian woman had not believed it possible. Most of the Nyxians already worshipped the ground the General walked around the moment they had conquered the Port of Lost Souls, but this was nothing to what was happening now. Plenty of Preachers and Confessors had travelled to the frontlines and uttered sermons that something called the ‘Naga’ had been banished and ‘the light of the Astronomican burned brighter’ while Lorelei herself had no reports confirming it!

“Do we have any idea how to neutralise ‘Cthulhu’ when the retreat order will be given?” a junior officer assigned to her staff asked.

“The Mechanicus, on the General’s orders, has prepared a world-flame warhead.”

Silence greeted her statement.

“Err...Marshal? Isn’t the world-flame the thing-?”

“Yes, it’s the weapon which burned an entire Eldar fleet at Pavia.” Lorelei authorised herself a smile behind the security of her helmet. “This should neutralise Cthulhu...and everything else.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Forty-five hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

It was exhilarating to be part of History like this. It was also utterly exhausting.

Not that the Navigator Chancellor had any intention to say it in public or private. For one, he knew every single being he was in the presence of on the bridge of the *Enterprise* was enduring the same stress and problems. Wolfgang Bach, to name only one name, looked like death had bypassed him three times, and this was after he had taken two hours of rest. For two, the rewards of this expedition-invasion promised to be astronomically high, and that was from a purely material perspective. The God-Emperor only knew what the political, trade and other types of rewards were going to be in the months to come, but it was certainly going to begin at ‘extraordinarily great’ and go up from there.

So Friar showed only the visage of a diligent Navigator and presented his report.

“At this hour, I’m afraid the exact position of exact reinforcements is difficult to estimate, with the Warp in turmoil and every independent command sending irregular reports. The Astropaths didn’t receive Marshal Malberg’s change of plans until fifteen minutes ago,” at which point the Black Templars and all the forces they had ‘encouraged’ to follow them were already fighting in Corespur. “So keep in mind the timetables I am going to give you are very vague.”

In other times, he might have shuffled his data-slates a bit to impress his audience, but not today.

“The Mechanicus Forge-Worlds have diverted fourteen Explorator Fleets from their original destinations to Pavia. Estaban, Metalica, Mars and Gryphonne IV are the core of the principal forces. Unfortunately, while their firepower is considerable, we think it will be a week before they can reach the stellar system behind us, never mind transit by the Eversprings Gate.”

And the battle, Friar Achelieux didn’t say out loud, would long be over.

“The Adeptus Astartes?” the question had come from Archmagos Sagami.

“We have received eighteen confirmed positive answers from as many Chapters which may reach us in forty-plus hours. Fourteen of them come from Blood Angel Successors. Two others are other Crusade forces of the Black Templars. The seventeenth is the most powerful, as it includes a third of the active White Scars’ fleet. Last but not least, the Novamarines are coming too.”

“I think they’re not going to regret answering the call of duty,” the Fist Naval Secretary declared before speaking of the next potential source of reinforcements. “The Frateris Templar?”

“There are over thirty individual different warships on their way, but nothing coordinated and their total firepower isn’t enough to represent more than a small squadron.”

Assuming they had the time to train and learn to manoeuvre together. This was time they would not have, no matter the outcome of the next hours.

“There are several hundreds of regiments with transports and escorts on their way, but the most optimistic estimate I have is one week and a half for the fastest arrival. One armoured Corps is stationed at Desaderia, but since the transports emptied in Corespur will need days to return there and there haven’t the Navigators to make the Warp-jump here, we can’t count on them.”

The Navigator emptied a glass of water offered by a guardsmen and continued his expose of the reinforcements.

“The reinforcements are far better where the Imperial Navy is concerned. Most of the local forces won’t be able to arrive before two weeks, but two operational Battlefleets had finished their battle-operations in nearby theatres and are on their way as we speak. They may arrive in thirty-plus hours at Pavia and should be able to join the Caribbean fleet for the battle you intend to fight here, First Secretary Bach.”

“Do we have an idea what their order of battle is?” the question had fused from the Mechanicus ranks.

