Weaver Option Update 02 June 2020

**Extermination 8.5**

**The Mark of Commorragh**

*What is the Mark of Commorragh?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

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

**Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity***

**The Last Sentinel**

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

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

“Acknowledged.”

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

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

“So my liege’s gamble has worked.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was only one question worth asking now.

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

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

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

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

Was it possible to kill one of the Ruinous Powers?

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

**Magnificent Xelian Gate**

**Battleship *Empire Reborn***

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Warp**

**Palace of Slaanesh**

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

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

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

This emotion was fear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was only one course of action left.

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Battleship *Evolution of Necrodermis***

**Two hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Destruction-Overlord Sitkah**

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

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

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

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

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

“Destroy everything, beginning with the Vileth shipyards.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sitkah clicked her fingers in disapproval.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Open fire!”

**Battle-Barge *Jaghatai’s Pride***

**Chapter Master Hibou Khan**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Message transmitted, Great Khan.”

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

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

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

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

“Separation-1 begins!”

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

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

“Falcon-2, execute!”

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

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

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

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

“We are going for Buzzard-3.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Battleship *Son of Victory***

**Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal**

Twenty minutes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Battle-Barge *Vulkan’s Wrath***

**Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Eldar are down to sixty battleships!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Thunderbolt *White Lance***

**Third Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everything was pain after that.

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

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

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By your command, My Lady.”

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

**Battleship *Empire Reborn***

**High Farseer Faer Machdavar**

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

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

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

And suddenly it stopped as brutally as it had begun.

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

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

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

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

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

The Ocean screamed and shrieked in fury.

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

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

The psychic pressure came back and doubled in intensity.

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

The Port of Lost Souls exploded in golden fire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Isha saves us...”

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Aelindrach**

**Eighteen minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Kheradruakh the Decapitator**

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Kheradruakh!”

“KHERADRUAKH!”

“THE DECAPITATOR!”

“AELINDRACH AND KHERADRUAKH!”

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

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

“AAARRRRRGGHGHGGHGHGHGHGHGH!”

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

“THE LIGHT! STOP THE LIGHT!”

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Seventeen minutes before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Khaine’s Gate**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was Slaanesh.

And she was awaited.

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

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

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

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

“Too many,” the Laughing God admitted freely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“For my people.”

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

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

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