**Extermination 8.1**

**The Port of Lost Souls**

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

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

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

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

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

*Everyone knew that in Commorragh.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*And this was just the fast-reaction force. There were more warships waiting at Port Shard and Port Carmine one Gate away. But should it prove insufficient, the Dynasty of the Red Sun had thousands, tens of thousands ships ready to be recalled across the Webway and uncountable pacts and dark commands to force every ambitious captain to come to defence of the Port.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Before the* Enterprise *stormed in the Port of Lost Souls, we began to hear the screams of agony.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**The Warp**

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

The Empyrean was never silent or calm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tzeentch remained silent.

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

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

And then Slaanesh found out the issues the Shadowpoint had created.

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**99 Hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

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

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

Commorragh was exactly what the worst rumours had warned to. It was a pit of depravation and cruelty which should have never been allowed to stand if it was located outside the Webway.

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

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

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

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

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

“Open fire!”

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

**Aurelia Malys**

Hours later, Aurelia would realise how lucky she had been. The battleship *Dark Heart* had, quite clearly, been spared by virtue of being too close to the Mon-keigh starship.

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

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

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

The first disaster was not long before starting. The battleship *Invincible Tyranny* broke in half and rammed the Bastion of Cruel Spite.

Then the ammunition stocks of the Bastion detonated.

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

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

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

And the anti-air guns and the fleet were not firing back.

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

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

Malys wasn’t so sure. A couple of heartbeats, there had been a shadow of genuine surprise on Vect’s visage and even now, his expression was all but assured.

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

“TREASON!”

“DEATH TO THE RED SUN!”

“Apologise or...”

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

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

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

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

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

**Ensign Freya Brasidas**

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

“This is White Leader! Follow me in!”

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

It was nothing but a gigantic slaughter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Chapter Master Pontiac Dupleix**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To be more accurate, it was one part of Objective C, for the Eldar had some cloning and resurrecting technology to challenge the odds. But the orders had come from the Emperor Himself, and it wouldn’t be written the Iron Drakes had failed the Master of Mankind in this battle.

Asdrubael Vect’s execution had been decreed, and the Adeptus Astartes would pursue the foul xenos until they were able to present the head in a casket.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I...WILL...RETURN...”

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

**Captain Corr Phoecus**

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

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

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

If he survived it, Corr was sure Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn would remove from him the captainship of the 2nd Company the moment they met again.

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

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

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

Energy and metal pulsed again. The myriad of Tech-Priests working on the flanks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES!”

“VULKAN LIVES!”

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But?”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, my Lady. Variant Beta I think is the more adequate for our purposes now.”

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

Her advisor immediately nodded.

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

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

“Do it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By your command!”

**Admiral of Terror Nothraq Xerathis**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vect. This disaster had Vect’s fingerprints everywhere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then every smile and expression of mockery died.

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

It was not belonging to any short of opponents the Aeldari routinely fought in their raids.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Aurelia Malys**

“Shaimesh’s putrid breath...”

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

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

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

The prospect should have filled her with joy and happiness.

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

Her evacuation ticket had crashed into the Crimson-3 slave market, and not only there was a general slave insurrection, there were ships of the Dynasts falling from the red skies!

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

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

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

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

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Necrons?”

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

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

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

At least the screams of the tortured were not heard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper**

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

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

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

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

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

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

This hope had lasted exactly the time the Eldar took to launch their first terrible counter-attack.

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

The point the victory may have been an agonising one if they had not had the Necrons on their side made it even more awful to swallow.

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

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

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

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

And since they had no Phosphex-type weapons in the Judgement’s stores, and in turn it left the Atmospheric incinerator torpedoes.

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Hidden Blade**

**93 Hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Supreme Lord Asdrubael Vect**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Supreme Lord of the Black Heart was not disappointed.

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

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

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

“My Lord?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even the worst plans he had envisaged for a failure of his coup were failing short of the reality. Because it was not the future of the still unborn Kabal of the Black Heart at stake. It was the destiny of the *Eladrith Ynneath*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**90 Hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Imperial Navy had taken the brunt of some insane weapons twisting gravity and dark light, and three auxiliaries, one Corvette and the Cruiser *Adamantium Prow* had been shredded by more nightmarish weapons that should be physically possible.

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

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

So many deaths. So many people. So many men, women and human beings who had swore to obey her orders and who had died.

God, it was hard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is,” the golden-armoured giant replied from the corner where it awaited, silent but eternally vigilant menace with his shield and spear.

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

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

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

“Marshal Groener!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Captain Gabriela Jordan**

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

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

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

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

But now the real challenge was about to begin.

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

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

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

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

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

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR! CHARGE!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then the enemy reinforcements stopped coming.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“DEATH TO THE XENOS! WITH ME BROTHERS!”

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

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

Needless to say, every penal convict fought harder.

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

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*Aeldari of the Webway, heed my words.*

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

*Our realm is under attack.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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