“No, I’m afraid not. The Warp is screaming in fury across Pavia, and several Astropaths have told me there’s a non-negligible chance Biel-Tan warships and psykers have taken position around the system trying to perturb our communications. Given that Magos Wismer has shattered one of their flotillas and the Necron forces have annihilated one of these perfidious xenos’ fleets which was trying to sneak on our forces, I support their judgement.”

Many officers had expressed their opinion the Eldar vermin had more Webway Gates around Pavia, since they obviously hadn’t used the Eversprings one in a long, long time. Their strategic assessments had been more than confirmed in the last hours.

“The first Battlefleet was the former Crusade naval support of the Heraklion Crusade, under the command of Admiral August von Kisher. It is designated as the Ultima 70th Battlefleet.”

“I’ve heard of the von Kisher family,” admitted the blonde-haired naval commander. “Their dynasty was obsessed at the idea of creating ‘fast battleships’ and they had managed to claw their way into several important war-construction programs when I left Kar Duniash.”

“The Quayran shipyards have heard of this controversy,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami added a second later. “Most Archmagi supported the conclusions of the Kar Duniash’s Mechanicus Strategic Board. These ‘fast battleships’ have been insufficiently analysed by specialist Tech-Priests and are too...*innovative*.”

The word resonated like a curse, and it was likely one.

“Then let’s hope they don’t bring them here. The number of Eldar fleets waiting to pounce upon our warships is definitely not the time to test them.”

“The other Battlefleet is the Tempestus-Bakka 13th Fleet, Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal.”

This time, truly nobody around the hololith or on the bridge had any clue about this particular fleet or the name of its commander. It was completely unsurprising, since most of said people had never travelled out of Ultima Segmentum, and Friar for all the resources of his House had never been involved in the last decades with the Lords of Bakka.

“The Rogue Traders?”

“Yes, the Rogue Traders...” rarely had the Chancellor been so tempted to shout a few insults in public. “Rogue Trader Lady Magdalena Orpheus, based on the Star Galleon *Arica Orpheus*, and Rogue Trader Great Duchess Olivia Cheshire, owner of the Cruiser *The Last Opera*. And yes, she is *the* Olivia Cheshire of Nyx. And as for those of you who have some doubts, yes we found their names and plenty of data about them on Sliscus’ databases. The Administratum teams have other things to do for now than peruse the data and the evidence, but they have been able to confirm that those two were in the Serpent’s bed more than once.”

“Damn,” to his credit Wolfgang Bach reacted quickly. “Colonel, immediately requisition the mercenaries which are present on their ships and use them as garrison troops in the Vileth zone. And find a pretext to put a few thousand Skitarii aboard their starships. I already didn’t trust their motives before, I don’t want them turning on us when the next wave of long-ears will come screaming for our blood.”

“It will be done.”

“Magos?”

“Ninety-one percent of the archeotech discoveries have arrived at Pavia. All the STCs have been evacuated out of Pavia and are protected by our most stringent security measures. The last ammunition ships will be ready for unloading in forty-six minutes. Repairs on all battle-worth starships will be complete in six and a half hours. Evacuation Plan Colossus will be delivered in your hands in seventy minutes. Archmagos Hediatrix estimates the chance of evacuating successfully all the Titans and the Ordinatus is approximately of eighty percent.”

“Inform me if some factor changes your estimates. Now let’s get back to the situation on the Necron front.”

“I’m afraid the situation is still extremely confusing there, Lord Bach,” a brown-bearded SDF officer replied. “No messengers managed to get out of the sub-realm of Old City of Commorragh before everything burned, and the war engines the Destruction-Overlord has tried to send in the furnace have not shown sign of life.”

“Trazyn the Infinite?”

“Destruction-Overlord Sitkah transmitted that, assuming his body got disintegrated, he will need a couple more hours to return and tell us exactly what has happened. The only thing the Necrons are sure of at this hour is that at this hour, Old City is utterly destroyed, and it’s not their weapons which have done the deed. The xenos ground commanders have fortified their positions at Mar’lych and for the moment they have been able to inflict massive losses to the Eldar counter-attacking armies and the abominations.”

“Let’s pray this will continue...”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Zel’harst**

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

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

To be quite clear, Aeonid was proud to be an Ultramarine Space Marine. He had immensely respected Roboute Guilliman – and still respected him for that matter – and knew that for all his support of orthodox doctrine, his Primarch was far superior to him when it came to tactics and strategy. Aeonid had never felt shame about it. The Lord of Macragge was a Son of the Emperor, and had certain abilities which were certain denied to even veteran Space Marines.

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“DORN LIVES!”

But for all his respect to Roboute Guilliman, he could not help but wonder if the *Codex Astartes* was a major mistake. It was obvious watching some Salamanders of the *Flamewrought* explaining to their successors some point of doctrine that the Astartes of M35 had not exactly made their tactics evolve since the end of the Scouring. And it was probably going to get worse when he met other Space Marines, because the Eighteenth Legion had never been truly codified beyond ‘this weapon will roast our enemies, don’t search further, brother’.

At least some things didn’t change.

The Black Templars had found a way to become crazier.

They had become worshippers of the *God-Emperor*.

To date, the Captain was unsure if he was supposed to laugh or cry when he was announced the news.

“BROTHERS, WE WILL NOT STEP A BACK UNLESS THE SAINT ORDERS US TO!” screamed the Emperor’s Champion. Yes, because the maniacs had obviously needed more than a Champion to protect their commanding officer, they had made Sigismund’s old title a permanent addition to their ranks.

“A spectacle I’m told the galaxy doesn’t see everywhere, I’m told,” the Archmagos to his left spoke.

Truer words had never been spoken. Under their eyes, hundreds of Salamanders reunited with each other, crying, laughing, and sharing the events of the last millennia as they erected new killing grounds for the daemons which were unavoidably going to pursue them to Zel’harst.

The sons of Vulkan were not the Astartes to shout and share a moment of brotherhood as for the moment the Gates linking Zel’harst and Corespur had been shut down by a combination of several captured Eldar artefacts and brute force.

There were Iron Drakes – which Aeonid thought had a fifty percent chance of being loyalist Death Guard. There were sons of Sanguinius, most of them keeping their red armours and their traditions well after their Legion had disappeared. There were the Black Templars as he had said before, crusaders to the death...and if they had decided to read the *Codex Astartes* once, the Ultramarine Captain would eat the tomes in question one by one.

There were just the largest contingents, exchanging tactics, increasing their knowledge about their cousins and preparing for a new round of battle. And it was evident this kind of meeting was anything but a regular meeting.

“I had no idea carving up the Legions was going to result in...that.”

The representative of Mars made a curious sound his augmented ears identified as a shrug.

“Decisions had to be taken at the end of the Heresy. And to be fair to your Primarch, he was placed in stasis long before he had the ability to analyse how much his choices would change the Imperium.”

That couldn’t be denied. The Imperium has lost the Emperor, and a few decades after that most of the loyalist Primarchs. It hadn’t been difficult to verify that Dorn had been the last active Primarch long after Aeonid departed in the research of a cure and that for now, the Praetorian was the only one confirmed alive.

What an irony that after all this millennia, his quest had only met a significant success now.

“Before you ask, yes the poison and the blades are on their way to one of my cruisers waiting outside the Webway,” Archmagos Belisarius Cawl said.

“This was not the question I was about to ask,” the veteran Space Marine replied, doing his best to roll his eyes. “I was wondering how you rated your chances to find an antidote to this awful murder-tool.”

“Fairly high,” the Martian Tech-Priest affirmed. “The Mechanicus has successfully found antidotes for many Warp-corrupting substances since the Dawn of the Imperium, you know.”

“Really?”

A lot of mechadendrites were agitated to give orders of a nature Aeonid Thiel was quite happy to forget in the next minutes.

“The cost is in general an enormous barrier,” the Archmagos regretted loudly. “And of course the Inquisition usually prefers cleansing the entire world than paying for the health bill.”

Aeonid dearly wanted to ask Cawl if he was joking, but fear of the answer was going to be held his tongue at bay.

“At least the Naga won’t be able to intervene against us for a long, long time.”

“True,” the Archmagos who had been charged by Guilliman to implement several secret projects agreed. “With the terrible blow Lady Weaver gave this false Primarch, I sincerely doubt we will see it again before M40.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Hidden Blade**

**Forty-three hours before the Commorragh**

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

If Vect had known that kneeling was the greatest desire of millions of Commorragh warriors, his plans would have been much, much different in the last thousands of cycles.

A pity it was something that this fact had been allowed to come in his sight a bit too late.

And yes, everything was lost. His main lieutenants had sworn themselves to She-Who-Thirsts. Rakarth had joined the ranks of Excess. Millions had preferred debase themselves rather than oppose the slightest amount of resistance. By Khaine’s nonexistent mercy, the population which was opposing the greatest resistance to the Keeper of Secrets and the Daemonettes were the Mon-keigh slaves.

“Maybe I should create a city where the hierarchy of the Commorragh was reversed...” the leader of the now defunct Kabal of the Black Heart mused aloud.

What a sight it would be: the slaves would be the rulers; as for the nobles, it would only be justice to let them work in the factories and suffer long agonies in the Beastmasters’ pits.

Asdrubael hadn’t the slightest idea how he could make it work: hallucinogenic drugs lasted only for so long; but for a short moment it brought a small smile on his lips.

It didn’t last long and he continued running away.

The last ruler of Low Commorragh had not come to Hidden Blade because he believed it was the best place to rally his troops. These armies were gone, and now the daemonic tides were submerging everything. He had chosen this sub-realm because it was the nearest Gate which had not been under She-Who-Thirsts’ control.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the same thing as saying there was no daemon presence in Hidden Blade. There were plenty of handmaidens and beasts in the service of the Dark Prince. Plus there were the things his subordinates and warriors had become. Superficially, Asdrubael supposed they could have passed as Aeldari...as long you were a few leagues away. Their presence was completely *wrong*. Their aura was pink, and their eyes were demented. A perfume of pure decadence and madness floated wherever they went.

It would take far more than that to kill him or to reduce him to the state of corruption.

He was his own Master. Asdrubael Vect did not serve. Asdrubael Vect was born to rule; he was not going to kneel to a parasite with delusions of grandeur. He was not going to enslave himself to a divinity unable to stop the Mon-keigh invasion – he didn’t know what had happened in the Corespur, but given the hundreds of fading Daemonettes he had seen from his own eyes, it had been extremely damaging to She-Who-Thirsts.

Asdrubael Vect ruled, or he died trying. Commorragh or oblivion; there was no middle ground.

“Anti-Empyrean bombs ordered to detonate. Activation Code: Asdrubael, Asdrubael, Vect, Commorragh, Poison, Khaine, Extermination.”

The halls he had just crossed burned in terrible lights, and a deep sensation of nausea and void filled his body. But it was worth it. His pursuers’ screams were filling the burning skies of Hidden Blade.

“You think you have beaten me?” the Supreme Lord who had once counted more than five hundred concubines for his court sneered. “I will not be your puppet, She-Who-Thirsts! I have sworn to rule the Dark City, or it will perish by my own hand!”

And since he had been denied the former, it would be the latter. Low Commorragh was destroyed, and now Hidden Blade was going to meet the same fate. He had released some of the most dangerous slaves he kept in chains with a few ‘mental suggestions’ to make sure they found some specific detonators in Sec Maegra and the Bones Middens. Added to the measures he had already taken for High Commorragh, the Dark City was going to burn a pyre that the destruction of the Port of Lost Souls would pale against.

And then there would be the great final. It would happen in the Port of Lost Souls, that much he already knew: the armada of the Mon-keigh, allied with the old Yngir threat, opposed to the last fleets of the Aeldari and Biel-Tan, with of course the Legions of Excess trying to kill everyone.

It was going to be a cataclysm.

Asdrubael almost wished to be there to witness the gigantic butchery...almost. The first and last leader of the Black Heart didn’t think he would enjoy very much discovering what the Mon-keigh’s had kept as a reserve for them.

“It would be different if I had a few reliable subordinates...” Vect laughed. It was a great lie. Only his life counted. Only his life and the power to rule mattered to him. He left the imbecilic charges and the doomed last stands to more stupid beings. He was going to-

Something fell from the skies and crashed a couple of hundred steps on the other bridge he was going to cross. And just as if things couldn’t be more dramatic, it was the last intact bridge out of four...and of course trying to reach the Gate which was going to lead him out of Commorragh would require a very long detour.

Asdrubael Vect drew his blade, feigning disinterest while in reality he was concentrated like never before.

And as the pink fumes increased to cloak the thing delivered by the sorcery of She-Who-Thirsts in a cocoon of energy and corruption, Vect realised his worst fears had fallen short of a reality.

It was common knowledge that in the dark days before the Fall, many, many Aeldari had marched willingly to the altars where they were slaughtered like livestock. And it wasn’t a mystery that at the moment reality was overwritten and the Aeldari Empire ceased to be, many of the Doom Priests had not died, but become something far more malevolent and corrupted altogether.

The Aeldari of Commorragh called them ‘Yr’xar’, an ill-omened word. A rough translation in a lesser language would be ‘those who have sold their souls to darkness’. For even less poetic minds and species, the term was ‘Chaos Aeldari’.

The naked female figure armed with a single spear for all weapon was far, far worse than any Yr’xar.

Normal, she was the first of them according to the old tales.

Fallen Empress of the Phoenix Court.

Mistress of the Cult of Pleasures.

Arch-Priestess of She-Who-Thirsts.

Her Dark Excellency Morathi Uldanesh.

“I’m honoured,” Asdrubael said, all the while trying to find another Gate as entire battalions of abominations converged on his position.

“**Silence, vermin!**”

That insult deserved an answer, and it couldn’t be a lie. Truth would hurt far more.

“At the risk of disappointing you...Lelith Hesperax is far more beautiful than you.”

The elegant face morphed into an ugly expression of utter loathing. Even a heartbeat after it had returned to the visage of a seductress, what little charm she had managed to influence him was utterly broken.

It was impossible to forget the horror under the fake-flesh.

“**When I will have finished with your soul, you will beg me to become my footrest**.”

It was an unpleasant fate, assuredly. And to make things more unfair, he couldn’t use a single psychic ability without losing his mind while the soul-corrupted Aeldari was free to use her skills like she wanted.

Morathi was not invincible, of course. But the next hidden anti-Empyrean bombs were rather far from his current location, and his blade for all its special properties was no pre-Fall masterpiece.

“Let Commorragh burn,” Asdrubael Vect murmured while beginning what was going to probably be the last fight of his life.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Citadel of Zel’harst**

**Forty-two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

Two hours of sleep might not seem much, but it had felt like heaven.

“Any outstanding problems that can’t wait my first cup of tea?”

“No,” Gavreel told her, handing her one of the rare luxuries she had decided to give to her General persona before everyone else.

The warmth and the smell were a delight. It was almost possible to forget she had not slept in a Baneblade to avoid potential calms.

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow and took a large swallow of warm tea. “The abominations didn’t find a Gate we had forgotten to close?”

“It surprised us too,” the Sergeant confessed. “But there’s a lot of psychic pressure on three of the largest Gates we used to assault Corespur. The possibility exists they truly not have found an unguarded path to invade Zel’harst.”

“Fine. Let’s stay prudent, however. These monsters are not very resourceful, but they don’t think in terms and gains as we do.”

The fighting retreat of the Desaderian Army had definitely proven that, if nothing else. General MacLean had lost approximately forty thousand men in a single hour of battle, and it was best not to mention the sheer number amount of wounded.

This had come in addition to the terrible losses every part of her forces had taken. The support forces were still trying to assess the magnitude of the butchery, but it had been terrible. The Frateris Templar, if one didn’t count their artillery companies, had stood and died. Entire regiments had been gutted, and her ranks of officers had been decimated. 1st and 2nd Army couldn’t possibly have more than thirty percent of their pre-Corespur invasion numbers breathing, and the Mechanicus Skitarii had suffered a high percentage of casualties.

More than one hundred Space Marines, all in all, had met their ends, though in their case half of the casualties were due to the damned serpentine False-Primarch.

“Dennis Peters and Leet want to speak with you about Utar’ragh,” Gamaliel spoke as she ate one of the new fruity-flavoured ration, wondering once again which cogboy had sabotaged the recipe.

Taylor watched the Seraph with a suspicious eye.

“Please tell me Cthulhu hasn’t gone out of control and attacked our troops.”

Fighting this bouncing orb of electrical doom was not how she wanted to spend her next hours in Commorragh.

“No, for the moment the invention fulfils its purpose and massacres the Eldar and the abominations,” the Blood Angel Space Marine reassured her.

“What a relief.”

“The Tinker, alas, began to make jokes on the vein of ‘rumours of my demise were greatly exaggerated’.”

Taylor closed her eyes, counted to ten...and decided scoffing was better than most alternatives.

“As long as he stays far away from the Black Templars when he says his jokes, I will ignore his behaviour for the next days.”

The Battle of Commorragh was filled with sacrifices, and for all the poor standards of Leet’s jokes, he was not disparaging the blood and the tears the Guard and all the other components of the Imperial Machine had shed to achieve the Objectives.

Taylor finished her improvised breakfast, all the while moving in pre-arranged tunnels and on the killing grounds hundreds of thousands of insects, leaving millions more in reserve. Lankovar had done an excellent job preparing a new swarm of considerable size – the last one had died when she threw it at the demons of Corespur when the last guardsman had fled through the Zel’harst Gate.

Putting her helmet back on her head, the parahuman General allowed the two Magi nearby to verify the machine-spirit and every component of the *Angel’s Tear* functioned optimally.

“The Salamanders are in position on the new Lava Line?” the insect-mistress asked as a formality as her bodyguards and she left the super-heavy tank.

“They are. And they’re impatient to show some of the old tactics their returned brothers of the *Flamewrought* have taught them.”

“I see.” One thing she had learned in the last three days was that as long as you didn’t speak the words ‘fire’, ‘lava’, ‘magma’ or most words associated with the vocabulary of flame, the Salamanders were perhaps the nicest Space Marines to have around.

But when they heard the word ‘fire’...they transformed into highly dangerous pyromaniacs.

Dennis and Leet arrived a few seconds later, and the latter had a particularly guilty expression on his face. Taylor was sure that if the edge of her mouth twitched at this instant, no one would count it against her.

“General, this scoundrel has-“

There was a powerful amount of wind from nowhere, and a column of green materialised in the space a company had used as a cooking camp an hour ago. From this abnormal phenomena, came Trazyn the Infinite, bearing a very different panel of decoration than the last time.

“Lady Weaver! Why are you not retreating to the Port of Lost Souls? Have you not received my message?”

“What message?” Taylor felt something unpleasant develop in her guts. There had been no Necron messenger who had directly come to her. “I’ve heard a few confused reports from my Admiral, but-“

“You must retreat immediately!” Taylor didn’t think she had seen the Necron that agitated...or agitated and panicked at all, period. “The Queen of Blades is here at Commorragh! We must abandon the Dark City immediately!”

Taylor blinked at the familiar title, a title the psychic diamond of the Core Gate had held with reverence...and grimaced.

“Trazyn, the Queen of Blades...does she have crimson hairs, a black armour espousing every form of her body, and a long curbed blade?”

“Yes, absolutely!” the Necron thief confirmed. “But how did you-?”

Taylor didn’t need to point a finger or give descriptions; the Eldar was feigning to sleep on top of the nearby Angel Sanguine Land Raider, and somehow she had managed to knock out the two Space Marines nearby without a sound.

“Flee you fools!” the Archaeovist of Solemnace teleported away in a new storm of green energy.

The Eldar female stretched, and Taylor had to admit in the privacy of her own head, the long-eared xenos was simply beautiful. Every aspect of her body – and with an armour sharing some similarities with the Callidus synth-skin, you could not hide much – was physical perfection. There was not an inch of fat, just pure muscle, and unlike the female gladiators she and the Dawnbreaker Guard had slaughtered by the hundreds, there were no scars or any sign of age or torture.

No scars. It was nearly impossible in a galaxy of war. Taylor had few scars, courtesy of the golden Bacta, but they existed. Every Astartes of the Dawnbreaker had them, either received during their time as baseline humans or later during their Marine training.

Her hairs were a magnificent colour which could have been mistaken for blood. Her skin was far more tanned than the average Drukhari, but remained pale enough to give a shade no human skin could approach.

But it was the eyes which were utterly terrifying. When she watched the red irises, Taylor could only look at them less than a second before closing hers. These were the loathing glares of the Commorragh rulers. This was the implacable weight of something aeons-old. Something that had been there long, long before humanity conquered the stars.

“It was a brave thing what you did with the Core Gate, little Queen,” the Eldar purred, and the sound was like a choir of angels had suddenly decided to sing. “Or should I call you Aeldari Empress now?

The content of the sentence had at least allowed her to remain in full control of her wits, unlike Leet, who was unashamedly drooling...and received a slap from Dennis.

“The Ancient Court, I think, would have sundered your homeworld and shattered your star for your audacity...assuming they didn’t fall dead at the idea of a young race using their precious relic.”

Each word was pronounced in Low Gothic, English or any variant of any human language. There was no accent, and the meaning went straight to her brain. The Eldar was using passively her psychic abilities, and Taylor was detecting *nothing*.

And suddenly, she was here, mere centimetres away from her face. Taylor blinked. She had not seen her move!

“Lower your weapons,” the crimson-haired Eldar whispered to the Dawnbreaker Guard. “If I wanted your mistress dead, your heads would have rolled with her.”

The judgement’s words were hammered like daggers of crystal, a divine sentence no one had the power to oppose.

And Taylor believed her. It was quite evident she was facing the opponent who had defeated Rogal Dorn in battle.

“The human Anathema always refused my challenges. It is kind of him to provide a nice substitute as compensation for his insults.”

“The Emperor would have torn you apart, monster!” one of her Dawnbreaker Guards, certainly Kratos, growled.

The Queen of Blades laughed. It was an enthralling symphony of amusement and joy.

“Your Emperor is a bit too young to represent a danger for me,” and the worst part, the xenos had a genuine look of regret on her face...like she genuinely regretted not having fought the Master of Mankind. “But he had potential.”

And then there was a barely perceptible twinge and the Eldar was back on the Land Raider.

“I am Aenaria Eldanesh, little Queen. I am the Queen of Blades, also known by your kind as Lelith Hesperax, Grand Mistress of the Aeldari Arenas.”

Taylor did her best not to flinch. Sliscus had been in the top hundred of the Imperium Most Wanted List, but the Duke had been largely a minor member. The name which had been uttered was in thirteenth position.

“I am Taylor Hebert. I am General of the Imperial Guard, Basileia of Nyx and mistress of the Swarm.”

“Good,” approved the ancient xenos. “Tell your vassals to remove themselves from my presence if they want to live. We are going to duel.”

There was a flash, and one of the last spires of Zel’harst, the one where the Imperial flag had been hoisted triumphant, was cut in two.

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*The pain is terrible.*

*There is agony, so much agony.*

*And yet, it is lessened.*

*The predators try to circle once more, but a good flick of the wrist force them to abandon the grounds around his fire.*

*They will come back, of course.*

*They always come back.*

*But for the first time in an eternity, he can truly wield the Astronomican as an extension of his will.*

*He can’t cry. He can’t mourn at the horrid state he finds the Palace and its surroundings. Everything has succumbed to idolatry, faith and superstition.*

*The Dream is dead. The Dungeon links only a single Gate, and it won’t allow even one more for thousands of years.*

*But he has chosen.*

*“Your victory is not preordained, parasites. We shall yet be free.”*

*And slowly, the Emperor turns his gaze to the stars once more.*

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**Extermination Countdown**

**Forty-two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Surviving Drukhari population in the Webway: approximately 131.4 billion**

**Asuryani killed during the Battle of Commorragh: approximately 973 million**

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**Author’s note**: A lot of things remain to be done if the light of hope is to be truly rekindled. But for the first time in millennia, a blow has been struck.

At long last after several millennia, the Siege of Terra is finally over (the timing with certain novels is ***completely*** coincidental). The Imperium has won the battle, though the price has been beyond Pyrrhic.

And now the true hurricane can be unleashed.

A treachery has been revealed. A Primarch has been confirmed alive. Hope exists for another.

The Battle of Commorragh and the battle-arc will continue in Extermination 8-4 *The Queen of Blades*.

Lelith Hesperax (aka Aenaria Eldanesh) the Queen of Blades, versus the Queen of the Swarm.

It is time for the Third Endbringer to prove her credentials.

Pray the God-Emperor a last time, fight against the vile epidemic of Nurgle and prepare.

It is going to get *more* apocalyptic.